



# Editor's Introduction

GRAHAM TULLOCH

THIS YEAR, 2020, has been a tumultuous year for the world to which Australia has added its own particular troubles and concerns. We began the year with bushfires around the country and then encountered the Covid-19 pandemic, with its immense threats to lives and livelihoods and with the creative and performing arts and universities being amongst the sectors hardest hit by its economic consequences. Along the way there have been heightening tensions in our relations with China and renewed attention to Indigenous disadvantage, highlighted by the Black Lives Matter movement, while government funding proposals have provoked questions about the place in our education system of key disciplines in the humanities. Human solutions are needed to address the immense challenges facing humanity and in this context the value and strength of the humanities in facing human issues has never been clearer. The articles in *Humanities Australia* have always, by their very nature, addressed topics of relevance to this country, but it so happens that a number of articles in this edition address issues that have been particularly prominent over the course of the year, either through considering contemporary events or through the lens of other places and times. So we offer this issue of *Humanities Australia* as a particularly direct response to this troubled year in which it appears.

In her 2019 Academy Lecture, given in the year of the Academy's 50th anniversary, Joy Damousi addresses one of the key human issues: the treatment of immigrants, in particular refugees and asylum seekers. Drawing on a long train of events, including her own family's experiences, she explores the varying attitudes which have underlain the reception of a range of different refugee groups in Australia, revealing just how much 'being humane' has been a contested history. At the end she poses the question: 'How do we humanise the future then in light of this past history and the present?' However in answering that 'the need to humanise refugees and their experience is paramount', she concludes that 'none of this...can be done without in parallel humanising the future for Indigenous Australians'. Looking for a more humane Australia we need to address both issues.

Clint Bracknell's Hancock Lecture, the ninth in the series, given at the Academy Symposium in November 2019, addresses one key aspect of 'humanising the future for Indigenous Australians', the recovery and revitalisation of Indigenous language. When Europeans arrived in Australia they encountered an incredibly rich and diverse culture but they largely ignored or misunderstood it and all too often actively attempted to destroy it. While this cultural

heritage has been all but lost in many cases, in other cases it does survive, ready to be revived and reinvigorated by Indigenous memory and through linguistic research. As this lecture shows, by considering the case of Noongar, music is a hugely important instrument in this recovery of human stories and human culture, especially when led by Indigenous people for Indigenous people. Community involvement in this program, along with the use of digital technology as a means of preservation and dissemination, has been crucial to its success.

At a time when the value of traditional humanities education has been called into question Dirk Baltzly comes at this issue from a very long historical perspective. By focusing on the education system of the late Roman empire with its emphasis on literary studies and philosophy (which we recognise as key disciplines in the humanities), he considers how far this kind of education served the needs of imperial Roman government. The late Roman empire with its (literally and metaphorically) Byzantine bureaucracy is a far cry from present-day Australia, but it is precisely this distance which allows the writer to stand back from our current situation and speculate whether future historians 'perhaps...will conclude that our needs would have been better served by the inclusion of more education in the humanities within the current curriculum, where the greatest emphasis is on STEM and business studies'. We do not have the benefit of hindsight of our own time, but asking what that hindsight might be helps us look with different eyes on our present-day issues.

John Clark's article also takes a historical perspective but a much more recent one. Looking at the ways recent Asian art has approached the idea of modernism he demonstrates the sheer diversity of responses. There is no single way in which modernism can be interpreted but, in the different political and social cultures which prevail in Asian countries, artists have responded in a multiplicity of ways which cannot be nearly encapsulated in a single notion of Asian Modernism. By drawing particularly on examples from China and Thailand but with

reference also to Japan, the article illustrates something of the diversity, vitality and complexity of Asian responses to the notions of what constitutes modernism.

In 'Legacies of East German Communism: Thoughts from Germany during the COVID-19 Pandemic' Alison Lewis addresses one of the most crucial questions which the pandemic has raised: how will the authorities and the public handle restrictions imposed in an attempt to control the virus? She explains that, living in Berlin earlier this year, 'On many occasions when confronted with rows of empty shelves in supermarkets and the sight of queues outside them, I was reminded of the fabled chronic shortages in the GDR.' This leads her to the observation that 'For many locals, the public health crisis awakened painful memories of being robbed of one's civil liberties—the right to associate and freedom of movement.' The article considers the response to this situation, weaving the discussion around the story of a representative victim of Stasi oppression and how Germany has handled its memory of its communist past before concluding that the culture shift Germany has undergone since the fall of the German Democratic Republic has ensured that, even under the stress of the COVID-19 crisis, there has been no reversion to the authoritarianism of the past.

Like Dirk Baltzly, Lea Beness and Tom Hillard, in 'The Clash of Ideologies, Class and Personalities in Second-Century Rome', look back to Rome, although in their case it is republican rather than imperial Rome, with a setting in the turbulent era of the Gracchi brothers. Here too we find reminders of the continuities and discontinuities with the past. Politics in ancient Rome was very different in many ways to present-day politics, but there is also much that we can recognise as similar to our own world: social divisions, personality politics, complex relations within the political elite, strictly legalistic interpretation of the constitution alongside disregard for it, competing ideologies, populist rhetoric. Even from this very different world we can learn much that applies today even as we recognise

some fundamental differences from politics as we ourselves experience it.

Ann McGrath in her article starts, like Alison Lewis, from very recent events and controversies, in her case the destruction of the Indigenous heritage site of Juukan Gorge and the police protection of the statue of James Cook in Hyde Park in the face of attacks on it. However her discussion opens out to the broader question of the place the notion of discovery plays in the understanding and misunderstanding of Australia and its history. She argues that historians have been unable to escape from the mental confines of barriers in our history which have been imposed by placing too much emphasis on the dates of 'discoveries' such as Cook's 1770 navigation of the eastern coast of Australia. In particular, getting over such barriers to reach an appreciation of Indigenous history as history rather than as a non-historical prehistory has proved to be very difficult. Nevertheless it is essential to do so if we are to properly appreciate the full extent of Australia's human history.

In a year when China's relationship with Australia has been a constant topic of concern and commentary, Louise Edwards provides yet another kind of historical perspective, in this case through popular Chinese art of the early twentieth century. With increased impetus following the establishment of a republic in 1912, China moved from being a country where the civil bureaucracy looked down on the military as inferior to one where the citizen-soldier became a key figure in the national consciousness, thus laying the foundations for the increasingly self-confident and militarily assertive China of today. In this period the portrayal of women in the traditional books of

*One Hundred Illustrated Beauties* was reworked to provide portraits of women appropriate to the new modern China. But while women were shown in exciting new modern roles in civilian life, they were excluded from military roles: in the rare portrayal of women as soldiers they were carefully coded as belonging only to the past and only to times of crisis. Similarly the portrayal of modern Chinese women with their sons dressed in naval uniforms maintained their gendered role as supporters of the citizen soldiers, not soldiers themselves. All these representations were carefully calibrated to celebrate but also demarcate the role of women in the new society.

Finally Alexis Wright offers a haunting passage from her novel *Carpentaria* which draws on her own Waanyi heritage. In a year when Indigenous heritage has been under attack and calls for the preservation of the sites of this heritage have once again come to the fore, it is also important to recognise how Aboriginal culture continues to innovate and create not only in art but also in literature and language.

Altogether then, the articles in this year's issue of *Humanities Australia*, whether their starting point is events and cultures of the past or those of this tumultuous year, address issues of continuing relevance and importance to the Australia of today. ¶



**GRAHAM TULLOCH** FAHA  
Editor, Australian Academy  
of the Humanities, 2016–