

INGA CLENDINNEN AO FAHA

1934–2016

FELLOW · ELECTED 1992



INGA CLENDINNEN IN LECTURING MODE WITH BLACKBOARD CUE, ELT 1987.
PHOTO: LA TROBE UNIVERSITY

Inga Clendinnen, the youngest of four children of small business cabinet maker Tom Jewell and his wife Catherine (Reenie) was born in Geelong on 17 August 1934. A vibrant young girl, Inga was mad on cricket and boasted she once oiled Lindsay Hassett's bat. A vivacious and popular young woman, she attended Morongo Presbyterian Ladies College and then the University of Melbourne where she completed a combined Honours degree in history and English literature in 1955. She married a philosopher from the same university, John Clendinnen, 'the best of companions' in a spousal and intellectual sense, in 1955. They had two sons, Stephen and Richmond (Richie). Inga was a tutor (1956–57) and senior tutor (1958–65, 1968) in the history department at the University of Melbourne. She was inspired by its head Max Crawford. Thirty years later she co-dedicated her second book to Crawford, whose 'depth of wisdom I am still discovering'.

An excellent teacher, Clendinnen became a lecturer in the history department, La Trobe University, one of the many inspired appointments by the founding professor, Alan Martin. At La Trobe she taught with imaginative teachers such as David Potts, Tony Barta and John Cashmere. Clendinnen and Potts pioneered an innovative first year

subject on the Mexican Revolution, in which students worked in pairs and groups peeling back the layers of meaning of this historical event. Later they and others developed a three hour 'workshop' method to achieve the same thing.

It was as a teacher that many first encountered Clendinnen, a meeting many never forgot. She had a beautiful tonal voice, which she used in clear and carefully measured speech. She once spoke at the History Institute of Victoria's series on 'Historians on History' in the early 1990s about Moctezuma's feathered headdress, which the Aztec leader gave to conquistador Hernando Cortés as a symbol of power, and which was received by Cortés as an act of submission. The audience, including myself, were spellbound by this lucid demonstration of the mixed messages across cultural boundaries. Clendinnen's conference papers, like her later books, were performances of beauty, both in delivery and the grace of her prose. At La Trobe her teaching brilliance, apart from her own subjects, was to transform the Honours Program (with others) by teaching 'reflective history'. It inspired an interest in history and theory among two decades of honours students.

She also developed into a wonderful, but sometimes scary, mentor for younger staff and postgraduates. Many of us possess encouraging handwritten notes from Inga – 'You've finished! Olé! Of course I'll read it'. Later came feedback that congratulated our achievements, but called for added perspectives and meanings, urging us to greater efforts.

She professed the discipline of history in the most powerful manner to impress on us its high significance. In a paper 'Writing to Rouse' in 2001 given to history postgraduates at La Trobe University, she pondered the difference between literature and history as being found in the 'moral relationships each establishes between writer and subject, and writer and reader'. Taking the case of her work on the Spanish Inquisition, she said that while the cruelties in a fiction can be turned away from, the actuality of history cannot be denied. For Clendinnen, history demanded staying power, absolute accuracy and a moral commitment. She declared:

Reading the records of past actuality, I am not free to refuse painful engagement of emotions and imagination, because I have entered into a moral relationship with the persons enclosed in

the documents – which means, of course, not only the victims, but the torturers, too. [Nothing could be inferred or falsified, otherwise] I would have falsified an actual human and therefore moral relationship between torturer and tortured, between myself and the people I had chosen to ‘re-present,’ and between myself and my potential readers, who look to me for history: to learn something of how it used to be, back then; to know our species better.

This view played out in her involvement in the controversy over the novel *The Secret River* by Kate Grenville FAHA, and led to the critical essay, *The History Question: Who Owns the Past?* (2006).

Clendinnen’s La Trobe years both witnessed and encouraged her emergence as a brilliant writer and researcher. Together with Rhys Isaac, June Philipp, Bronwen Douglas, Michelle Stephens, Greg Denning, Ron Adams and others, Inga Clendinnen explored in a staff workshop on ‘Small Scale Societies’, ways to understand the past. Human society could be understood through studying the symbols, rituals, actions and performances of historical actors. They read (and reflected on) E.P. Thompson on recovering the meanings of the voiceless through studying actions; Victor Turner on symbols; anthropologist Clifford Geertz on the meanings of culture and developing ‘thick descriptions’ through observing others; sociologist Erving Goffman on the presentation of the self; and many others. Out of this, Clendinnen, Isaac, Philipp, Denning and his partner Donna Merwick from the University of Melbourne, developed a new method for doing history, termed ‘ethnographic history’. They were dubbed the ‘Melbourne School’ by Clifford Geertz, who became an admirer.

Such thinking emerged alongside research. Clendinnen chose Meso-America as the subject of her Master’s thesis, which she completed in 1975. It inspired her articles published in eminent journals such as *Past and Present* and *History and Anthropology*. Her article ‘Landscape and World View: The Survival of Yucatec Maya Culture Under Spanish Conquest’ published in *Comparative Studies in Society and History* (1980) won the 1981 best article in Latin American History awarded by the American Historical Association. She soon held fellowships at the Shelham Cullom Davis Center for Historical Research (1983) and the Institute of Advanced Studies at Princeton University (1987).

Her first book, *Ambivalent Conquests: Maya and Spaniard in Yucatán 1517–1570* (1987), contained vivid insights into the perplexing nature of culture contact. For that monograph, Clendinnen won the Herbert Bolton prize offered by the American Historical Association for best book of the year in Latin American History (1988). In 1991 Clendinnen published *Aztecs: An Interpretation*.

This book was a brilliant and sustained analysis of the lives and rituals of the Culhua Mexica, meticulously studied to catch the ‘distinctive tonalities of life’ of ordinary Mexica in the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlanon on the eve of the Spanish Conquest. Clendinnen focused on the actions, symbols and rituals of violence and why ordinary Mexica, so decorous and fastidious, also lived so intimately and easily with human sacrifice of a most monstrous manner. She pondered what ‘scenes of mannered violence said to them of the human condition and of the terms of their own social existence, the one casting its natural light upon the other’. She never lost her fascination with performance, wherever or whatever it might be. Indeed when visiting her beloved Magnetic Island hideaway, she would pay attention to rodeos in North Queensland and was enamoured with the feats of an unrideable bull, ‘Chain Saw’.

The year that *Aztecs* – the apogee of her Meso-American writing – appeared was also the year when her health spiralled perilously down through an auto-immune disease that led to her resignation from La Trobe and some years of illness. This seemingly was an end to a brilliant career. She later reflected on her illness in an honest and engaging book about aspects of her life, *Tiger’s Eye* (2000) and produced some literary essays. However, as her health improved she was able to begin critical reading, but not research overseas on Meso-America. She changed direction to enter an entirely new field for her, the Holocaust.

Out of this came her brilliant book, *Reading the Holocaust* (1999). In it she produced some astonishing and novel insights in a field of history crowded by more scholarship with each passing year. She asked the hard, often unasked questions, throughout. What is the guilt of the Sonderkommando, Jewish men who cooperated to fuel the fires in Auschwitz and ‘make a kind of life in the midst of the horror’? Why did the camp SS conduct endless and apparently meaningless disciplinary rituals? To sustain their morale, self-image and sense of glamour through such theatre, argued Clendinnen. *Reading the Holocaust* was widely acclaimed and deservedly won the NSW Premier’s Gleebooks Prize for Critical Writing (2000) and the *New York Times* Book of the Year award (1999).

Clendinnen then turned to Aboriginal history, first reading the journals of George Augustus Robinson and producing a wonderful reflective article ‘Reading Mr Robinson’. She was invited to give the prestigious Boyer Lectures in 1999, which were published as *True Stories* (1999). In these she argued for a nuanced view of the Australian past and an alertness to the multiple stories produced by the actions of diverse historical actors in complex contexts.

Dancing with Strangers (2003) applied these insights to the first years of the Sydney Settlement. In thirty short chapters, just right for bed time readers, Clendinnen explored a series of episodes or pieces of actions in and around early Sydney. The Spearing of Governor Arthur Phillip at Manly was one of these. In typical Clendinnen style, and true to her method of an action-oriented cross-cultural history, she wrote: ‘if we consider only the actions [of the First Australians] and edit out the authoritative British voice-overs interpreting those actions, the ‘silent film’ strategy, Baneelon begins to look very like a master of ceremonies, not an impulsive buffoon’. The spearing argued Clendinnen was not savagery, but a pre-arranged ritual event, to which Phillip was lured, to pay back the offences done to the First Australians. *Dancing with Strangers* was awarded the following prizes: Queensland Premier’s History Prize (2004); NSW Premier’s Douglas Stewart Prize for Non Fiction (2004); and the international Kiriya Prize for Non Fiction (2004), awarded to books about the Pacific Rim and South Asia that further understandings among nations and peoples.

For her illustrious career Inga Clendinnen gained other awards not specifically tied to one publication, including: being made a Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities (1992), being the winner of the biennial Australian Society of Authors Medal (2005) for contributions to the Australian writing community; winning the Philip Hodgins Memorial Medal (2007) awarded annually for excellence in Australian writing; being honoured as an Officer of Order of Australia (2006); and being co-winner of the David Dan Prize (2016). The Dan prize has been awarded annually since 2001 by an international corporation based at Tel Aviv University in three categories for ‘innovative and interdisciplinary research that cuts across traditional boundaries and paradigms’. Awarded a year before her death, it was perhaps Inga Clendinnen’s highest accolade. Her life was spent trying to know others in past societies through the prism of history. She taught us to jettison stereotypes and other mythologies and read historic texts for human actions and meanings in the search for understanding the common threads of our humanity.

RICHARD BROOME FAHA