

INGA CLENDINNEN (1934–)

“HISTORY THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS” (1999)

When we are being historians we have to slow the process down, and that requires us to look very soberly and critically into the mirror. What we are trying to decide as we stare is – could we, in these circumstances, under these specific imperatives, imagine ourselves doing this specific thing?

Of course that is not the end of the matter. People in fact and in fiction are always doing things we would never dream of doing. But even when we can't imagine doing such things ourselves, we are somehow able to imagine them doing them.

We understand this indispensable talent far too little, especially as it is far from foolproof. I have an eminent colleague in the United States who sincerely believes that when the chips are down, at the end of the day, when push comes to shove, everybody . . . shares precisely the same view of the world as an ambitious middle-aged American male academic of Presbyterian background and Scottish descent.

His mirror is welded to the end of his nose – but he doesn't know it. That is a bad place [for] a mirror, for a historian or for anyone else. Watch out for it. Check for it.

The required gaze is much like the celebrated, much analyzed gaze of the great Spanish painter Velazquez, as he sometimes chose to represent himself on the edge of a group portrait, most famously in 'Las Meninas'. The gaze is detached, analytic, mistrustful, intent.

Now: this persistent use of our personal mirrors has a curious and consequential outcome. A shadowy imprint will be left on the writing which is the final product of all that earnest looking. The organizing, assessing sensibility will lurk in the prose it produces, which thus becomes a shadowy mirror itself . . .

It is on that subtle impress which humans leave in their writing that the whole historical enterprise depends, because it is that which enables us to retrieve individuals from the writing they leave behind.

Lately I have been thinking about the notion, the conceit, if you like, of the historian as magician, folding her origami men and women out of the papery texts they have left behind, then setting them to walking and talking. This walking and talking absolutely depends on that second use of mirrors. First there is that constant examination of the self as the universal model for and of humanity. Then we stare into our sources, the written texts, which can be likened to a great broken mirror. The individual shards might be as opaque, speckled, eye-baffling as a trout in a river, but as we look, we think we see shadows, moving.

What we are looking for is the trapped light of a past sensibility, that impress of a particular mind. And when we see that, we are able to effect our peculiar magic. Our origami people come to life, as we discover the sensibility of a human being from a time, a culture, quite often a gender not our own. And all this is done, give or take an artefact or two, through mirrors.

Taken from Inga Clendinnen, “History through the Looking Glass” (Kathleen Fitzpatrick Memorial Lecture, University of Melbourne, 1999).