



Australian
Academy of the
Humanities

Stuart Macintyre AO FASSA FAHA

1947 – 2021

One of Stuart Macintyre's books is called *Winners and Losers*. It is a comparatively early work (1985), the first of his monographs to deal with Australia; and its subtitle, *The Pursuit of Social Justice in Australian History*, introduces what was to be a dominant concern in his life as a historian and, for that matter, as a citizen. Macintyre's sympathies were, of course, on the side of the "losers," whoever they might be: oppressed workers, the unemployed, women relegated to an inferior position, indigenous peoples subjected to colonial rule. Yet he himself – by origin, education, career success and public honours – was unmistakably one of life's winners. Others in this situation might be apologetic, even guilt-ridden, or adopt some kind of protective colouration, but not Stuart. Conservatively dressed, there was always something patrician in his bearing. His Communist friends, like his Establishment ones, could take him as he was.

Born in Melbourne in 1947, grandson of a Congregationalist minister, Stuart Macintyre attended an elite private school, Scotch College, before going on to the University of Melbourne (where he was at Ormond college) and graduating in 1968 with an honours degree in history. He became chairman of the Labor Club, a Melbourne University institution distinctly to the left of the ALP, and when he went on to Monash to do a Masters' degree, he joined the Communist Party of Australia. His Monash years, the early 1970s, coincided with the heyday of student revolt, anti-Vietnam sentiment, and the ascendancy of the New Left. Despite his political commitments, Stuart stayed on the traditional path for top graduates of the Melbourne History Department and proceeded on to Cambridge to do

a PhD. His appointed supervisor was Henry Pelling, a historian of the British Labour Party Britain who, as Stuart later wrote, was “by background and temperament... utterly removed from the labour movement and all radical enthusiasms.” That was not the kind of historian Stuart aspired to be (although typically he and Pelling remained on good terms); along with contemporaries like Gareth Stedman Jones, he was more attracted by the new social and labour history pioneered by E. P. Thompson. He also joined the British Communist Party in Cambridge and found the level of intellectual debate in the local branch to be high. His PhD, which became his first book, combined labour history with a study of political ideology in a study of proletarian autodidacts: *A Proletarian Science: Marxism in Britain, 1917-1933*. That was published in 1980, the same year as a spin-off – *Little Moscovs: Communism and Working-Class Militancy in Inter-War Britain* – that took him closer to the territory that he would later make his own: Communism as lived experience in societies where the party was politically marginal.

Other works of labour and Communist Party history followed – *Militant: the Life and Times of Paddy Troy* (1984), *The Labour Experiment* (1988), *Reds: the Communist Party of Australia from Origins to Illegality* (1998) and finally, after a twenty year hiatus, his long-promised second volume of the history of the CPA, *The Party: the Communist Party of Australia from Heyday to Reckoning* (2022) – showing Stuart’s fascination with the exponents and organizations of labour militancy and mastery of its history. The two volumes of history of the CPA are not only the definitive treatments of the Australian party but also exemplars of Communist party history internationally. During the Cold War, especially in the United States, the history of Communism became a separate field, distinct from labour history or comparative political history, whose conceptual framework derived from the premise that Communist parties (Moscow- or later Beijing-directed) were alien foreign imports, not a legitimate part of the national political scene. Historians wrote the history of Communism either as a convinced Communist or as firm, often militant, anti-Communists. But Stuart did neither of those things; his *Reds* was perhaps the first post-Cold War history of a Communist party to normalise its subject. By this

time, Stuart's Communist party membership was decades in the past (on his return to Australia, he joined the ALP, albeit a radical wing) but that was almost irrelevant, as he did not write about the Australian Communist Party as a political partisan. He used the same tone – empathetic but detached, critical without being accusatory – that had become his trademark as a historian and applied the same rigorous research methods.

The breadth of Stuart's historical sympathies was evident in a notable work outside the field of history of labour and the Left published a few years earlier. *A Colonial Liberalism: the Lost World of Three Victorian Visionaries* (1991) explored the intellectual and political worlds of three Australian nineteenth-century liberals: newspaper proprietor David Syme; Chief Justice of the Victorian Supreme Court George Higinbotham and educational reformer and sometime Victorian Minister of Charles Pearson. The origins of this book, he wrote in the preface, "lie in a curiosity about a tradition that shaped the public culture of this country" (wide-ranging curiosity being one of the characteristics that made Stuart Macintyre such an impressive historian), and "an unresolved attachment to and rejection of the values it embodies."

In the 1990s, Stuart became a highly visible participant in the so-called "History Wars," a complex argument among historians about how to view Australia's national past, in particular the relationship between European settlers and indigenous peoples. It was a bitter and deeply political debate, with ex-Prime Minister Paul Keating weighing in in support of a more critical assessment of Australia's past and Prime Minister John Howard taking a strong position against what came to be called the "black armband" view, namely that there was more to apologise for in Australian history since 1788 than to boast about. Stuart's exchanges with Keith Windschuttle were untypically sharp, and he was a signatory of the statement issued by members of the Melbourne History Department dissociating themselves with the views of the Department's chairman, Geoffrey Blainey, on Asian immigration, which at that time many saw as racist. But the tone of the book Stuart later wrote about these arguments,

The History Wars (2003), was no longer harshly polemical, indeed it has his characteristic fair-mindedness in presenting opposing views, while at the same time making clear his own position in the debate.

It followed logically from Stuart's involvement in the History Wars that he should regard the school curriculum in Australian history as in need of reform, and it was typical of the man that he set out to do it. His participation in the Keating government's Civics Expert Group, the Howard government's Inquiry into School History and the National Centre for History Education were among many public duties that Stuart took on in his mature years. At the University of Melbourne, whose staff he had joined in 1980, he became the Ernest Scott Professor of History in the early '90s and served two terms as Dean from 1999 to 2006. He was a member of the Councils of the National Library of Australia and the State Library of Victoria, served at various times as chair of the Humanities and Creative Arts Panel of the Australian Research Council and President of the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia. A Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities since 1999, he received the Order of Australia in 2012. "In real life," Stuart had noted in *Winners and Losers*, "social justice is always mediated through political processes and necessarily involves a tug of competing interests," and its implementation in modern conditions is necessarily through the state. Since that is so, it behoves the people who want to achieve social justice and other radical aims to work through the state and its agencies, especially if they have a talent for such activity. Stuart did have such a talent. And he was not only willing to use it but, as those who knew him well have attested, felt a responsibility to do so.

In one of his finest works, *Australia's Boldest Experiment. War and Reconstruction in the 1940s* (2015), Stuart showed how well he could think like a state, or at least like a labour government setting out to accomplish major and wide-ranging reform. In *Boldest Experiment*, he celebrates the creative efforts of men like John Curtin, Ben Chifley, Nugget Coombs and even Robert Menzies to launch a postwar reconstruction based on principles of planning and involving industry and infrastructure (the Snowy Mountains Hydroelectric Scheme), the banking system, work,

immigration, housing, welfare and education. Not all this ambitious agenda was achieved, but it nevertheless set Australia's policy agenda in basic areas until the 1980s. This scarcely fits the picture of a "black armband" historian intent on slighting Australia's achievements and focussing on its defects. Instead, we have a historian suggesting that Australia's greatest achievements were not necessarily the ones (like military valour) most often cited.

Still, there is no denying that some sense of disappointment infuses Stuart's *Concise History of Australia* (1st edition, 1999), whose almost elegiac tone was noted by several reviewers. "I wrote the *Concise History* at a time when it was difficult to feel optimistic," he wrote in a discussion of the book in *Australian Historical Studies*, noting that for him Australia is "a country so dear that I want it to be better." There is palpable disappointment, too, in his 2010 study of the social sciences in Australia, *The Poor Relation*. On the Communist front, volume 2 of his history of the CPA, written in the light of the Soviet Union's dissolution in 1991, is a story of decline and fall, with a series of blows to Moscow's moral authority in the international movement from Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin and the Soviet suppression of revolt in Hungary in 1956 to the dispatch of Soviet troops to Czechoslovakia in 1968. By 1970, when The Party ends, Communism in the West, including Australia, was a "spent force."

All the same, as Stuart remarked in the AHS discussion quoted above, cheerfulness kept breaking through. Stuart's engagement with the past was a distinctly personal one: as a historian, he seemed to be engaged in an on-going and enjoyable conversation, both with his historical subjects and the historians who had preceded him. Unusually for a man of the Left, he had a respect for "lineages," which may or may not be a "Melbourne" preoccupation (as one Sydney reviewer of *Colonial Liberalism* rather snidely suggested) but is certainly generally a conservative one. The unexpected appearance of Nettie Palmer – a woman of the Left, not of Higinbotham's generation – in the first sentence of *Colonial Liberalism* implied a lineage of which Stuart himself could be a part. He did the same thing writing of Australian historians of previous generations: Ernest Scott,

the first professor of Australian history at the University of Melbourne, on the one hand, and Manning Clark and Brian Fitzpatrick, who challenged and repudiated Scott's legacy, on the other. Stuart never met Brian Fitzpatrick (my father), yet when I read his account of Brian, I felt he must have known him.

Stuart's knowledge of Australian history and its practitioners was legendary, and so was his generosity in sharing it with students and colleagues. A case in point was his insistence that his student, Anna Clark, author of one self-contained chapter in *The History Wars*, should be billed as his co-author. He never let an opportunity pass to bring his students' work to the attention of colleagues who ought to know about it and might be helpful to the students' careers. He collaborated with other scholars in volumes on a wide variety of topics, including the history of the University of Melbourne (*A Short History of the University of Melbourne* with R.J.W. Selleck, 2003), private and public sector collaborations (*How Organisations Connect* with Gordon Boyce and Simon P. Ville, 2006), the historical work of Brian Fitzpatrick and Manning Clark (*Against the Grain* with Sheila Fitzpatrick, 2007), and civil liberties (*Liberty*, with James Waghorne, 2011).

Polemics that go viral like the History Wars leave some participants wounded and others angry, but it is rare indeed that they stimulate serious thought about the nature of the scholarly undertaking. In 2004, Stuart edited and introduced a volume, *The Historian's Conscience*, whose contributors were asked to reflect on their discipline in the light of the History Wars, but not necessarily with direct reference to them. There are some very interesting articles in this volume, but perhaps even more thought-provoking for historians are the questions that Stuart sets out in his introduction. "How do historians deal with unpalatable discoveries?" "How are historians constrained in their investigations? What sort of obligation are they under to bodies that sponsor their work or those that control access to information?... What are the responsibilities that arise when they enter into the past, when they make the imaginative leap into worlds other than their own? How do they deal with those versions of the

past that are powerful markers of present identities?" Such questions, posed with exemplary clarity and trenchancy, will never have definitive answers. But historians have to keep asking them, and that will be harder without Stuart Macintyre's presence.

Sheila Fitzpatrick FAHA¹

University of Sydney

25 November 2021

¹ Thanks to Joy Damousi, Warwick Anderson and Ann Curthoys for helpful suggestions.