**Historiography**

**Australia, 1960-2014**

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Historiography encompasses the kinds of research, writing and analysis that historians engage for their purposes. Individual historians may be discussed in terms of their historiographical influence and contribution, but more often the study of historiography concerns broader patterns of writing and analysis. The historiography of educational research and writing in Australia has always been responsive to international trends. At the same time, conscious study of historical writing, a close attention to historiography is a relatively recent development in Australian educational history, dating from the early 1970s.

Interest in historiography tends to peak in periods when there are attempts to go beyond the ‘common sense’ or conventional practices of historical research and writing. This conventional approach may be characterised as the pragmatic, or Anglo-empirical tradition. It can include positivist elements. Normally it assumes that good historical analysis requires relative freedom from hypotheses arising from social theory and that clear evidence should underwrite the narratives and interpretation of historical phenomena. The ‘truth’ of historical phenomena is discoverable given highly skilled research efforts. This tradition regards the application of ‘theory’ as likely to contaminate analysis, interfering with what the evidence may have to tell the historian.

Another controversy in the historiography concerns ‘presentism’. Allowing contemporary preoccupations and questions to set research and writing agendas may be criticised as ‘presentist’. The critics argue that the possibility of an authentic understanding of the past is likely to be disrupted by allowing contemporary questions and understandings to shape the study of the past.

Arguably much of the historical thinking outlined above was simply blind to its own assumptions, indeed theoretical foundations. This tradition is sometimes characterised as the Whig, liberal or progressive tradition. In this tradition there is an assumption that some topics are more worthy of study than others and that some evidence is more legitimate than others—and that educational history in particular is a story of improvement or progress. Associated with the tradition was an absence of interest in studies of innovative research methodologies.

The remainder of this entry discusses significant historiographical influences for the history of education as practised in Australia. The work of most historians may be described as ‘genealogical’ in character, that is each of their arguments, methodological approaches, styles of writing and topics explored, have a history of their own. Historians usually engage with an existing literature (another meaning of ‘historiography’) on the topics and eras they research.

Mastering this existing literature allows the recognition of its strengths and weaknesses, and the identification of issues with which it may have failed to engage. Historiographical study is therefore an essential part of developing new and better explanations of historical phenomena. As Peter Burke’s *History and Social Theory* (2005) suggests, the judicious consideration of relevant social theory may also make a considerable contribution to the developing historiography.

**Historiographical movements, traditions and influences**

**Whig, liberal and progressive**

This tradition has been responsible for a great number of works in the history of education, in fact it may be considered the dominant tradition. In general the themes it develops concentrate on progressive reform in schooling and education. In the process it often privileges the biographies and contributions of the builders of institutions and school systems. These are usually male. It concentrates on the beneficial effects of such work. It often traces the expansion of systems of public education as a force for the improvement of populations, economic development, educational opportunity and nation-building in general. Better examples of writing in this historiographical tradition, considered so by their plausibility of argument and skilled use of evidence, perhaps include sympathetic discussion of those who opposed ‘progress’.

Most commissioned histories of schools and other educational institutions and systems, fall into this Whig tradition. Many lack critical focus as system or school leaders and builders are praised for their contributions.

With its concentration on successful institutions, especially, but not only those providing public education, this historiographical tradition has come under sustained criticism since the early 1970s. An early source of criticism was provided by those who felt that significant populations, such as working class, women, Indigenous, disabled and other ethnic or cultural minorities, were ignored, misrepresented or misunderstood.

This is not to say that this tradition has not added substantially to our knowledge and understanding of Australian educational history. An early formulation of the dominant argument, that necessary and accessible public education arose from the morass of religious denominational provision can be found as early as 1853 with the publication of George Rusden’s polemic on the virtues of national education. Further, the biographies of leaders such as Peter Board, George Higginbotham, George Rusden, Frank Tate, William Wilkins and Harold Wyndham produced by historians of education provide essential knowledge about the origins and character of Australian educational institutions. Most of the older studies that constituted the Australian historiography concentrate on the contests between churches and state in the building of systems of education, and then the building of the educational state. Work by historians A.G. Austin, J. S. Gregory, Gwyneth Dow, Richard Ely, R. J. W. Selleck and Denis Grundy contribute to this historiography.

**Revisionism and social history**

Revisionism and its close ally, social history in the critical tradition, are very broad terms for a range of challenges to the standard Whig or progressive educational historiography. Marxist and New Left social theory and historiography, especially from the United Kingdom, and a wave of radical or ‘revisionist’ histories challenging the accepted truths surrounding public education history in the United States, had a strong impact in Australia. There was usually an argument that disadvantaged populations were in part made so by schooling and knowledge systems and practices that routinely advantaged wealthier and more powerful groups in the population. The subjects and focus of historical study tended to shift towards ‘social history’, that is, much more attention being given to the experience of ‘ordinary’ young people and teachers rather than the work of educational leaders and the founders of systems of education. Although leaders and systems often continued as subjects of educational historiography, the arguments became critical. The different approaches of historians Clifford Turney (1992) and Barry Smith (1990) to one of the builders of New South Wales’ public education system, William Wilkins, or the histories of South Australian public education, Colin Thiele’s, *Grains of Mustard Seed* (1975) and Pavla Miller’s, *Long Division* (1986) illustrate the different historiographical approaches.

Important works of radical revisionism from the 1970s included Jean Ely’s, *Reality and Rhetoric* (1978), Bob Bessant’s *Mother State and Her Little Ones* (1987), Pavla Miller’s *Long Division* (1986) and David McCallum’s *The Social Production of Merit* (1990). In Adelaide there was the so-called [Adelaide School](http://dehanz.net.au/entries/adelaide-school-social-history-childhood-family-education/), associated with Ian Davey. Its historians initially addressed the difficult relations between the working class and public schools, but went on to develop histories of childhood, youth and schooling that responded to developing gender theory. In New South Wales, Geoffrey Sherington and Winifred Mitchell wrote their *Growing Up in the Illawarra* (1984) and John Ramsland, *Children of the Backlanes* (1986). With work such as these, and Craig Campbell’s studies of adolescence, the historical study of schooling was expanded into that of childhood and youth (see below). Regionally based social histories also became more common. The impact of schooling on populations became as important a question as how the educational state, more narrowly defined, developed.

A result of revisionism saw changes in the kinds of documents that were thought relevant to educational history. Collections such as those by A. G. Austin and Clifford Turney in the 1960s and 1970s had concentrated on the building of education systems and church and state relations. The South Australian collection, *Learning and Other Things* in 1988 focussed more on documents that supported the writing of social histories of education.

Revisionist historiography encouraged non-traditional research methodologies. The development of comprehensive data-bases of young people enrolled in schools, or teachers’ records allowed for [‘quantitative history’](http://www.history.ac.uk/makinghistory/themes/quantitative_history.html). Hypotheses about what had happened to broad populations of teachers or young people caught up in education, or in transitions to the workforce could be supported by this kind of evidence. Alison Mackinnon and Craig Campbell wrote histories based on extensive student databases collected from a variety of school records. Moreover, [oral history](http://www.history.ac.uk/makinghistory/resources/articles/oral_history.html) was increasingly recognised as one of the very few ways of recovering the voices and personal histories of people who were usually silenced in the writing of mainstream history. The practice of oral history generated historiographical and methodological debate. Alyson Holbrook and Josephine May were significant participants in this debate in the 1990s and 2000s.

The book edited by Marjorie Theobald and R.J.W. Selleck, *Family, School and State in Australian History* (1990), provides a convenient collection of articles that engaged with the social history of education and revisionist historiography.

**Feminism and women’s history**

At the same time as the emergence of social history, and in critical dialogue with it, numbers of mainly women historians began to ask new questions about the experience of women in educational history. Jill Blackmore’s *Making Educational History: A Feminist perspective* (1992) reviewed the developing historiography. Helen Jones and Noeline Kyle sought to rescue the historical role of women in social and educational change more generally. Others were strongly influenced by second wave feminist theory. Historians such as Elizabeth Windschuttle, Marjorie Theobald and Kay Whitehead sought to tell the histories of women who had resisted patriarchal power. Histories of women teachers and girls’ schools predominated, although what constituted the female curriculum over time also received attention. Theobald’s essay, ‘”Mere Accomplishments”? Melbourne’s Early Ladies Schools Reconsidered’ was internationally significant in the historiography of women’s education. There was a similar movement among historians of Catholic education as the activity of female religious (nuns) was considered in the light of feminism. Christine Trimingham Jack and Anne O’Brien wrote important studies.

As had been the case for the related revisionist history, social theory, in this case, gender theory became significant in the raising of new questions in writing histories of education. Theorisation about gender order and gender relations as they might impact on the institutions and practices of women and girls in education enabled insightful histories such as that by Jill Matthews on a school subject like home economics, or Alison Mackinnon on the history of women in higher education and the new professions opening to women. The most accomplished work in the historiography that addressed the history of girls’ schooling and women teachers was Marjorie Theobald’s *Knowing Women* (1996).

**Foucault and cultural studies**

As the work of [Michel Foucault](http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/foucault/) became well known among historians of education, mainly in the 1980s and 1990s, it initially promised a major influence on the historiography, but few histories have been published so far that consistently employ his theories and methodologies. Nevertheless the arguments surrounding genealogies, power, subjectivities, confining institutions, and discipline and punishment for example, have had some influence. One issue of the *History of Education Review* (vol. 20: 2, 1991) engaged with the possibilities for the historiography. The writing of Nicolas Rose, including his *Governing the Soul: The shaping of the private self* (1990) received a specially commissioned review in the issue.

The new cross disciplinary field, cultural studies, produced the more significant Foucaultian studies that may or may not have included some insights into educational history. Ian Hunter’s *Rethinking the School: Subjectivity, bureaucracy, criticism* (1994) included a critique of revisionist historiography in education. Selleck’s 1991 review of Hunter’s *Culture and Government: The emergence of literary education* (1988) regarded much work inspired by Foucault as useful and occasionally brilliant, but also argued that the studies were often marred by an alienating language that mystified historical analysis. One of the more successful Foucaultian inspired studies of Australian schooling was David Kirk’s *Schooling bodies* (1998). It provided a much-needed history of physical education in Australia.

From the 1990s, studies emerged that were inspired by topics emerging from cultural studies. Josephine May’s history of the representations of [Australian schools and school children in film](http://dehanz.net.au/entries/films-students-teachers-schooling/), *Reel schools* (2013), owes much to the new questions arising from cultural and media studies. Studies of texts and sometimes visual materials, and the discourses of education they encouraged, grew in number in the early twentieth-first century. Julie McLeod and Katie Wright’s *The Promise of the New and Genealogies of Education Reform* (2014) is a study of educational thinking in the 1920s and 1930s that fostered new social and personal knowledges that might transform self and society. A concentration on issues such as changing identities and subjectivities, representations and signifying practices were often at the heart of this developing historiography. Older concerns, for example with the inequalities of access and opportunity in education, so important in the revisionist historiography, were not necessarily abandoned. The arguments developed with a new language and a different approach to the collection and reading of relevant evidence.

**The historiographical challenge for selected themes and topics in education**

**Indigenous**

New demands were made on the historiography if the educational histories of Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples were to be told. The existing historiography is limited. Jim Fletcher’s *Clean, Clad and Courteous*(1989) is an exception. It documents the variable access and exclusions of Aboriginal people from public education in New South Wales. Historians such as Anna Haebich, *Broken Circles* (2000), often touched on schooling, and essays such as those by Quentin Beresford in *Reform and Resistance in Aboriginal Education* (2003) provide valuable surveys. Nevertheless the historiography lacks studies that develop the themes of surviving pedagogies, colonialism, racism, community resistance and agency. There is only one substantial history of a school for Aboriginal children, Brook and Kohen’s, *The Parramatta Native Institution and the Black Town* (1991). The voices of Indigenous peoples have yet to be published in substantial histories, though the book *Trying to Get It Back: Indigenous women, education and culture* (2000) by Gillian Weiss and collaborators made an excellent start. A. Williamson’s *Schooling the Torres Strait Islanders 1873 to 1941* (1994) provided another rare and valuable contribution to the historiography.

**Catholics**

The Whig historiographical tradition usually constructed the opposition of the Catholic Church in Australia to the emergence of mainly secular public education systems as contrary to reason, economy, and the delivering of good access for all young people to efficient schooling. The Roman Catholic Church did not reconcile to the passing of the [Education Acts of the 1870s](http://dehanz.net.au/entries/free-compulsory-secular-education-acts/). The struggle to build an alternative set of Catholic schools and school systems inspired an historiography that could resemble heroic saga and hagiography [see *Glossary*]. From this resistance politics, a Catholic historical literature emerged that shared parallel characteristics to the Whig tradition, in reverse. Fogarty’s *Catholic Education in Australia 1806-1950* (1959) is the key work in this tradition, though without obvious hagiographical characteristics.

Mary McKillop was canonised in 2010. She was the founder of the Sisters of St Joseph and of many parochial Catholic schools across Australia. Her sainthood has encouraged a hagiography that incorporates glowing histories of Catholic schooling, at least in the popular media. Popular histories of the Goulburn diocese school strike in 1962, in protesting state aid denial, are often in this tradition also. Recently a more critical historiography of Catholic education has begun to emerge. Barry Coldrey’s *The Scheme: The Christian Brothers and child care in Western Australia* (1993) provided an early exposure of systematic child abuse in Catholic institutions. Feminist historians have sought to recognise the often ignored stories of women and girls, lay and religious (see above). Others, especially Tom O’Donoghue have addressed the authoritarian traditions of the Church, and its difficult history of child abuse. His *Upholding the Faith* (2001) represented a sharp challenge to the dominant Catholic educational historiography.

**Childhood and youth**

The Whig tradition did not address children and youth other than as the passive subjects of the good intentions of school founders and leaders. It is the rise of social history and revisionism that allowed a different focus. Lesley Johnson’s *The Modern Girl: Girlhood and growing up* (1993) andJan Kociumbas’ *Australian Childhood: A history* (1997) provided significant studies, both influenced by revisionist and Foucaultian perspectives. Geoffrey Sherington and Chris Jeffery’s *Fairbridge: Empire and child migration* (1998) provided a judicious historical assessment of the Fairbridge scheme in Australia. Three years earlier, Terry Irving, David Maunders and Sherington, wrote a comprehensive study of Australian youth policy since World War II.

**Schooling the powerful and wealthy**

The book by Sherington, R. C. Petersen and Ian Brice, *Learning to Lead* (1987), provided the first critical history of corporate non-government schools, those enrolling girls as well as boys. C.E.W. Bean’s *Here My Son* (1950) addressed boys’ schools, writing mainly in the uncritical Whig tradition. Girls’ non-government schooling has received some attention apart from the celebratory school histories. A rich literature surrounds the historical significance of the founding of the Presbyterian Ladies College in Melbourne. The historiography addresses the degree to which the school and its curriculum were a part of first wave feminism, and questions the received narrative, that it represented a radical break with the older private ladies colleges. Kathleen Fitzpatrick and Marjorie Theobald provide the more significant arguments. Elizabeth Windschuttle’s article, ‘Educating the daughters of the ruling class in colonial New South Wales, 1788-1850’ (1980) also addressed the issues of power and wealth. Janet McCalman’s *Journeyings: Biography of a middle-class generation* (1993) remains an exceptionally good study of the way schooling shapes individual and collective cultures, indeed, leads to the construction of social classes. Gender is an increasingly acknowledged theme in the historiography of ruling class schooling. The most accomplished of the monographs addressing the history of Australian masculinities in the context of middle and ruling class schooling is that by Martin Crotty, *Making the Australian Male: Middle-class masculinity 1870-1920* (2001).

**Higher education**

There exist useful studies of individual universities and sometimes older agricultural, technical and other colleges of advanced education, though many of them reflect their origins as commissioned histories. W.J. Gardiner, Don Anderson, Susan Davies, Peter Musgrave and David Jones are some of the pioneers in writing broader histories. It is only very recently that studies are emerging that are both critical and comprehensive, for example, Hannah Forsyth’s *Knowing Australia* (2014). There is a great need for further studies in this area. Ursula Bygott and Ken Cable’s *Pioneer Women Graduates of the University of Sydney 1881-1921* (1985), Alison Mackinnon’s T*he New Women: Adelaide’s early women graduates* (1986) and Alan Barcan’s *Radical Students: The old left at Sydney University* (2002) are some of the few studies of students and graduates. Stuart MacIntyre’s *The Poor Relation: A history of social sciences in Australia* (2010) is a rare example of a broad historical study of related disciplines of knowledge as found in universities.

**Curriculum**

Broad, cohesive, critical historical studies of school curricula from colonial to more modern times barely exist. There are studies for individual school subjects, and curriculum for limited periods of time, but curriculum remains a field barely scratched. It is an important issue for the history of ideas and sociology of knowledge in Australia, let alone the historical role of curriculum in educational development. Nevertheless two studies of significance are the collection of essays in *Australia’s Curriculum Dilemmas* (2011) edited by Lyn Yates, Chery Collins and Kate O’Connor. Richard Teese’ *Academic Success and Social Power* (2000/2013) includes short histories of the school subjects that he argues are assessed in such a way as to create social inequality. Histories of assessment and credentialism include the specialist studies by Peter Musgrave *From Humanity to Utility: Melbourne University and Public Examinations 1856-1964* (1992) and Antonio Mercurio, *Questions as Answers* (2003).

**Pedagogy**

How have teachers taught in Australia over time? There are no published monographs that address the history of teaching for substantial periods of time. Some innovative histories of reading and its curriculum, by Phillip Cormack and collaborators exist, mainly in journal article form.

**Pre-school and primary**

Pre-school and primary, infant and elementary levels of education attracted a lot of scholarly attention for the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth, but then the studies dwindle. Comprehensive, coherent monographs are difficult to find. Exceptions in the early childhood area include Deborah Brennan’s *The Politics of Australian Child Care: From philanthropy to feminism* (1994) and L. Gardiner’s, *The Free Kindergarten Union of Victoria 1908-80* (1982). Larry Prochner has written an important comparative study: *A History of Early Childhood Education in Canada, Australia, and New Zealand* (2009).

**Secondary schooling**

There are a wealth of studies addressing this area. They cover schools, school systems, and the social and cultural relations of schooling. Historians of this sector include Rupert Goodman on Queensland, Bob Bessant on Victoria, Craig Campbell on South Australia, Kaye Tully on Western Australia and Geoffrey Sherington nationally. The monograph by Campbell, Carole Hooper and Mary Fearnley-Sander (1999) addressed the historiography as well as providing state based studies within the social history and revisionist tradition. Campbell and Sherington’s *The comprehensive public high school* (2013) provides a New South Wales study tracing the rise and decline of universal public secondary schooling. Josephine May and Helen Proctor have contributed oral history based studies of localised secondary school history. Richard Teese’s *For the Common Weal: The public high school in Victoria 1910-2010* (2014) continues that author’s distinctive historiographical contribution based in historical sociology and a concern for the theme of equitable access to good schooling.

**Teachers**

Many of the more long-lasting teacher unions have had commissioned histories written. Andrew Spaull as a labour and education historian has provided important studies here. Historians Martin Sullivan and Bruce Mitchell have also published teacher union histories of interest. For teachers more generally we have studies on women through to the early twentieth century, including Kay Whitehead’s *The New Women Come Along: Transforming teaching in the nineteenth century* and Marjorie Theobald’s *Knowing Women* (1996) but for men specifically, almost none, and general histories, virtually none. B.K. Hyams’ *Teacher Preparation in Australia: A history of Its development from 1850 to 1950* (1979) is the only ambitious monograph in the historiography that addresses the long-term history of teacher education. Kay Whitehead has added a further dimension to the historiography; much of her study of teachers and educational leaders occurs in the context of the making of transnational careers. Her work on Lillian de Lissa is an example of this.

**Communities, parents and schools**

According to the standard historiography the 1870s Education Acts radically reduced the power of communities and parents over the schooling of their children. There has been a little attention given this topic, especially for the nineteenth century by Malcolm Vick, but as a topic of historical investigation, the studies are sparse. As Australia’s public education systems reorient towards more powerful parent involvement, administrative devolution, community engagement, occurring as the same time as the rapid growth of non-government schools, these developments need historical contextualisation. Part of the effort requires histories of different ethno-cultural groups and schooling. Cleverley’s *Half a Million Children* (1978) provided pioneering studies of the diverse histories involved. Michael Gilding’s *The Making and Breaking of the Australian Family* is foundational on parents and families. Campbell, Sherington and Proctor’s *School Choice* (2009) provides a history of parents in a variety of school markets from colonial times. For the nineteenth century Theobald and Selleck’s *Family, School and State in Australian History* (1990) provides foundational essays for the issues involved for communities, parents and schools.

**Glossary**

*Hagiography* is literally the writing of the lives of saints, usually in the Catholic tradition. It has acquired a secondary and negative meaning. Hagiography is often used to describe any biographical study that uncritically idealises the life of its subject.

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