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## Stepping into the arena to advocate for history and humanity

BY KIERA LINDSEY, PHA SA



*'A History of drinking and wine', 2023 History Festival event, photograph by Kelsey Zafiridis Photography.*

*This paper is an edited version of the speech Kiera Lindsey, South Australia's inaugural History Advocate, made at the 2023 PHA conference dinner in Adelaide.*

In this paper I reflect upon my role as South Australia's inaugural History Advocate, before identifying some of the opportunities and obligations we share as fellow history advocates in the third decade of the 21st century.

The History Advocate role is a revitalised version of the State Historian appointment, which was created in the 1980s when the nation was preparing for the 1788 bicentenary of European settlement of New South Wales and Australian historians were beginning to explore the possibilities associated with 'social history', which was then a relatively new form of history-making. Like the previous State Historians, I am based at the History Trust of South Australia,

which was established via state legislation in that same decade, 1981 to be precise. The Trust is responsible for collecting and communicating the state's social history, which includes a collection of some 35,000 objects, a network of regional museums as well as the National Motor Museum, the Maritime Museum of SA and the world's first Migration Museum, established in 1986. The Trust also has a dedicated educational team and an extensive events program, which includes its annual flagship event, a month-long History Festival – probably the longest and largest history festival in Australia, if not the world. In May 2023, the festival attracted close to 190,000 participants in more than 500 events across the state. Given the history sector's urgent need for generational renewal, particularly when it comes to our highly valued volunteers, it is encouraging to note that 51 per cent of the attendees at the 2023 festival were under the age of 65.

There have been three State Historians in South Australia, each making a unique contribution until funding cuts led to the role being disbanded in the early 2000s. Since then, many South Australians had called for a resumption of the role; it was the current CEO of the History Trust, Greg Mackie OAM, who made this happen. South Australia is the only Australian state or territory to have a government-funded history advocate, although there was a brief period in the 1980s when the goldrush scholar, Weston Bates, occupied a comparable role in Victoria.

It is tempting to suggest the History Advocate role represents another example of South Australia's celebrated 'exceptionalism', although I suspect few would consider it quite as significant as the idiosyncratic foundation principles and processes associated with South Australia's European settlement; the advancement of the female franchise in 1894; or the decision to legalise nude swimming in 1975! Nonetheless, the History Advocate role does speak to the distinctive value South Australians attribute to the past when it comes to their meaning-making and sense of belonging.

The role begs a few questions about how the history community and Australian public might benefit from each state and territory government funding its own History Advocate. What role the PHA could play in this process? And how might we advocate for history nonetheless? In raising these questions, I hasten to add that the Professional Historians Association has long benefitted from many committed advocates such as Peter Donovan, who established the Professional Historians Association in the 1980s and was one of the hosts of the 2023 conference. And of course, there are and have been many extraordinarily passionate



*Peter Donovan addressing the 2023 PHA conference in Adelaide, photograph by Remco Albers.*

advocates who have dedicated their professional and volunteer energies to 'giving the past a future - now!', to quote the History Trust's tagline and clarion call!

The notion of 'advocacy' has a rich history dating back as far as the 14<sup>th</sup> century. The term originates in Roman law, where it was first used to describe a person who assists others to have a voice. Around the same time, the French adopted the term to refer to those who stepped forward to plead for others. The word eventually drifted into the English lexicon where it defined those who were prepared to intercede for others, as protectors and champions. Here, in 21st-century Adelaide, the History Trust has chosen 'advocate' to describe a role intended to:

- champion history in all its expressions and explorations
- increase awareness of, and appreciation for, the state's distinctive history, in collaboration with education, tourism, arts and culture
- explain past complexities in ways that foster wisdom and innovation, and
- make the stories of South Australia relevant across the world, for the world.

Having commenced this role in November 2022, I am still getting the lie of the land and determining what I could, should and must do. Nonetheless, it is already clear that I need to work closely with all stakeholders in the history community – be they experts or enthusiasts – if I am to champion history in ways that make history *matter* to those who are yet to share our passion for the past. As public-oriented historians well understand, history must be sufficiently relevant and resonant to meet ‘us’ in our moment. By ‘us’ I mean the increasingly diverse publics we serve and the various problems and possibilities we face together now.

### HISTORY MAKING IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

And what a moment this is, especially for professional historians! In contrast to the 1980s, when Australian history was still a relatively new discipline within the academy, several generations of historians have exponentially expanded the areas of enquiry we work in, as well as our capacity to reflect upon the politics of our ‘history-making’. Once upon a time, the public regarded academic historians such as Manning Clark and Geoffrey Blainey as secular priests and gratefully received their definitive accounts of *the* history of Australia, delivered Moses-like from the ivory tower of the academy. Thankfully, in the decades that followed, those who practised history have tended to do so at interdisciplinary intersections in ways that have resulted in rigorous self-reflection and more nuanced understandings of the world. They have dramatically matured our discipline.

By the end of the 20th century, ‘history’ had become such an influential way of understanding Australian society that biographies about historians were the most popular publications

of comparable works. Nonetheless, the ‘truth-telling’ and transformative powers of history clearly threatened certain cohorts of our society, as both historians and their discipline were soon subjected to political scapegoating and institutional antipathy. This, coupled with the economic contractions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, have resulted in a dramatic reduction in the history subjects and students taught across the university sector. Over the last few years, we have witnessed something of an exodus of historians from the sector as people like myself, and many other PHA members, who undertook formal history training animated by the promise of ‘higher learning’, have grown weary of the relevance-deficit model associated with publishing (or perishing) in specialist academic journals. And so, here we are, at a moment when Australian history is undergoing yet another seismic period of generational change.

While some mourn the decentralisation of academic history expertise, I sense an energising invitation to re-imagine both the role of the historian and the nature of history making in ways that infuse professional historians with a fresh sense of purpose. After all, as we know, the majority of Australians no longer consume their ‘history’ via learned tomes but via school curriculums, streaming services, podcasts and heritage paths, museums and family history. Where professional historians could once ply their trade by relying largely upon their reputation as rigorous researchers and stimulating story tellers, we must now also develop and demonstrate our abilities as agile thinkers, creative communicators and entrepreneurs. Now, more than ever, we need to read the world and make a convincing case for how history can help us engage with real-world concerns.

In early 2023, for example, the release of Chat Generative Pre-trained Transformers (Chat GPT), signalled a new era of artificial intelligence (AI) that has stimulated both excitement and moral panic. While those seductive and flattering Chatbots appear to satiate our every question, their answers are often proliferated with hallucinating falsities. For all the possibilities these new innovations present, particularly for those working in the GLAM sector, there is good reason to fear the way that AI's ever-regenerating algorithms of large language data threaten to unmoor 'facts' from their contexts until we can no longer discern a legitimate primary source from one that has been doctored or distorted. Rather than retreat from these challenges, historians need to immerse themselves in these new contexts and become part of the solution by demonstrating how our disciplinary skills in research and analysis, discernment, as well what the Marxist historian, EP Thompson, once called 'the discipline of context' – can help the world become AI-ready.

The South Australian Department for Education was the first in Australia to experiment with the possibility of AI, and in 2023 I commenced a conversation with them about how historical skills might be deployed to generate greater 'AI-readiness' in the classroom. In addition to advocating such cross-sectorial conversations, if we historians are to play our part in preserving humanity from the calculating – and highly distorted – algorithms of AI, we also need to focus our analytical skills and well-developed sense of indignation at injustice into persuasive arguments that challenge the 'black-box' environments in which these algorithms are developed and disseminated. As our history training also teaches us to become comfortable with uncertainty and paradox we can also insist

upon ways of making sense of the world that defy the reductionist black and white 'truths' of Chatbot. Again, the skills we develop in imagination, speculation and storytelling as historians also allows us to connect with hearts and minds in ways that machines cannot.

However, if we are to take our seat at the policy table and convince others that history is crucial to shaping the future, we must address the urgent challenge of generational renewal facing the history sector because the two issues are inextricably inter-linked. Although many recognise that younger generations are powerful history-makers, we historians are often reluctant to relinquish our historical authority. To demonstrate how history can make the world AI-ready, we need to initiate greater exchange across the generations, for example, connecting and combining the considerable AI-skills of 'digital-natives' with our own in research, contextualisation, analysis and meaning making.

## THE QUESTIONS WE ASK

A useful starting point may be the advice of French Absurdist playwright, Eugene Ionesco, who asserted 'it is not the answer that enlightens, but the question'. The 2023 PHA conference provided an ideal context in which to think more deeply about the questions we ask. However, before focusing on questions associated with **what** we might do or even **how**, I invite us all to meditate upon our 'why' as individual historians and a history community.

'Why' is the question thought leader Simon Sinek identifies as the driving force in our most outstanding leaders and organisations. Such leaders have a clear **why**, he argues, and it makes them so authentic that they stand out, inspire



trust as well as a potent sense of belonging. Indeed, for Sinek, 'why' is the most profound of all questions, because it comes from deep within the ancient limbic part of our brain which manages the feelings and behaviours we need to survive. When we ask 'why', Sinek argues, we connect to something innate to the human experience.

To illustrate this point, Sinek recounts the story of the two stonemasons. The first is asked if he likes his job and replies with a grimace. 'Are you kidding. I am out here in the heat every day and for what? I break my back while I am breaking stones and the pay is terrible. Even though I've been at this for years, I doubt I will ever see my work finished in my lifetime'. When the second stone mason is asked the same question, she looks up with a grin, wipes the sweat from her brow, 'Are you kidding? I am building a cathedral'.

Like the second stonemason, we historians have a powerful **why**, for we too work on cathedrals of truth-telling and meaning-making. We chip and chisel away at the evidence with painstaking attention, driven to produce something of substance we can hand on generation to generation. However, our focus on the detail often means that we forget to look up, and thus we often lose sight of our purpose. The 2023 PHA Conference provided us with an opportunity to look up and recover our **why** as historians who have the power to inspire trust in ways that can transport the individual and transform the collective. By reconnecting with the shared purpose of our 'why', we will be able to encourage one another to take risks when it comes to making history for this moment. And so, I want to conclude with a quote from a speech American President Theodore Roosevelt made at the Sorbonne in April 1910. Roosevelt

distinguishes between the critic who sits on the sidelines of history-making and the advocate who is prepared to step into public arena:

It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who know great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly.

The 2023 PHA conference was an important occasion when we stopped for a moment to look up from our stonework and acknowledge the scope and ambition of the cathedral we are building together, as we also inspire one another to 'dare greatly' for the future of history and humanity together.

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KIERA LINDSEY