

History, change and the future
Mark Peel, Monash University
South Australian State History Conference
2 August 2008

[As this presentation contains as yet unpublished material from a forthcoming book, you may cite the paper but please do not quote from it without written permission: please email me on mark.peel@arts.monash.edu.au]

In thinking about what I might contribute to a conference of history-makers, I took as my guide the titles of the presentations that feature in the program and your shared commitment to the significance and enjoyment of dealing with the past. In a very important way, of course, making history means making decisions about the nature and meaning of change, and providing our audiences with resources for their own debates about the future. To understand today and imagine tomorrow, you must first know yesterday, and not as some dead weight pushing us along one unavoidable path. The past is a place of possibilities, of ideas and prospects. Good history examines the past in terms of choices and decisions, not inevitabilities, and it accordingly follows the paths not taken, and the futures that did not come to be. If we live in the world that the people of the past made, it is important to examine their debates and disagreements, as well as their common ground. We need to listen for their whispers, for their half-spoken hopes, for their prophecies fulfilled and unfulfilled, for what they shouted out and what they could hardly bear to say. The task of history-making, in that light, is to emphasise connection rather than veneration; our goal is empathy, not awe. Certainly, we illuminate the differences between the people of the past and ourselves, and acknowledge the difficulties of knowing past lives, especially when only a few scraps of evidence remain. Yet we must struggle nonetheless to tell stories that bridge the distances, and render the intimacies and ironies of past lives so that all of us can find a place there.

Good history is also one of our strongest defences against resignation: the idea that things never change, or that the world can't be altered. It is a strange thing, but some people assume that being an historian makes you a pessimist. On the contrary, I think it makes you an optimist and an idealist. History shows the capacity for change as well as continuity, and it proves the strength of well-made arguments and powerful ideas. History is about resilience and adaptation. Hearts are moved, minds are changed, what was once taken for granted is left behind, injustices once assumed to be ordained or inevitable are challenged and overcome. History shows worlds being made, and what is made can be unmade and remade.

So how we make our histories is very important. In looking at your program and your theme, and taking as our common challenge how to find ways of engaging people with the past, what I thought I would do today is to share three examples of how I have tried to write and teach history in ways that connect past and present, that capture something of the drama and contingency of the past, and that try and use imagination to tackle the issue of silences and absences. There are all kinds of possibilities in history-making, in many of which most of you are more expert than I: physical and cultural heritage, walks and 'living' history, exhibitions, oral and family histories, to name a few. We might have somewhat different audiences or even ambitions for our various histories, but because we strive for common objectives, I think there is much we have to share and discuss.

My first example is drawn from my undergraduate teaching, and takes up the question of how to engage people in the dilemmas and decisions of the past. In the last decade or so, we have seen a number of interesting attempts to place modern people into a more or less accurate recreation of the past, and then to watch what they do. Some have been more successful than others. Two British series—*1900 House* and *Edwardian Country House*—struck me as particularly interesting, the former for its attention to detail, the latter because it dramatised so well the sheer cliff face of class difference in Edwardian England, and because the young servants articulated the vast changes that have since occurred in how ordinary women and men can hope to live their lives.

Of course, we can't actually put people back into the past, not least because it is highly unlikely the ethics committees with which we must all deal would allow us to recreate the disease environments and physical debilities that would make it actually real. Injecting every tenth participant with smallpox, for instance, or removing most of their teeth, might cause a bit of a scandal. But I think we can ask our participants—in my case, my students—to grapple with something from the past, using only the tools, information and assumptions that were available in that past. Every time I teach the history of the American Civil War, I set the students a challenge. Each of the tutorial groups represents a specific constituency of 1860s Americans: abolitionists, slaves, secessionists, the Republican Party, and so on. Acting only on the basis of what those Americans could have known and could have done, I ask the students to prevent the Civil War. For a week, they use an electronic—and yes, extremely ahistorical—bulletin board, where they issue ultimatums, seek alliances, make threats and arrange secret deals, all in nineteenth-century language. They spend hours refining their rhetoric and their speeches. The abolitionists rail and sermonise, the secessionists wrap themselves in the mantle of the founding fathers, the slaves describe the injustice of their oppression, Abraham Lincoln talks about the house divided. They become very absorbed by it all. One young man posted an angry denunciation of secessionist treason one evening after having too merry a time at a party; the next day, he sent out a realistically nineteenth-century apology for imbibing too much liquor at the hootenanny.

At the end of the week, the students take over the lecture theatre and hold a Convention. Each constituency issues a manifesto, to be cheered or jeered by their allies and their enemies, and then sends out envoys to negotiate with other constituencies and form historically valid compromises that might have delayed or even prevented the war. It is bedlam; there are usually 150 or 200 students, and they quickly discover how hard it is to find and maintain compromises amid so many clashing interests. Indeed, they rarely succeed in halting the momentum of events, and usually create a worse war than the real one. By the conclusion of negotiations, they are usually exhausted and defeated. Sometimes, they turn to other means. One group decided to turn into Cherokees and launch an Indian war while everyone was distracted. The Confederate Army kidnapped Lincoln one year and refused to allow him back into the lecture theatre until I found and freed him. Another year, the escaped and refugee slaves brought cardboard pitchforks and stood behind the Confederate civilians chanting “forty acres and a mule, or it's Nat Turner time” (Nat Turner being one of the rare examples of a bloody slave revolt in the American South).

By that point, of course, this has gone way beyond anything we would call history. When the tumult has subsided, however, and when the students write their critical reflections upon the events, they all say that they have learned something.

Having come to the study of a civil war convinced that wars result from the stupidity or bloodthirstiness of the people of the past, they have a very different sense of just how hard the dilemmas that confronted Americans in the 1860s really were. In pretending to be nineteenth-century people, they often gain new perspective on themselves as twenty-first century ones. They listen to all of the people in the past: if they articulate and hear the strategies of the powerful, they must also recreate—and respond to—the convictions of the powerless. In the eight years I've done this, only one class has managed to prevent the war. They did so because a charismatic and highly tactical leader—who I think and perhaps fear will soon be one of our leading politicians—managed to swing enough support behind a compromise that essentially sacrificed the slaves and the free African-Americans of the North to ensure the survival of the Union. All of the other years, the students have presumed that in being unable to prevent the conflict, they have failed. As the dust settles, however, they ponder the nature of this war, and they wonder whether some wars have to be fought, and whether or not to fight for freedom—which is something that at least some of the participants in the American Civil War thought they were doing—is ever an easy decision. In a very interesting way, they live out some crucial points: that the people of the past didn't just take orders or blindly follow their leaders, that we must really struggle to understand the context and the constraints within which they made their decisions, and we must always remember that while historians can stop time and look for alternatives, the people of the past couldn't. They lived in real time, and they found it very hard to interrupt history's rapid momentum. And more than anything, I think, the students begin to realise that the seeds of their supposed failure lie in the crucial differences between themselves and those nineteenth-century Americans who were, almost to the brink of war, also struggling to find a compromise. Unlike those people, they are not willing to condemn four million humans to another generation or two of enslavement, brutality and indignity. While they learn something more about the world of the past, they learn even more about the world they want to make in the future.

My second and third examples are both drawn from my most recent and not quite finished book, which labours under the tentative title of *Miss Cutler and the Case of the Reincarnated Horse*; I promise that this will make more sense after my talk than it probably does now. In the book, I am using the encounters between charity and welfare workers and their clients during the 1920s and 1930s, revealed in more than fifteen hundred case files, to explore how the people of those decades understood poverty. I look through the eyes of charity and welfare workers, in other words, and ask what they saw and what they wanted to say about the inequality and misery they witnessed. It is a large undertaking, set in Melbourne, London, Boston, Minneapolis and Oregon, some of the places in which collections of these case files survive, and it has a huge cast of characters. It is a story that demands care, in part because I think the hard-learned lessons of the 1930s have been forgotten, and in part because I must fulfil the promise of these sources in a way that conveys their drama and their intensity, and the impact they should have on how we think about poverty now, as well as in the past.

In my history-making, in many of the presentations at this conference, and in much of the superb work now being done in our museums, there is a particular stress upon doing justice to the diversity of voices in the past. Certainly, I have always tried to emphasise those voices who offer the most effective challenge to complacency, who tell that part of the truth few people want to hear, who remember what others want to forget. True stories don't come from only listening to the powerful, the

advantaged and the lucky. We must listen for—and capture as best as we can—the more ordinary experiences of the past, through oral history, imaginative reconstruction and a concern for the shards and fragments of common life. History must tell the truth, and you can tell the truth more effectively when you can find all the evidence and see things from every angle. The desire for inclusion and diversity is never simply about balance or a ‘fair representation’. We include the excluded because doing so changes what we can say.

We all know by now the power of listening to the people whose voices had not been heard. We know, for instance, how the history of Australia has been fundamentally rewritten by the simple act of listening to what its indigenous inhabitants have been saying for a long time. And in my own work, which has focused largely on poverty and inequality, I argue that the people to whom we need to listen first are those who live on the lowest rung. We need to listen not out of sympathy, nor simply for anecdotal detail, but because they have much to tell us. So-called ‘losers’ know things about the world that winners don’t. There are things that being privileged doesn’t teach you and doesn’t make visible. The unlucky know more of the world and its vulnerabilities than the lucky; the weak have a far better sense of what matters than the strong. To comprehend the historical or the contemporary importance of housing or health or employment, listen to the unhoused, the unwell and the unemployed.

The point, then, is to find places where we can listen to those voices. It’s not easy, and it is difficult to write about lives that are either hidden from us or seen only through the eyes of someone else. So many of the people of the past have left us very little that speaks in their own voices and in their own terms. They appear in flashes of lightning, often when they’re caught in the middle of something they don’t control. They are in court, or incarcerated, or they need something from a charity. They are forced to tell stories they don’t want to share. We see them almost always through the eyes of others, often people who want to judge them, punish them, save them and only occasionally listen to them.

So how do we hear? To address that problem, I want to draw you into the meticulous files kept by Melbourne’s Charity Organisation Society before the Second World War. It is important to dwell in the past of meanly measured doles and indignities that can be glimpsed there, as the women enquiry officers investigated and tested appeals for assistance. To take these case files as an example, we should be impressed by what they give us but also by what they demand from us in the way of imagination. On the one hand, they provide an intimate portrait and a detailed narrative of hardship. On the other, they reveal how people who were not poor understood those who were. Their writers shaped what they witnessed into stories. They added flourishes and dramatic momentum, creating exemplary tales, tableau in a theatre of poverty, with more or less stock characters playing out dramas of detection, redemption and salvation. In Melbourne, the enquiry officers wrote themselves leading roles in tales of forensic investigation. They modelled themselves as lady detectives in pursuit of the fraud and the ‘simulator’. To ensure that help was given in the exactly right degree to an undeniably deserving person, each encounter with an applicant involved a careful choreography of questions and answers in which workers struggled to reveal secrets, admissions and lies. So these stories were written almost entirely from one side.

Yet as workers probed for details and recorded their clients’ responses, they also provided us with fragments and words, and sometimes just the shadows of what must have been said and done; all together, they do provide us, I think, with the raw

materials for a kind of historical writing that re-enacts these encounters and tries to give voice to those whose words might otherwise remain muted or indeed be lost. In all of our work as history-makers, we are responding to how the people of the past more or less deliberately projected themselves into the future, in letters and diaries and photographs, in family histories and accounts and autobiographies. For a few, we have much; for most, we have very little. The point, then, is to understand the fragmentary record of the past as a challenge, not a defeat, and a challenge best met by utilising the skills of imagination and the creation of context that good historians have always brought to their craft. For me, in these files, this has meant attempting to write dramatisations, scripts, if you like, creating more rounded characters and trying to do justice to people whose words of wisdom and knowledge were so often ignored. It doesn't mean simply making it up, and this is not pure invention. Instead, it builds what I hope are realistic versions, true stories, out of the bits and pieces I know for certain. It is to insist that my characters, and especially the poor, not be ciphers, or marionettes in a drama that gives them no life, no passion, no feelings and no voice. It is to make them actors in a more fully-realised story than the actual record makes possible, by using information and words drawn from other files or other sources to paint a richer portrait. There are undoubted dangers here. We need to be mindful that historians, unlike fiction writers, can't change the ending of the story, and we need to ensure that the reader knows the boundaries between fact and dramatisation. We must always remember our most important job as history-makers: writing dramatically and truthfully about the past.

What I want to share with you is one of these dramatisations, of an encounter between a social worker and an applicant in 1930s Melbourne, in which I hope to illustrate the assumptions and mistakes that prevented then—and too often still prevent now—effective responses to poverty. The 1930s might seem a long time ago, but they're not, especially when you are an historian of poverty and welfare. The closeness of this past is uncanny, because so many people of our own time seem to share the sentiments, if not the exact words, of seventy or eighty years ago. "Necessary gratitude" has become "mutual obligation"; "pauperism" has turned into "welfare dependence", and the "undeserving" have become the "non-compliant". People are still said to be "truly in need" and there remain more or less clumsy ways of trying to differentiate the worthy from the unworthy poor. I most want to explore—and challenge—the assumption that the poor could not be trusted and had to be interrogated, in part because they supposedly told lies to mask their inadequacies, and in part because they were dependent, hapless and helpless. This meant that what they said could often be discounted, when, I am arguing, what they said was usually true. So this is the dramatisation of Miss Cutler and the Case of the Reincarnated Horse. I will welcome your thoughts. You may want me to keep trying. You may want me to stop doing it immediately.

But for the foolishness of men, Miss Cutler thought, she would be making good time. She'd left ten minutes ago, but was still waiting in a queue of cars on Victoria Parade to pass an accident caused by one young man driving his car into the car of another, and then into a tram. This wasn't helping her established dislike of long drives. She drove well, of course, with all of the careful determination that marked every aspect of her demeanour. But she did not enjoy it. Cars were unhelpful and sometimes unmanageable machines, and the attention that driving demanded seemed to her rather a waste of time. Still, the Aldermans lived nearly twenty miles from the city, and while there was a train, one could never be sure when there would be a bus to the

street near their little block. So she would have to drive the Charity Organisation Society's car.

Clear of the confusion, she gathers a little speed, though the gears are as uncooperative as ever. Miss Cutler is more used to the streets and lanes closer to the city, in Fitzroy and Collingwood, or in Richmond. She can find anything or anyone there. She can take the tram or the train, and walk. It is easier to walk. It means a less obvious arrival, though in those dreary, overcrowded little streets she knows that news of "the Charity lady" ripples just ahead of her. Early mornings are a good time for visits. She always impresses that upon the younger inquiry officers. In the morning, Miss Cutler finds, you can see into a household with a particular clarity. You could see the family as it was when you were unexpected and they were unsuspecting. You could find the men still in bed, the children unwashed or unfed, the women with their hair unclipped and their stories not yet straight. It was the women you had to talk to, of course. The men were usually rather dull and sullen. Or they talked too much, and tried to charm you. "All teeth and trousers", Miss Cutler remembered someone saying once. It wasn't a very polite phrase, but you couldn't doubt its accuracy.

For an experienced charity investigator, mornings also produce the clues that distinguish the merely slovenly from the scroungers, cheats and liars. There will be the same crumbs on the table, and the sour milk you can smell before you see it, but the evidence that an applicant is undeserving will often emerge more slowly. The cigarette butts won't yet have been thrown away, and the finger-printed glasses of last night's liquor will still be on the draining board. Sometimes there are too many people for the beds. Or there are the signs of a man whose presence might be denied but whose shade lingers: a pair of boots too carelessly pushed under a bed, a razor strop not hung back behind a door, or the smell of shaving soap and workman's sweat. People cannot hide the truth that character always etches upon them. Their eyes will flicker, and their faces will reveal their deceit.

Well, this won't be an early morning call. Nor will she have a chance to ride on the train, Miss Cutler thinks, and perhaps do a little reading. In her satchel are two keenly-awaited pleasures, Miss Agatha Christie's short story collection *The Thirteen Problems*, and Miss Dorothy L. Sayers' new Lord Peter Wimsey novel, *Murder Must Advertise*. She'd read *Five Red Herrings* and *Have His Carcase* last year, and while Lord Peter could be irritating, Miss Cutler wants to see if Harriet Vance appears again. Miss Christie's Poirot is a good detective, more interesting than Father Brown, but her new collection includes a woman, Miss Marple. Miss Cutler always contends that women are the better writers as well as the more interesting detectives. Women are better at spotting lies and deceptions, she thinks. She would not say that she drew inspiration from these characters, for life was neither so simple nor so straightforward as in a two hundred-page novel, but Miss Cutler enjoyed the occasional similarities between their fiction and her fact. Like her, the characters had a nose for secrets. And she does like some of the men. Miss Margery Allingham's Albert Campion is growing on her. But her brief forays into American writers have not been successful. There is that awful Philo Vance, a "Manhattan aristocrat", no less. And of Mister Dasheill Hamnett, she thinks, the less said the better.

Leaving the main road and travelling down an unmade street, she looks for the turning that leads down to the Aldermans' block. She'd had only a few minutes to look at the file before leaving; the case stretched back three years, to January 1931, when Harold Alderman was first referred by the Dental Hospital. He and wife Ada had come from London in 1921 but, like a good many of the British migrants of those

years, they hadn't enjoyed much success. With five children under ten, Harold out of work and on sustenance, while owing nearly four pounds in payments on a house they were buying, they were desperate.

Miss Cutler had done the first home visit, too, which is helping her to remember the way. She slows down to manoeuvre the car around two large potholes at the place where the turning meets the street. "Impressed favourably", she'd written of them in the first instance, but they are, Miss Cutler thinks, rather a hapless couple. Harold had visited the office in July 1931 to say he couldn't work due to an accident; he had "evidently been drinking", she had written on the file, for while "he was not drunk" his breath "smelt of whiskey". In the winter of 1932, he was in again; diagnosed with tuberculosis, he needed clothing, pyjamas and shaving equipment so he could attend the Amherst Sanatorium. Then, in November 1932, Ada and her eldest daughter had been knocked down by a motor truck in Mitcham and injured; Miss Cutler, ever aware of the need for meticulous accuracy, clipped the story from *The Herald* and glued to it a page in the file.

Though she is visiting today in order to gather more information about Ada's most recent inquiry, made last week, there is another thing Miss Cutler wants to ascertain. Back in 1931, the COS had agreed to loan the Aldermans four pounds. Harold's first horse had died. He wanted another, and a cart, so he could make money by delivering wood to neighbouring houses and farms. Always keen to steer applicants away from dependence, the COS agreed. Miss Cutler had never seen this horse, though Harold reported it to be good-natured and a hard worker.

The horse turned out to be as hapless as its owners, Ada reporting that it had to be destroyed in September 1931 following an accident. Three years on, Miss Cutler is still puzzled by that, and she wants to ask for further details today. She had impressed upon them the very great investment that the COS had made, and asked that they keep her informed. To lose one horse might be an accident, but to lose two beggared belief, and she had wondered if Harold had been drinking. But Ada had seemed very forlorn about it—and she said the children were very sad—so Miss Cutler had let the matter rest. He was a returned serviceman, and sick with the tuberculosis that made so many people's lives a misery, so a little generosity of spirit didn't go astray. But she wants to hear Harold's version of events.

The gate is closed, and Miss Cutler thinks it best to park on the track. But a girl of around ten or eleven runs up and opens it. As she drives into and along the short path, the gate opener skips ahead, joining three younger girls, all rather watchful. The group is completed by a little boy, maybe two years old, who runs across the porch before descending the ill-made steps with the quiet intensity of a still unsteady walker.

Miss Cutler steps down from the car, smiling at the girls and then at the boy. "*Are you parents here, dear?*"

"Yes", says the tallest. Miss Cutler can't quite remember the girls' names. Rose, perhaps. Or Daphne. The child ventures nothing further, so Miss Cutler smiles at her again. She steps off the rough drive and looks around the side of the small weatherboard house, the children following her from a distance. The place is sturdy enough, though they must bake in the heat under that iron roof. The general impression is of a kind of half-realised ingenuity. A somewhat askew pipe runs from the roof to a water tank, but it is dripping slowly from an ungainly bend in its middle. Some kind of homemade pump is rattling away, though its purpose isn't obvious. An old washtub, almost orange with water stains, holds two potted geraniums and what

looks like a mint bush. There is an apple tree; one of its limbs has been cut off and it looks about to topple over.

Miss Cutler steps back on to the drive, and walks to the other side of the house. The children again move behind her, as if she is their scout and they are tied to her by some invisible thread. *"Is your father here, dear? Daphne, isn't it?"*

"I'm not Daphne."

Miss Cutler smile becomes a little more forced. *"I don't quite remember your names"*, she says.

"That's Daphne". The girl pointed out by her sister nods.

"Oh, yes, that's nice." Stepping further out so she could see around the house, Miss Cutler trips and then catches herself; it is, oddly, the rollers of an old mangle, which have been attached to what looks like a baking tray. She shakes her head, but looks more carefully at the ground as she takes a few more steps, the children still shadowing her every move.

"I'm Violet".

"Yes, dear, lovely, Now, is your father here?"

"No."

"But," says Miss Cutler, turning, *"you said your parents were here."*

"He's not there. He's here."

This really is an exasperating conversation. *"What do you mean"*, she begins, just as Harold Alderman appears from the side of the house.

"See. He's here", offers Violet helpfully. The children all look at their father. "It's a lady, Dad. She's got a car".

"Yes, love, I can see that. Now make yourselves scarce, you lot." Violet picks up the toddler, Daphne grabs the two smaller girls by the hand, and all retreat around the side of the house from which Mister Alderman emerged.

The first impression is not altogether favourable, Miss Cutler thinks. A slight man, he seems deflated and worn. He is around forty, she knows, but looks more like fifty. His trousers are old, and his boots even older.

"Good morning Mister Alderman. Are you doing well?"

"Good morning. Yes, well. Quite well."

He clearly isn't sure who she is. Perhaps he has forgotten the visits from two and three years ago. *"Miss Cutler, Mister Alderman. Your wife came in last week."* He looks more blank, if anything. *"Miss Cutler, from the Charity Organisation Society"*.

"Oh, yes, Miss Cutler. Yes. Forgive me, I hadn't realised you would be visiting us."

"We always visit, Mr Alderman. We need to check details, of course, but many people prefer to discuss plans at home rather than in the office."

"Yes, of course. I remember that you visited us last time, when my wife was so ill."

Miss Cutler is pleased. She liked to be remembered. *"Yes, I did. That was three years ago now."*

"Really", says Harold, his face still rather blank.

"Yes, it was at that time that we procured you a horse, Mister Alderman." He is still blank. *"So you could cart wood. Deliver wood to other houses"*.

"Yes, Miss Cutler".

"The horse for which the Society paid four pounds."

"Yes, I do remember that, Miss Cutler. It was very generous. We've had a good deal of help from generous people."

“*Well, let’s get on*”, said Miss Cutler, as she continued down the side of the house. Harold, expecting that she would want to go inside and speak to Ada, is unsure about her interest in the yard.

“*You maintain the house yourself, Mister Alderman?*”

“*Yes, yes, I do.*”

“*And the vegetable garden, where is that?*”

“*Sorry? Begging your pardon, Miss Cutler?*”

“*The vegetable garden, Mister Alderman? You surely grow vegetables?*”

He looks puzzled. “*There’s not really enough water, Miss Cutler. Not in the summer. We try and . . .*”

“*Well, I should think growing vegetables would help a little, Mister Alderman. Help you help your family, you see.*”

“*Yes, I see, but . . .*”

“*Perhaps around the back. Around here.*” She strides towards the back of the house. “*Perhaps rabbits, Mister Alderman. Or chickens.*”

“*I’m not sure how we’d manage all of those animals.*”

“*Come now, Mister Alderman. I’m hardly suggesting that you imitate Noah’s Ark. But a bit of self-reliance never goes astray, does it? You seem to be able to turn your hand to some home improvements.*” It was important to be encouraging, she thought, though Miss Cutler was not sure she would trust Harold Alderman’s ungainly handiwork in any but the least important operations.

Then she sees it. She stops and turns towards him. He is affecting a rather uncertain smile. He clearly hasn’t remembered that she leaves no stone unturned, no angle unexamined.

“*And what, Mister Alderman, is that?*”

“*What’s what, Miss Cutler?*” He is either very stupid or very cunning, she thinks. His eyes are flickering, but he’s still trying to smile. Of course, he is looking into the sun, but there’s more to the flickering than the sun’s glare.

“*That, Mister Alderman, that.*” She points, and points again.

“*Miss Cutler, I’m not sure what you mean. What are you referring to?*”

She stays controlled. “*That to which I refer, Mister Alderman, is directly in front of you.*” His eyes are flickering again.

“*The paddock, Miss Cutler?*”

She hopes her gaze is withering.

“*Was your wife lying, then, Mister Alderman? Was she lying? That, Mister Alderman, over there, larger than life and enjoying what I assume to be its oats? It’s all very well looking vague, Mister Alderman. It’s all very well looking vague. But that*”, she said with the flourish of a hand, “*is a piece of evidence that’s hard to hide!*”

Harold Alderman must have wondered what had happened, and what he had done wrong. I can’t be sure when, where and how he was confronted, but confronted he was. Miss Cutler had spotted a horse. A horse where there should be no horse, a horse that was supposedly destroyed and long gone, a horse that had apparently come back from the dead. If it was not a case worthy of Lord Peter Wimsey or Miss Marple, it was an occasion for the display of Miss Cutler’s detective skills. She remembered that there was a horse, and the £4 it had cost the Charity Organisation Society. She remembered what Ada Alderman had said, and what had been written in the file. She remembered the horse, and she remembered that there was also a cart, which he admitted, after the initial confrontation, “could be used all right”. Her notes on the incident are short and to the point: “*I told him [what] his wife said on 27 September 1932*” and he “*looked vague*”. Looking vague offered scant protection from Miss

Cutler's ire. Yet it seems she did not press her advantage. Ada Alderman received the order for her free glasses and Miss Cutler reserved the moral of her tale for the case record: "*he still impresses me as a decent man, but he and his wife appear to expect a great deal from the Government*". The Aldermans did not approach the Charity Organisation Society again.

We can't be quite sure of the denouement in 1934, nor of what the Aldermans made of their confrontation with the Society's most adept investigator. Was Harold Alderman stumbling for an answer to a question he hadn't expected to face? Was he caught out, unsure what Ada had said to this woman? Was he worried about what he might be risking? Vague was one strategy, and it may have been for the best.

One thing is certain. It never crossed Miss Cutler's mind that she might be wrong. In a semi-rural locality still caught between the city and the farm, with market gardens and scattered bungalows and no high school within miles, is it not possible that the Aldermans found a way to buy, beg or loan another horse in the nearly two years since the old horse was supposed to have died? Was this actually the same horse? Did Miss Cutler know what kind of horse and cart was purchased in 1931, a task that appears was left to Harold Alderman, once the sum of £4 had been agreed? Did Harold think better of contradicting her, fearing that to do so might endanger the expensive special glasses that Ada needed?

I feel for Miss Cutler and what she was asked to do. In a very important way, and while Miss Cutler was an independent woman who made her own choices, she was also the instrument of a flawed practice. The Miss Cutlers of the 1920s and 1930s—like the "compliance officers" of our own time—are as kind or as unkind as they are allowed to be. As they enact the theatre of obligation and entitlement, they are very aware of their audience, an audience torn between a desire to give assistance and a fear that some of that assistance might end up in the wrong hands. It is up to them to achieve the impossible, to size up the poor, make the right judgement and provide the right help, all the while ensuring that each and every drop of kindness is deserved. The right decision is recognised by a few. The wrong decision will bring down the wrath of many. So Miss Cutler was a variation on a theme, not its inventor. In the end, perhaps, we should be as impressed by the tenderness of her mercies as by her occasional ferocity. Detective she was, but she was not always judge and jury.

But it remains possible to hold her to account for some things and for the questions she did not think to ask. The Aldermans were a rather unlucky and perhaps somewhat hapless couple, but there is little that suggests they were cheats and liars. It is telling that Miss Cutler came so quickly to the conclusion that the horse she saw in 1934 was the supposedly dead horse of 1931. Even if she didn't make "catching them out" the linchpin of her story, she did make the Aldermans part of the proof for something larger. They, like other struggling people, didn't tell the truth. Even more, they failed to keep their promises or take the measures that might end their dependence upon others.

I wonder, too, if people now hearing the story of Miss Cutler's horse assumed—along with her—that the Aldermans were hiding something. Did they expect that Harold and Ada Alderman, who were after all poor, were telling lies? I wonder if they anticipated a revelation and a triumph of detection, rather than the much more typical messiness of real people's poverty. Whatever the truth of individual circumstances, charity investigation then—and the obnoxious war on welfare fraud now—rests upon a larger and more significant conclusion. Some of the poor lie, it claims, and almost all of the poor hide things and need to be reminded of their obligations. And that means you don't need to listen to what they say, and the

truth they know about poverty and security and safety. In the end, whatever the uncertain outcomes of detection and investigation, and however many horses were or weren't reincarnated, that was the most reassuring conclusion of all. It was also, of course, the most misleading. And if it was misleading then, it is just as misleading now. The women inquiry officers of Melbourne, along with other members of the generation who endured the Depression, would in time learn that the poor had been telling the truth all along, that poverty was a series of disasters, not a flaw of character. They also realised that the mistakes of the past stemmed from a conviction that poverty's remedies lay in changing poor people, rather than changing the situations that produced and reproduced their poverty. For a time in this country, poverty became an injustice, a matter of shame. Now, on the brink what I fear will be a new hard times, and living in what has become one of the western world's most unequal societies, I think we need to listen again.

My third example takes a fragment—some scribbles and drawings on the back of letters—and uses them to reconstruct a life, and recognise a loss. It tells the story of a fourteen year-old boy, diagnosed and dismissed as 'feeble-minded' in the early 1920s, who inadvertently left us the evidence of something quite different. It is set in Oregon at a time when the welfare authorities of that American state were particularly energetic in their pursuit and incarceration of the 'unfit' and the 'feble-minded'. It takes up again the challenge of dramatising the past, though in a slightly different way to Miss Cutler.

Earl Spiller's father first came to the Child Welfare Commission in the middle of December 1921. He was very upset about Earl's confinement in the State Institution for the Feeble-Minded in Salem. Earl, just fourteen, had been committed by a local doctor. His mother had deserted, and there were two other boys, aged twelve and nine. Earl had been boarded out, but the boarding home mother reported that "he masturbates continually and has a licentious mind". Then he had been expelled from school for "viciousness". His father, Franklin, had taken him out of the Feeble-Minded hospital and put him in temporary care with the nuns at St Mary's. His plan was to find a housekeeper, perhaps with some charitable help, so that all three boys could be at home. He was adamant that Earl shouldn't go back to Salem.

Commission worker Edith Perry knew her job was to sort out the best plan. But it was difficult to know how. The reports suggested that Earl was one of the seeming scores of feeble-minded children being discovered around the state. Perry was aware that some of Oregon's charities and doctors were enthusiastic about the rehabilitative prospects of the State Institution. Perhaps some were a little too enthusiastic, especially now that the doctors there advocated sterilisation of the incurable inmates. Perhaps Franklin Spiller knew that, which might explain his hostility. He kept saying that there was something wrong with the boy, "something like sleeping sickness". There had to be a cure, something the doctors could do, he said. "The boy's not sick in the head, the doctors should try something else".

She'd reasoned with him, asked about the doctor who'd done the committal: didn't he have Earl's best interests at heart? Did Franklin really think a doctor would send a child to an institution unless it was the best thing? Parents weren't always the best judges of a child's best interests. If Earl was vicious or in danger of delinquency, or if he was feeble-minded, he would get much more help at Salem than from the nuns. In the end, Franklin agreed to return his son to the Hospital.

In September, Perry returned from her summer break to find a letter from Salem; Franklin Spiller had taken Earl away again in June. Also among the mail was a letter from Franklin. He was seeking her help. Another doctor had pronounced Earl

incurable, but Franklin was sticking to his guns: “I have to do something with the boy and Lord only knows he is such a care”. But he wanted the boy close by, and he wanted him cured of what he insisted was a disease. He proposed to try another doctor. There was no denying Franklin’s interest in his son. There weren’t many deserted fathers among her cases, and there were fewer still trying to face and not evade their responsibilities.

Other workers agreed with Perry’s growing apprehension that a confinement to the feeble-minded home should wait, at least until Franklin had a chance to seek the new diagnosis. She wrote a letter to the county authorities: “we really believe that under present conditions the child is going through an inconceivable amount of trial and suffering and we feel that in this enlightened generation, there is enough heart in any community to prevent that”.

Now, finally, there was a new diagnosis. Lethargic encephalitis. The sleeping sickness, which the doctors said was incurable and inexorable and had already rendered the boy sub-normal. Or, it was severe epilepsy. In any event, Earl would get worse. He would have to go back to Salem, because either disease would attack and enfeeble his brain. He would be compulsorily transferred at the end of November.

Franklin would make one more try, just a week before the committal. He wrote another letter; “I hear he is to be railroaded to Salem. Can the Dr opprate with any hope, tell them to try it”. He visited, bringing with him some letters from the Home and from the nuns. He was apologetic, because Earl had done some drawings and writings on the back of several of them. He talked about giving the boy a chance. Perry reminded him of the doctors’ diagnosis, and told him there was little more that could be done. There were many cases of the sleeping sickness, and of severe epilepsy. Earl was already damaged. He couldn’t really manage very well in the world, and would be better in the home. Franklin had left, deflated and despondent. She put the drawings and writings into the file, and put the file onto the side of her desk where it would sit to await further developments.

I don’t know if Edith Perry ever turned those letters over and saw Earl’s drawings and writings. This is the point at which what might have happened diverges from what we know did. But if she looked, I think they might have been enough to give her pause, and to make her wonder if a home for incurables and so-called imbeciles was Earl’s last or best hope. Maybe she thought they were childish scribbles. Did she unfold a sheet, and turn it over? Did she ever realise what was there?

As he sat in his father’s house one day in 1922, perhaps told to amuse himself, Earl used the only paper there was to hand. As I sat in the state archives, turning pages over to see what he wrote and drew, I wonder which of them Edith Perry might have seen. Perhaps his list of all the children in his small town, eighty or so names, apparently written from memory. On the same sheet, there’s another list, “My Girls”, of those he liked. There’s a poem about driving a car. Perhaps it was the sheet with his drawings of detailed geometric shapes, some of them labelled. I imagine it might have been the one covered in complicated multiplications; in some, Earl had to write down the number he carried, but most he seems to have done in his head. And then there is the sheet on which he completed a mental long division of two eight-digit numbers without making any other calculations. He must have been pleased, for next to it he wrote “Ha!”

Of all the people who lived in the past, children stretch perhaps the flimsiest threads into the future. We know things about Earl Spiller: his deterioration, what doctors and boarding mothers thought of him, and what was written about his

condition and his prognosis. Those words make him hapless and half-witted, perverse and stubborn. Those few remnants of his own voice, these unwitting projections of himself into the future, accidentally saved because they backed on to something that was considered worth keeping, suggest intelligence, wit and whimsy. Perhaps he was eccentric and difficult. Perhaps the circumstances of his mother's leaving had made him angry. There is no doubt he was ill. But I wonder what might have been his fate had he come from what the Child Welfare Commission called a "superior home", or a "good family". I wonder what might then have been found for his care.

At fifteen, Earl Spiller entered the Oregon State Institution for the Feeble-Minded at Salem. As far as I can tell, it was for the last time. Perhaps his father took him out again and left the county or even the state. Perhaps they went somewhere there wasn't a history and a case file to damn them. Or perhaps Franklin accepted the final verdict, and the argument that his oldest son would be better off living in an institution for the rest of his life. Whether encephalitic or epileptic, the evidence of other cases suggests Earl was probably sterilised.

Were there no other options? Certainly, they might have been difficult to achieve, and Franklin's plans for his son were perhaps unrealistic. The sleeping sickness baffled and unnerved everyone in the 1920s; if that is what he had, Earl was one of millions to endure its stalling grip. Yet his incarceration reminds us that these were years in which different conditions were tangled together in a vague diagnosis of 'feble-minded' that could in turn justify all manner of cruelties, even in the name of kindness. Edith Perry struggled to help Franklin Spiller care for his son. But in the end, she trusted neither Franklin nor herself with the responsibility of giving him a future. I can't and won't blame her, because we ask her and all of the workers like her to make terrible decisions without any of the resources that might allow them to explore real alternatives. Perhaps Earl had an incurable disease. Perhaps he needed an operation, or long-term convalescence. In a welfare system obsessed with spending as little as possible, Edith Perry was never given the opportunity to find out.

There is something else I don't know. Earl's real name was blacked out before I could see the photocopied file. So I can't find him anywhere. People became separated from their names and identities in twentieth-century institutions. And by the end of that century, nervous governments made sure that historians couldn't connect them again. Protecting Earl's privacy means covering over the rest of his story. And that means history can't give you the comfort of a neat resolution, or a conclusion that explains everything. Worse, Earl is denied the justice of an ending, and the disquiet that we should still feel on his behalf. It means that he is, and will forever stay, lost.

Yet I won't end there, not with loss. To return to where I began, one of our strongest themes must be hope. In a very important way, history is an exploration of what creates change, not just of the forces that sealed Earl Spiller's fate, but the arguments and the ideas that ensured, eventually, that someone like Earl would be treated better and should never be subjected to that fate again. And I want to come back to that point, to the conviction that history is one of our most powerful tools against continuing injustice. The victories for equality and for inclusion in human history have been won because people refused to accept what was considered natural and unavoidable. Those victories have also come, in part, because those who have been excluded have also been heard. The discarded, the distrusted and the disdained, the Aldermans, Earl Spiller and his father, the thousands of people whose lives are so momentarily uncovered; they have created change, in part, because people who weren't discarded and distrusted and disdained have listened to them and accepted the truth of what they said. And they have created change because historians found and

turned into true stories the things they tried to say, the words they struggled to make heard above the din of ignorance and superiority. As history-makers, perhaps our most important capacity is to create the places and the times when the people of the present can hear, however briefly, all of the voices we need to hear. We have to be imaginative, we have to be inventive, and we have to hold fast to the promise of the past. That is history's challenge and, for me and I am sure for all of us, that is history's passion.