History Takes Time:
The counter-modernism of the Historian's pursuits.

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This photograph of the destruction of Palmyra by ISIL has motivated international outrage, including among people who had never heard of Palmyra before. Even though neither most of the public, nor the journalists interpreting wobbly Youtube videos on free-to-air TV, knew what Palmyra meant: a flood of interpreters were suddenly clipping old National Geographics and stock film shots to fill us all in on the 2000 year history of this Graeco-Roman-Persian Pearl of the Desert. Why this should be so relates to the uses to which this history is put. As a UNESCO 'site of world significance', it is not so much the content of Palmyra's history which gets traction, as its status as an asset in the repository of human capital. It is the battle of the two pilgrimages. ISIL refuses infidels any site significance within Dar al-Islam which is not a site of Quranic pilgrimage -- in return, we Western humanists refuse, on a globally expansive scale to barbarians who self-define thereby, the destruction of sites which we incorporate into our definition of civilization. Warring universalisms each with its own deliberate ignorance of the historical meaning of place.

History is full of ironies. The real rub, of course, is that this process of erasure and resistance is written into the history of almost all the countries involved in the Middle East. Syria under the cruel Baathist regime (which we all hate, right?) was in fact one of the few places in the Middle East where the resistance of minorities actually had a chance of resisting the forcible Turkification to the north, and Arabization to the South and East, which has seen ancient traditions (Christian, Yezidi, and more) erased from the landscape. The Arab Spring in Egypt, much lauded by the Western left, rapidly became an attempt to step up the erasure of the ancient Coptic community there, in addition to the normal pattern of church burnings and bombings, beatings and abuse, which punctuate the communal life of Egypt. It raises the question - how did Western governments and intellectual elites get that so wrong.

But before we leap to the conclusion that this is the sort of thing which happens among uncivilized peoples elsewhere, let me point you to some straws in the wind. You will be aware of what has become known as the History Wars -- which became particularly associated with the prime ministership of John Howard, but in fact emerged across the Western world when 1960s reformism moved from marginal street protests to systemic monopoly in politics, universities, media and social welfare institutions. Its occurrence during the Cold War ensured that many of the revisionist cultures of the West attached themselves to the materialist secularism at the core of the enemy of their enemy, Stalinist Marxism. The arts and literature emerging from Europe East and West impacted on Western youth and intellectual subcultures, newly empowered with leisure and disposable cash, organized in universities and social movements, energized by desire for a new world, new forms of community. All of this was, of course, defined against the old--the religious nationalism which opposed itself to the Stalinist Bloc, and by so doing failed to engage with the increasing pluralism of the post-War cities,

the thought world of the universities, the inward-looking conservative materialism which resulted from the restraints of the Depression.

A core doctrine in these counter-cultures--working out of the inverted ideological materialism of Marxist doctrine--was encapsulated in the work of Mikhail Pokrovsky, the first president of the Society of Marxist Historians, who is known largely for his reflection on the nature of the historical, encapsulated in his statement "History is politics, projected into the past". For the student activists of the 1960s, who (like Bill Clinton) matured to become the political and academic leaders of the 1990s and 2000s, the history which their parents had insisted they learn, emulate, and to which they had to submit. They later claimed that they had participated, but not inhaled (though nobody believed it when Clinton said it). They certainly inhaled the spirit of the times, having no real use for history, except as an extension of of embodying their 'passions', of legislating into existence a world disconnected from the stories of the past. Whether from a Marxist approach (which annihilates human agency in preference for large scale reified economic forces) or from a literary critical approach (which 'kills' the author and enslaves the 'text' of historical narrative to politicized academic interpretations), the history told back to Western societies by their own intellectuals involved erasing one set of narratives (about civilization, Christianity, internalized values sustaining types of public order and respect) and reinscribing others (about invasion, personal over communal rights, secularity, the futurist reductionism). History had indeed became politics.

This repositioning of public narratives during the 1970s and 1980s made history the battleground, redefining the political left and the right. The stereotyped conservative voice of the period, Margaret Thatcher, for instance, defined her campaign not just in economic, but in moral terms. In 1979 she declared:

> We are witnessing a deliberate attack on our values, a deliberate attack on those who wish to promote merit and excellence, a deliberate attack on our heritage and our past. And there are those who gnaw away at our national self-respect, rewriting [our] history as centuries of unrelieved doom, oppression and failure-as days of hopelessness, not days of hope' (Margaret Thatcher 1979)

In 1992, likewise, Patrick Buchanan declared "a war for the soul of America" during the Republican National Convention of that year in Houston. His theme was the "culture wars," a struggle, in Buchanan's words, "as critical to the kind of nation we will one day be as was the Cold War itself." With such urgent rhetoric, the right- wing former adviser to presidents Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, and Ronald Reagan aimed to elevate the stakes of that year's presidential election. The nation was confronted with more than a choice between Bush and the Democratic challenger Bill Clinton: it was a decision "about who we are," "about what we believe," about whether "the Judeo- Christian values and beliefs

upon which this nation was built" would survive. Likewise in Australia, as Greg Melleuish has noted, conflict over history "came to public prominence because the agenda of the black-armband brigade was taken up by Paul Keating as part of his 'big picture'. Their willingness to use history for political purposes provided useful ammunition for Keating on matters such as indigenous affairs, the republic and multiculturalism." (Greg Melleuish)

It is worthwhile remembering, in this context, how *recent* history is as a core, formative discipline in the West - compared to, say, the classical curriculum. In Greece, the *enkuklios paideia* or "education in a circle" and in Rome the *liberalia studia* ("liberal arts" or "liberal pursuits") were echoed in the 'liberal arts' for educating the elite, and were echoed in the later *trivium* (Logic, Grammar, and Rhetoric) and *quadrivium* (arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy). You will note that history is not in that list, except as a form of narrative study. This is not to say that the Greeks and Romans didn't study and write history: indeed in Herodotus and Thucydides we have the virtual Scylla and Charibdis of later forms, and in Tacitus and Suetonius, the origins of modern national and political histories. History as a discipline followed by professional scholars was essentially a response to the rise of place in which scholars could be professionalised (i.e. the state-supported universities of the nineteenth century), and a public function which they could perform (rendering academic historiography, as most famously pursued by Ranke, an arm of empire and nation state in the 19th century). The first chairs of history were often extensions of Chairs in Latin or Grammar, and the sort of history carried out was suitably dry, obscure, and philological. Hence, as you may have heard, the meddling of German scholars in re-historicizing the texts of the Old Testament. In many ways, such scholars were not historians properly understood at all, but grammaticists with a narrative and contextual bent. The first chairs of history in Australia were not founded until the 1890s (at Sydney, for example, with the Challis bequest).

With that background, it is easier to understand (a century and a half later) why history is disappearing from our universities and public debates in the face of 'evidence based', 'rights based' or 'policy based' approaches. The ideological shallowness and foolishness of contemporary political debate in Australia is a symptom, almost a reversion to the norm. The last great public embrace of history was the left turn of the 1950s with the emergence of the great mythologizer of Australian progressivism, Manning Clark. (His biography of Henry Lawson, one reviewer wrote, was "a tangled thicket of factual error, speculation and ideological interpretation"). After that, even the Black Armband outbursts in the 1980s and 1990s were really the sound of a long retreat of historical understandings from the public square. Not surprisingly, from the 1990s, the craft itself began to shrink in Australian universities. Between 1989 and 2000, the numbers of academics employed as historians by universities fell by a third. It stabilized by the mid 2000s, but largely because the generational hiring patterns linked to the foundation of new universities (with large influxes in

the 1960s--after the Martin Report-- and the 1990s--with the Dawkins unified system) meant that cohorts of tenured staff were effectively ageing. As an avid user of Seek to track the state of the profession, I have not seen an advertisement for a historian, as such, for some years, in any of Australia's 40 plus universities. In the UK, across the same period, the numbers of students taking history at A level fell markedly, and in the USA there were only a third as many students reading history at university in 1990 as there were in 1970. History has not disappeared: rather, it has been relocated out of public productive space and become once again the pursuit of antiquarians (note the rise and rise of Ancestry.com) and the leisure industry (as seen in the close tie between First World War History and battlefield tourism).

The contextual reasons for this retreat from historical consciousness are not too hard to find. The founding rationale for academic history was essentially to reify the still inchoate idea of the emerging nation state. All the emerging nation states established new universities in the 19th Century to propagate the technical rational systems and historical understandings on which they were based. So, Ranke was the grand old man of Prussianists, Macaulay the champion of empire, Gibbon -- well, he was basically a self-promoting mummy's boy who had father problems, but apart from that, his work was a pro-Enlightenment paean to the Roman values which reinforced the re-paganization of the British imperial ruling class. The decline of the nation state and the rise global interstitial and governmental agencies has undermined the original purpose of history: to celebrate the *particularity* of the nation state. As nation states have bureaucratised and become the mechanism for transnational forces (markets, technology flows, certification for the global labour force) academic history has declined in perceived usefulness, replaced by those even later comers, economics and the social sciences. Having been fought over in the History Wars of the 1980s-2000s, history has --along with sex and religion--joined the list of things not to talk about at a BBQ. It is too delicate a thing in a pluralist settler society - the person on the other end of the conversation may, after all, have an attitude to, or even family link with, some dreadful disaster or identity issue, be it White Invasion, the Armenian Genocide, the Holocaust, or the Spanish colonization of the Philippines. Too tragic for the public gaze, too little taught to be a matter of personal expertise, history is safer as the object of personal choice and heritage, or when slaved to a public ritual (such as the Gallipoli pilgrimage).

In Christian circles, one might expect things to be better - but one would largely be disappointed. Our interests, too, are largely personal for many of the same reasons. While we pride ourselves as being associated with a historic religion based on the in-history actions of God, our engagement usually fades out about where the edges of our denominational affiliation takes us. Our institutions, largely because we have had a long (and largely mistaken) belief that the education system was 'on our side', have tended to reinforce this through the

close association of doctrine and history. Very few theological colleges, for example, teach history in any depth, apart from the mandatory survey course in Church History, followed by some historical references in our biblical and doctrinal classes. We don't produce historians, as a whole, and neither do we hire them. I have had one Theological College Principal let me know that one of his distinguished former staff members was 'too interested in dead people' for his purposes, and another point with some pride to his historian (singular) on staff, who presumably provided the standard service courses for students on their way to a BTh, MDiv or DMin. In a recent exercise at my own institution, I was engaged with the Chaplaincy staff to develop a theological and historical framework document for our strategy process. Despite the fact that many of them walk almost weekly past a portrait of John Dunmore Lang in the hallway of our main administration building, the historical account of the roots of the College ended with Calvin. (As he died in 1564, you can imagine that this left some backfilling for me to do in the latter half of the document. The outcome of this is that almost everyone in our Christian Studies now knows who Thomas Chalmers was.) As the last great home for the traditional humanities, it seems, Christian institutions around the country have, by a fit of absence of mind, forgotten about the formative disciplines of historiography.

In 2010, Philip Jensen (under whose ministry I spent many a lunchtime during my graduate student career at UNSW) bewailed the lack of traction he was getting when attempting to celebrate the 200th anniversary of William Cowper, the first Australian-born clergyman. Like many people, he said, "I hated Australian history at school." (A common problem -- I, having spent a lot of my life removing the hatred of history from adults who had unfortunate school experiences, now work at the school he went to!). And like many people, he later realized that he had become as an adult 'very appreciative of those wonderful schoolteachers who so nobly fought the indolence of my youth and drummed some information into me.'[1] More than that, he came to the conclusion that:

> Common understanding of our origins is a basic peaceful mode of uniting a community. Losing your past, or censoring it, is one of the ways to destabilise a society. It makes us the victims of the present fads and fashions and worse still – victims of today's power brokers… Ignorance of white settlement, censors Christianity out of our culture.

I think we can agree on the outcomes--on the 'killing of history' as a mode of elite power-expression in high modern societies. Modernity, as Andrew Cole and Vance Smith note, defines itself *towards* the Middle Ages, and cannot let go of the spectre which it rejects.[2] I do think, however, that Philip is being too hard

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1 http://phillipjensen.com/articles/ignorance-or-historical-censorship/

2 Andrew Cole; D Vance Smith, *The legitimacy of the Middle Ages: on the unwritten history of theory*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2010, 24.

on himself in thinking that his lack of knowledge about the past was merely the result of 'the indolence of my youth'. Disengagement with history, at least in my experience, is not merely a matter of laziness, but of a structurally redirected gaze, of embedded institutional values. History *takes time*. Time is constitutive of history not only in terms of its passage, and in the thing-ness of sources, but in its method and disciplines. As Richard Evans notes in his critique of postmodernists such as Lawrence Stone, not taking time produces bad history: 'When you work in the archives… you're bored, you're in a hurry… You're bound to make mistakes.'[3] I have told elsewhere the story of one prospective PhD student who thought he might like to do a historical thesis, only to return three days later with the comment that "history was too much work"! He became a noted theologian instead. History, on the other hand, takes time.

My theologian friend's choice was not a matter of laziness - doing theology takes effort and a certain amount of intelligence as well. The difference is that 'the system' of the modern is against the historian. Theologians can find interstices in the secular (which is inevitably fractured and discontinuous) through which to insert their observations. I can remember being confronted by the contrast on a rare trip abroad to South Korea, where I ran into two (in my mind) equally influential Christian scholars, on the one hand, Jurgen Moltmann (who, I was told semi-humorously, had virtually taken out citizenship there) and Mark Noll (voted by *Time Magazine* in 2005 as one of the 25 most influential evangelicals in the USA). Moltmann was received with almost religious fervour: Noll, on the other hand, slipped in and out of the country, with a mixture of applause (and the usual brickbats from that particularly fundamentalist form of Korean theological liberalism), leaving little trace. Theologians will, not doubt, complain about the need to publish or perish, the terrible pressure of time. Still, that does not *necessarily* end in the production of bad theology, though bad theology is sometimes a result. History, however, takes time - one of my mentors even said to me once that 'You are not a good historian until you turn 50.' I have the melancholy duty to inform you that having passed that ripe old age, I can now say that he was right. It just takes that long to turn over the sources, make a set of sources exhaustively yours, teach enough, read enough, know enough to create contexts for understanding. Without time, the result is just bad history. History takes time.

All of this gives one something of an insight into the base problem. We are caught up in the ambivalence which modernity has with regard to history. Itself both a temporal category, and also an attitude towards the direction of and shape of time, it sits between the Medieval and the Future, towards which its values are constantly directed. Returning to our opening image, the great sins of ISIS explain why they are such an anathema to us, why anti-colonialist, pro-Arab Spring, non-interventionist liberals have now happily joined right wingers like Glenn Beck in 'bombing the snot out of ISIS'. ISIS managed at one and the

3 Richard Evans, *In Defence of History*, 122.

same time to make itself (or, more probably, was made by reaction) both a renascent Medieval barbaism on the one hand, and also a threat to smooth dreams of globalizing futures on the other. As Osborne notes:

> the idea of modernization, through which the sociological concept of modernity was extended beyond its original reference to European and North American societies, in the context of the processes of postwar decolonization, notoriously presumes a homogeneous continuum of historical time across which comparative judgements about social development may be made in abstraction from all qualitative temporal differences.[4]

The 'modern' is created through its difference with 'tradition' or the traditional. The use of the past is to be critiqued, so the modern can be brought into being. From this perspective, the dominance in the press of Palmyra or the destruction of the treasures of Nineveh, is not the point for the Christian. We can allow ourselves to be shocked by the destruction of Palmyra, but at the same time realize that the reason why the media-consuming public draws breath at things about which it knows nothing is because they see materialized before them the stereotypical barbarians who justify their lived order and their own willingness to selectively suppress the past.

Christians, on the other hand, may wonder why the stones of Palmyra receive more press coverage than the wholesale murder, rape and dispossession of ancient Christian communities.[5] The logic of high modernism provides us with a reason: Christianity is a thing of the past, embodied in the unfortunate but, as it turns out, temporary geographical dislocation of these obviously lost Christians (after all, everyone knows that the Middle East is Arabic, right? And Arabs are Muslims, right?) Clearly we can't be witnessing something targetted at a people who are clearly not supposed to be there in the first place, and so when Australia offers 12000 places to Syrian refugees, there is outrage at the suggestion that Christian populations be given precedence. After all, there can be no genocide if there is neither a people nor a time which can be recognized.[6] What appears to us to be remarkable mental gymnastics by people such as the *Herald* reporter, Eryk Bagshaw, by the Muslim Women's Association, by public

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4 Peter Osborne, *The Politics of Time: Modernity & Avant-garde*, New York: Verso, 1995, 2.

5 Natasha Moore, 'Why don't we hear about persecuted Christians?', 1 Aug 2014, http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-08-01/moore-why-don't-we-hear-about-persecuted-christians/5641390 (accessed 30 May 2016); Eliza Griswold, 'Is This the End of Christianity in the Middle East?', *New York Times Magazine*, 22 July 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/26/magazine/is-this-the-end-of-christianity-in-the-middle-east.html?_r=1 (accessed 30 May 2016).

6 Eryk Bagshaw, 'Syrian migrant crisis: Australian Islamic leaders label Christian refugee preference as 'bigoted',' *Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 September 2015 http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/syrian-migrant-crisis-australian-islamic-leaders-label-christian-refugee-preference-as-bigoted-20150908-gjhvjl.html

activists such as Mariam Veiszadeh, or the left-leaning University website *The Conversation*,[7] is in fact continuous with 'the modern'. We cannot presume to give preference to Christians *there*, lest we be seen to be racist *here*, despite the fact that reactions both to Christianity and 'religion as race' are creations of the secular modernist response to pluralist societies. One would have thought, otherwise, that refugee peoples faced with genocide (as a group as well as individuals) might have been given some preference to refugee peoples dislocated in a war in which their communal existence was *not* under threat. This at least has been our traditional understanding as a country, given that Australia was a major promoter of the UN *Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide*, and the second country in the world (after Ethiopia) to sign the convention (in 1949). Indeed, under Article 3 of the Convention, one wonders whether those "constitutionally responsible rulers, public officials or private individuals" (Article IV) who promoted the failure to assist these people might not be subject to proceedings in the International Criminal Court for 'complicity in genocide'.

Not surprisingly, this does not seem to have been suggested during the debate - and of course, it wouldn't really get up, because complicity requires 'knowledge of the precise crime committed by a principal offender'. What we have in the modernist dismissal of history is precisely an *un-knowing* of the precise crimes committed by those principal offenders whose future-oriented actions support the rise of the modern condition. It, too, is a form of erasure, an erasure of uncomfortable histories which make the modern present more liveable. This is the third sense in which history 'takes time' in the modern context. In the first sense, history 'takes time' as its medium; in the second, history just takes time to mature, for the historian to be able to write good history. Here, however, we understand that history 'takes time' like an emotionally wrought relative who we encourage to step out of the room: modernism pushes history out of the narrative of events as history is remade as present politics projected back into the past. There was no Armenian genocide, only 'relocation' within the bounds of the Ottoman Empire: there are no Christians here, and never have been. There is no Christian genocide on the Nineveh plain (despite the use of words such as 'ethnic cleansing' by UN heritage officers): once ISIL finishes the job of destroying every church in Mosul, it will be as if they had never been. On their ashes will rise either a modern Iraqi confederacy, or a new, modern Kurdish nation (depending on which way the politics goes). The 150 monks of the oldest monastery in Iraq, the Chaldean Dair Mar Elia destroyed in 2014 as ISIS stormed into Mosul, won't mind. They were all killed in 1743 by the Persian leader Tahmaz Nadir Shah, when they refused to convert to Islam. I suppose our lot in Australia is better. Australian churches--at least those outside of Victoria, where numbers of public figures pronounced themselves 'elated' at the prospect of church burnings in the aftermath of the Royal Commission--remain under

7 https://theconversation.com/favouring-christian-over-muslim-refugees-is-bad-for-everyone-47440

heritage orders, as assets in the repository of human capital.[8] They make, as a whole, excellent restaurants and warehouses. We are so much more civilized here in the modern West: we do not condone the torching of history, howevermuch our press and politicians extend their therapeutic understanding to those who might. As that reputable source of public opinion, the Murdoch *news.com.au*, blared 'Melbourne church blaze sites house shameful history'. We know what to do with shameful history in this country, don't we?

Time might be the healer, but we have not time for that. History takes time - and we are a society in a hurry. The future beckons, and woe betide any barbarous lout who should stand between us and our potential tourism to places in the Middle East where we will probably never go; who threatens the icons which link 'tradition' with the present, and so our narrative of how we came to be so very, very civilized. The past frightens us, and our response to historic pain is to burn it down. Two cheers for the victory of civilization in this war, and in all the wars to come.

8 Stephanie Juleff, 'Who is burning Geelong's churches?', http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-05-18/who-is-burning-geelong-churches/7425416 (accessed 30 May 2016).