Launch speech, National Museum of Australia, 15 March 2012

Darrell Lewis, *A Wild History: Life and Death on the Victoria River Frontier*, Monash University Publishing, Melbourne, 2012

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This impressive book is a distillation of bush wisdom and scholarly tenacity, of courageous fieldwork and equally adventurous archival sleuthing, of 40 years of learning the country and a lifetime of listening to history. This is a book that makes me proud to be a historian because Darrell shows us what sensible magic great historians can conjure.

Darrell is about as secular and direct and true and no-nonsense as one can be, so he will be amused or possibly scornful at this mention of 'magic' in association with his work. But I'm fair dinkum. Something entrancing and mysterious does happen when sensitive and thoughtful historians steep themselves in the past. The essence of good history is a balance between empathy and perspective, between intimacy and distance – or, as W K Hancock put it, between attachment and span. Historians immerse themselves in context; they give themselves wholly and sensually to the mysterious, alchemical power of archives, testimony and environment. As well as gathering and weighing evidence piece by piece with forensic intensity, they sensitise themselves to nuance and meaning, to the whole tenor of an era, the full character of a person, the ineffable power of a place. And if they are like Darrell, they will also have walked that land, swum its crocodile-infested rivers, got to know its plants and animals and people, slept under its stars, inspected its caves, recorded its inscriptions on rock and tree, and then pursued its material diaspora wherever it may have migrated. What results is not just a work of scholarship but a work of art: a gift to the region and the nation from someone who is neither insider nor outsider but something remarkable in-between.

Every region of Australia – indeed, of the world – deserves its own Darrell. But you can't plan for such a book to happen. You can't write a grant application for forty

years investment. You can't get a corporate sponsor to back an enquiry so exhaustive and so discomforting. You certainly can't get a Human Ethics Committee to approve such an open-ended and enduring investigation. You can't design or contrive wisdom. It grows from personal commitment, original vision, a hunger to understand, a lifelong sense of responsibility to the people one talks to and writes about, a knowledge and love of the land, a willingness to be frugal, a capacity to be humble. These are some of the wellsprings of wisdom, and one of the virtues of history as a craft is that it accommodates and even encourages many of these wild sources of creativity.

Darrell has written 'a wild history' but he is not a wild man. He makes a fabulous blackberry jam. He carefully stitched my daughter's goal umpiring flags with the result that, for years, AFL Canberra was governed by Darrell's craftsmanship. He knows how to find the perfect campsite, out of the wind, free of mosquitoes and catching the morning sun. He writes with clarity, delicacy and precision and with a delightful natural rhythm to his words. Darrell is at home in the wild but he is a gentleman, and a gentle man. Ned Kelly's ghost – in full rattling armour – has sometimes put in an appearance at Canberra gatherings but never, you may have noted, when Darrell Lewis is around. It is as if Kelly knows that you don't mess with Lewis.

In this unique book, Darrell seeks 'to replace current wild imaginings with a more soundly based "wild history"'. Although his knowledge and research is cross-cultural, and Aboriginal people are key players in this book, he has chosen to tell a white man's history – and, as he says, literally a white *man's* history because for much of the settler period white men outnumbered white women by as much as 50 or 100 to one. His account explores two themes especially – the nature of contact and encounter between Aborigines and whites, and the formation of a local settler society. His detailed ethnographic attention to cultural encounter and to the various phases of a violent frontier are compelling and utterly convincing. And he is also attentive to what was an environmental frontier, a physical assault on the land by the cattle themselves. The book draws on important methodologies such as Darrell's renowned use of repeat photography to document environmental change, and it offers significant findings such as his observation of increasing tree numbers in riverine areas especially

in the post-war period. The book is thus an environmental history in the best sense – the land, vast and harsh and majestic, is always present, not just as scenery, but as an everyday force and context that itself changes as it interacts with economy and society. And this is not a side-story but carries one of the central themes of the book, which is, to quote Darrell, that 'Ultimately both sides lost – the coming of the cattle began the destruction of the paradise for both' [Aborigines and settlers]. Darrell always weighs evidence carefully, resists any simple conclusions and leads us towards more complex, deeper understandings.

He is therefore a myth-buster extraordinaire. So, over the years we have learned from Darrell that Robert O'Hara Burke was possibly shot dead by John King and that Ludwig Leichhardt may have ended up in the Great Sandy Desert. And so here he delves beneath myth to reveal the hidden history of Jasper Gorge or he explodes the popular belief that Alexander Forrest's report of his 1879 traverse of the Victoria River country caused a land rush. As Darrell puts it with characteristic directness: 'The facts are otherwise'. He relishes demolishing other frontier illusions, showing how they were 'nothing more than a pipedream, or perhaps a "pub-dream".

You can see that Darrell is not only interested in understanding, as far as one is able, *what* happened, but also in how knowledge is transmitted across generations, or not. Thus a crucial insight of his work concerns the absence of family dynasties among the white people of the Victoria River country. There was, he observes, a weak transmission of local knowledge from generation to generation among local whites. 'By contrast', writes Darrell, 'Aborigines don't come from somewhere else, stay for a period and then leave. Instead, their family dynasties extend back to the Dreaming. … They are in fact the 'keepers' of much 'European' history.' So Darrell's history of the white people of this district is traced partly through the memories of the black people. This is an extraordinary inversion of the Australian frontier with which we think we are familiar – and another brilliant piece of mythbusting.

Let me share with you another inversion of the frontier that Darrell discerns. Here he is describing (p. 22) the impressions of John Lort Stokes in 1839:

> Even though his explorations didn't extend beyond the lower Victoria River, Stokes painted a glowing picture of the region and his report was an encouragement to further exploration. Before leaving the Victoria he expressed the desire that, 'ere the sand of my life-glass has run out … smoke may rise from Christian hearths where now alone the prowling heathen lights his fire'. Stokes died on 11th June 1885, just two years after the first (at least nominally) Christian hearths appeared on the Victoria. The irony is that today there may well be more Aboriginal Christians in the district than there are European Christians and, over the years, many of the local whites could easily have qualified as 'prowling heathens'.

Professor Henry Reynolds has written a superb Foreword to this book where he comments that Darrell 'came to the historical records with a rich treasury of life experience – and it shows – he really does know what he is talking about.' And Reynolds also observes that Darrell has the trust of the families of the district, both Aboriginal and European. 'He is one of them', declares Reynolds, 'and not a blow-in busy-body from down south'. And in another of Henry Reynolds' appraisals of this work, he rightly lauded Darrell's 'complete mastery of the sources'. I'm proud that this book grew out of a PhD thesis completed in the Centre for Environmental History in the ANU School of History.

I want to say a word about the Centre for Historical Research here at the National Museum of Australia, Darrell's institutional home during the final stages of writing this book. I am very impressed by the books emerging from this Centre – there are many fine recently published examples by staff here, and some extraordinary manuscripts from Darrell's colleagues are circulating at this very moment. It makes you think about what constitutes a productive environment for research and writing. Many universities have completely lost the plot (although I am lucky to work in an enlightened corner of a good one) and many institutions multiply the bureaucratic obstacles to deep, intensive thinking. But there is something going on here that is good, very good. The Centre is collegial, welcoming, generous-hearted, interdisciplinary and conversational. It fosters an enabling chemistry. Its director and staff believe in the importance of the book as a scholarly and public product. And the Centre no doubt benefits greatly from its place in a museum, for a museum guarantees

a meaningful and lively public interface, and it also supplies the steadying ballast of a collection. Those of us interested in how to generate productive intellectual ferment might well benefit from looking at what is going on here under our very eyes.

I would also like to pay tribute to Darrell's publisher, Nathan Hollier, and to Monash University Publishing. They quickly recognised a great book when they saw it. And they have made a beautiful production of it. Monash University Publishing has bestowed a rare honour on Darrell and one that will make him the envy of his professional colleagues – they have given him pages of text with footnotes at the base of them. In doing that, the publisher has judged the audience well. Darrell weaves a rich story of evidence and memory, of myth and truth, and the footnotes are part of it. People will love reading both above and below that line.

Finally, of course, we want to thank Darrell – for his organic, vernacular telling of true stories, for his years of fieldwork in the clear air of the Dry and in the floods of the monsoons, in the majestic ranges and across the great Mitchell grass downs, for his meticulous, archaeological attention to the surviving material evidence of the history of this region, for recording all those etched messages in the skins of boabs, for capturing the stories of people, black and white. I am reminded of a great landmark work in Australian history, a book by another bush scholar, Eric Rolls, about the Pillaga Scrub and called *A Million Wild Acres*. Like Eric, Darrell knows his land inside out. Like Eric, he gives the dignity of a name to his people, wherever possible. And like Eric, Darrell is a skilled storyteller – have a look at how he carefully unpacks one story of an Aboriginal attack in 1895 on two white teamsters, John Mulligan and George Ligar. It is a story told in compelling slow-motion over 27 pages in the middle of the book so that, as the drama unfolds, there is also revealed the full cross-cultural complexity, biographical depth and topographical beauty of the Victoria River country. In *A Wild History*, the fields of Indigenous history, settler history and environmental history – the three themes, incidentally, at the heart of the National Museum of Australia – are seamlessly and impressively entwined.

Thank you, Darrell, and congratulations! It gives me great pleasure to launch *A Wild History*.