History, too, is representation, not reality. Histories are stories that some historians are more willing to tell than others, stories that help us make sense of all the other stories we need to tell. Why do we do this? Because we need stories to understand the world, to fill the gaps in our knowledge, to make sense of events that have happened in the past.

Tim Winton’s Fiction

History and That Eye, the Past
bad if 'facts' and their interpreters have inherent biases. Facts are not immutable, all evidence is open to interpretation and reinterpretation. Which means, really, that despite good intentions, historians are as wicked with the lies they spin as any writers of fiction. Yet the paradox remains that fiction may illuminate 'truths' which history fails to reveal.

Tim Winton is a liar of considerable virtue. He brings attention to his own fabrications and those of his characters. In *Shallows*, Queenie says, 'My family is a myth.' This is like saying 'My story is a lie, inside the Lie of fiction...'. We cannot rely on the author, the narrator or the characters to simplify our reading of the texts, to provide singular, definitive meanings. In *An Open Swimmer*, when Jerra reads his grandfather's diaries, equal weight is given to the number of eggs his grandfather's chickens have laid and to his involvement in the Second World War. Our reading is suspect, however, since the narrator skims over sections dealing with 'troop movements' and so on. Jerra's attention to the diaries is cursory. But that is not all which renders them unreliable: the diaries have been altered. Whether aging is responsible for their disintegration or whether more deliberate editorial intervention has taken place is not made explicit. In any case the information presented is not complete, as indeed no history can be. We can delve into the past, discern its patterns and movements, but not recapture it whole. Jerra decides there is nothing in the diaries of interest because there is nothing which appears to relate to his own problems. Jerra's selective (and dismissive) reading becomes a pertinent comment on the preparation and reception of 'history'. Inherent in any text is a range of possibilities of meaning.

Winton's texts do not seek closure in the traditional sense of fictional narratives; they have inconclusive endings which fail to offer up incontestable 'meanings' and, in a few instances, have characters who 'live' beyond the confines of a particular text. Jerra Nilsam reappears in several short stories contained in the volume *Minimum of Two* and Queenie and Cleve Cookson return in the story 'Laps' to the scene of their humiliation in *Shallows*, in order to make peace with the place, the past. Leaving characters confined within texts (or contexts) frees the reader from further discourse or interaction with them.

One of the problems with written history is its immutability as opposed to the evolutions inherent in oral history. Family histories, communicated orally, are fleeting rather than permanent records and so appear less authoritative. They are less susceptible to misunderstanding than written records, and this may be why they receive more sympathetic treatment from Winton. Family mythology helps individuals towards a sense of identity and place in the world. In *That Eye the Sky*, Ort Flack says: 'I don't know everything about us Flacks. Only what I hear and what people tell me. You spend your whole life trying to work out where you fit.' The urge to tell stories, furthermore, is natural, part of a larger set of relations: 'On nights like this Mum and Dad remember things and tell us. It's like the forest and the sky make them remember.' (60) In the silence which descends following Sam Flack's accident Ort hankers for stories and hopes that Henry Warburton may have some. 'Long time since anyone told stories around here. Grammar is too old and in herself, and Mum is too worried and busy and Dad can't talk any more.' (69) Verbal storytelling signifies healthy human relationships; silence, the contrary.

Written history can be picked up and put away, without conscience. In *An Open Swimmer*, Sean reads *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, which is initially referred to by Jerra merely as a 'hard-covered book'. The horrifying implications of its contents are, in effect, hidden behind its covers, nullifying or at least moderating its potential to effect change in its reader. There is no inherent responsibility in either the act of reading, or writing.

Nathaniel Coupe's journals reveal that he was an observer who kept 'a safe and secret distance' from the barbarous life around him. His 'lookout position was perfect'. Yet his proclamation of innocence in a later journal rings hollow: 'A
Reading Tim Winton

man is not responsible for his company. I suffered in resisting barbarity. I did not participate. I am innocent." Despite the version of history he leaves for future interpretation, his eventual suicide suggests that he is in fact aware of his own guilt by association. As Daniel Coupar says, 'There are sins of inaction too, you know.' (79)

Daniel Coupar replicates his ancestor's sin of evasion by editing the journals, keeping to himself the final pages which relate to the suicide, his most shameful act. He tells Cleve to 'read them properly' yet has colluded with his forebear to distort the past. His instruction to Cleve to 'Read it for the things that aren't there' becomes ironic in this context but makes a concise point about the way in which history is constructed.

Reading between the lines (for 'the things that aren't there') Cleve realises that Nathaniel Coupar knew that the young man, Churling, was raped by the men in the whaling company and that he took his own life as a consequence. Nathaniel Coupar did not intervene to stop it, nor did he actually admit it was happening. Writing became a means of excusing himself from his present/our history. Reading the journal becomes an excuse for Cleve to dissociate from his present; to avoid the whaling protest, Queenie's confusion and his own rootlessness. He attempts in a sense to graft himself to history via the journals. Queenie's wish to centre herself in the present, to fight a worthwhile cause, to effect change, is threatened by her husband's obsession with his past. This clash creates a contemporary violence. She attempts to sweep the journals out of existence: Cleve strikes her. It is not the fault of the past/the journal per se, but of the way it is handled in the present. Cleve's obsession with Queenie's family mythology ignores her present needs and renders him ineffectual.

All novels have a time dimension, since time is the medium of narration, but the degree to which time is made explicit, thematically or structurally, depends largely on whether or not the dialectic between the individual and time—or history—is conceived problematically. For Winton time and memory are recurring themes. His preoccupation with the question of the individual's relationship with history—personal and public—is reflected in the narrative techniques he employs.

Winton's characters move within specific chronological frameworks. Whether we are privy to events which take place within a few months as in An Open Swimmer, That Eye the Sky and Shallowis, or whether we see characters through a generation, as in Cloudstreet, the overall configuration of each text extends well beyond the characters' immediate circumstances due to constant 'expansion' of the text achieved by exploiting subjective time—that is, time as it is actually experienced in the mind. Its motions are not determined by external logic, it cannot be measured by clocks and calendars like historical time. It displays the inner logic of association and interpenetration between past, present and imaginary events, emotions and sensations. Time in the mind, then, is capable of assimilating past moments within the present. Because of this human capacity we are unable to escape the past. This is the crux of our dilemma; it is central to the notions of sin and guilt.

Winton's characters are consumed by a desire to undo the past which leaves little energy for confronting the present and the future. In An Open Swimmer, Jerra's existential anguish is a self-conscious response to the period he lives in. Jerra's inability to act, to make a decision about his future, indicates his problematic relationship with his own historical period. 'How does a bloke decide, these days?' (12) Jerra's concept of his own historical period is that there is the possibility of choice but limited opportunity. 'Choice is nothin' when there's zero to choose from.' (58) The implication is that the expectations of the period are out of sync with its social and economic reality. The potential for choice complicates life and Jerra idealises a mythical past—his father's, his grandfather's—when life was supposedly simpler. But like many of Winton's characters, Jerra is overwhelmed by intense and contradictory memories. His more distant memories embrace an idyllic childhood, an untainted male domain and two
valued relationships—one with his friend, Sean, and one with his father. More recently his innocence has been destroyed by sexual guilt and disillusionment which, due to his excessive preoccupation with them, negate the possibility of him making anything of his life. Yet as the old man reminds him, 'Some things you can’t do anything about' (38).

The dominant linear progression of Winton’s texts is not only complicated by his characters’ tendency towards intense introspection and reminiscence, but also by ‘alternative narratives’—diaries, letters and journals. In addition, his characters must also carry with them formalised versions of the past and contemporary ‘newsworthy’ events learned from books, school and university education and media reports. Reference to major historical events—Hiroshima, the Holocaust, the Korean War, the death of President Kennedy—carry the expectation that readers will have a certain degree of historical learning, a set of associations which may be evoked by the mere mention of historical figures or events such as Hitler or Belsen. Elsewhere, a more precise historical knowledge is implied. For example, in Cloudstreet a ‘price war’ between competing shops is won at the very moment that North Korean forces embark on their major offensive of the Korean War, overrunning most of the South. Although the real war is not mentioned the fixing of the date in the fiction is precise, the irony is pregnant: ‘It was January 19, 1951. The Lambs slept the sleep of the victorious.’

Winton’s Shallows and the ‘rambling family saga’, Cloudstreet, in particular, reveal a strong historical presence; or, rather, a preoccupation with the past, which is not the same thing as saying that they are historical. An Open Swimmer, That Eye the Sky and Minimum of Two tend towards nostalgia rather than history.

Nostalgia is often seductive stuff in story-telling but its historicity is dodgy, to say the least. A strong strain of nostalgia runs throughout Winton’s fiction creating, if you like, fictions within fictions. Winton cautions against the propensity of nostalgia to engender a complacent attitude to the past or what historians call received or accepted versions of the past, versions which tend not to be subject to reinterpretation: ‘You must remember that the West Australian and the Western Mail are not the final authorities on history’ (11). Quick is told by his history teacher, the only ‘teacher Quick Lamb could talk with.’ (139) Even newspapers, used by historians as ‘a first draft of history’—are fictions. In Shallows the media helps create ‘news’ by its mere presence, as well as its actual interference; it even fabricates ‘evidence’, painting slogans which it then attributes to those protesting against the whalers. The printed word is always suspect for Winton; so too is pictorial ‘evidence’.

Yet, to the annoyance of some critics, Winton’s fictions embrace nostalgia almost in spite of the warnings. For Jerra Nilsam in Minimum of Two the past is both a source of pain and of comfort. He uses memories to fill the empty spaces of the present. In An Open Swimmer childhood and teenage reminiscences provide Jerra with a sanctuary from the present’s awesome demand that he become responsible and make choices in a world, which he believes no longer offers moral sureties to help him find his way.

But the fact that characters take comfort from an era of innocence, that of their childhoods, is not surprising, since their collective past, learned as they grow up, is problematic. How do we come to terms with Hiroshima, the Holocaust, the ethnic cleansing of the Aborigines from Australia and so on? What does history mean, what relevance can it possibly have, after such atrocities? In Cloudstreet, Quick learns of the Holocaust from his teacher. He later spies the anorexic Rose Pickles: ‘It struck him that her silhouette was just like something out of Belsen... it struck him as sick headed for a pretty girl to starve herself like that.’ (140) So this is the lesson of six million Jews exterminated in Nazi concentration camps. Poor Rose Pickles—it’s bit like using a sledge hammer to bludgeon a butterfly. Winton’s characters are aware of history, but its impact is continually circumscribed by the immediate incidents and emotions which comprise their
private lives and become their memories.

The old man in *An Open Swimmer* raises a crucial issue: 'History. Learn a pack from the past. Yet can too. Ever learn you anything?' (20) Neither Jerro nor Sean reply. Nor does Winton answer this question on behalf of his characters in any of his works. The idea of learning from the lessons history has to offer is an ancient cliche which has become more urgent perhaps and necessary since the Holocaust. Yet the possibility, even probability, that history will repeat itself is more likely to encourage active intervention to disrupt the cycle than will comfortable deceptions that the same mistakes will not be repeated once they have been documented.

In *An Open Swimmer*, Jerro discerns a similarity between popular fiction and history. Sean claims Alistair Maclean's novels represent the 'same plots shuffled differently each time. Same faces.' He tells Jerro, 'Nothing changes. It doesn't get any better—or worse.' 'What's his story?' Jerro retorts, 'You read that, and stay awake a lot of the time. Don't talk to me about repetition.' (49)

The prologue to *Shallows* illuminates even more explicitly similarities and continuities between the past and present—Angelus in the 1830s and Angelus in the 1970s. In this novel, Winton's perception of history as repetitious is established from the outset. This implies neither progress nor regress, but serves rather to demolish the rhetoric of progress often associated with the spread of so-called civilisation. The Reverend Pell muses that a hundred years earlier the blankets he now carries to the Aborigines would have been laced with typhoid, 'and here I am... still bringing them blankets.' (3)

Repetition is also evidenced when suicide becomes a generational pattern of degradation—a kind of inherited despair. There is a suggestion in all this that avoiding the patterns of the past will be difficult, if not impossible. It is easier to follow than to chart new directions. This view of history as repetitious is essentially conservative and pessimistic. The possibility of a personal life free of shame and regret seems minimal. Yet the fact that Daniel Coupar does resist the pattern, rejecting suicide, indicates that while the sins of the fathers may be visited upon the sons, change on a small scale, although painful and difficult, is possible by an act of will.

Winton suggests the futility of regret and immobilising guilt. It is largely his characters' failure to accept the evil which exists alongside the good that is responsible for their failure to live effectively in the present and it is, in a sense, this secondary failure—the failure of will—for which they are condemned. This is Quick's lesson in *Cloudstreet*. In *An Open Swimmer* the old man says that, 'Some people got bad in 'em. More 'n most... Some people never do anything at all. Maybe it's better doing something bad than never doing anything all your life. At least it's trying. You make blues. You gotta try.' (134–5)

*Shallows* ends with the mass beaching of whales. Humanity, too, has moved towards mass destruction at various points, through confused 'signals' or following the leader, despite an apparent ability to choose. Fleurier's father searched for answers about Man in 'wrecks and salvage and mystery... as if Hitler and Hiroshima didn't tell us all we needed...'. (39) Fleurier himself suggests an alternative to looking over our shoulders: 'Our future lies in communication between the species, co-existence with the environment. Not in the follies of the past.' (39)

Winton's novels and short stories share an awareness of historical process, that is, of the past as a 'concrete precondition of the present'. His characters become what they are through a collaboration of circumstances: historical, personal, familial and social. His narratives embrace the linear and cyclical implications of chronological progression. Winton often anchors his characters historically, providing specific dates for their stories. He also exploits repetitions and images of circularity which support a cyclical view of history. This does not preclude historicity, since every moment, or event, is preceded by another, forming a recurring 'order of things'. But it does mean that time is not negotiable—all time is answered for at any particular moment. Whatever will be will
be, in other words, and history itself becomes a fairly futile pursuit since it is, by this logic, already written. (The Bible is regarded by some as the complete book of history since it supposedly chronicles the beginning to the end of time. Biblical allusions abound in Winton’s texts.) There is a sense of characters being entrapped in a predetermined world, but there is also, and more importantly, a suggestion that we might imaginatively transcend that world, and eventually (through death) overcome temporality. Winton’s view of history, then, is complicated by theology. In his texts, historical and ahistorical perspectives intersect.

In An Open Swimmer Sean tells Jerra that it gets a bit silly ‘swimming in circles’, but Jerra’s response indicates an awareness of something more. ‘Ever thought about diving to the bottom more often? In the caves. Always different. Another world.’ (45) This other world is not governed by historical processes. The key to it is not in formal learning, but in faith. Faith moreover, is likely to be confounded by learning. Winton appears to distrust intellectualism, which he associates with cynicism and distrust of the imagination.

In That Eye, the Sky, Ort Flack sees a cloud of light above his home which is not perceptible to any other character. The cloud enables him to make sense of his shattered life or at least be comforted in spite of it. Ort Flack is acutely aware of his own chronology. Winton’s use of the present tense brings immediacy to his anxieties, highlights his naivety, traces his growing faith in God and the possibility of things having meaning. Ort’s self-consciousness of his place in his family and his approaching adolescence is attended by an emergent faith. Ort’s adoption of Christianity becomes a way of channeling his heightened sense of imagination. It is significant that Ort’s personal history is not conventional. He was, literally, born, then reborn. In this novel, a linear conception of history is challenged through disruptions to personal (progressive) chronology as well as by Ort’s extratemporal visions.

In Cloudstreet, Winton makes explicit the idea that there is an afterlife, a non-physical world which is nevertheless not free of history.

Across the planes all things still play themselves out, all fun and fear, all silliness and queaking effort, all the bickering and twitching, all the people going about the relentless limited endeavour of human business, and the sight of your body rolling like that, bursting with voice and doublessness, reminds you that the worlds are still connected, the lives are still related and the here still feels the pangs of history. Those who’ve gone before you do not lose their feelings, only their bodies. (164)

Winton seems to be saying that we will continue to play out our historical secular lives, riddled with angst, no doubt, but that time in its religious fullness—past, present and future—will eventually reveal itself. His characters are impatient in most cases, however, and pursue meaning, without success, while still embodied.

This dimension to his novels, which is not historically defined, helps save his texts from nihilistic interpretation. His characters might attain a degree of peace through ‘knowledge’ of a kind not contained in books or daily experience. While humanity is moribund, subject to secular laws, it is capable of transcending them, momentarily at least, through imagination, which might take the form of visions or an ability to be at one with nature, most often the sea. But this sense of a reality beyond, or above, everyday life, provides an extra dimension which is by no means universally available. Not all characters appear to have access to extratemporal experience. In Shallows, Cleve Cookson is sadly aware of his inability to achieve it, whereas his wife, Queenie, does so effortlessly. And Daniel Coupar ‘was haunted by the shortcomings of his mind: when sometimes he came in sight of understanding, his thoughts faltered, petered out, and he failed to penetrate, as though wisdom had a hide too thick for him.’ (59) In An Open Swimmer, Jerra Nilsam’s quest for enlight-
enment is thwarted. He is not yet able to see beyond himself, his individual angst. He is, if you like, blinded by contemporar
ey events, self-pity and shame. Knowledge symbolically
capsulated in the pearl he supposes resides in the kingfisher’s
head, evades him in childhood, and again later when he
massacres a fish only to find its head contains nothing but
brain and eye tissue. Jerra’s problem is that he inadvertently
set himself in opposition to the fish/wisdom (‘I beat him’).
Finally, though, the implication is that Jerra looked in the
wrong place for the pearl, rather than that there is no such
entity.

It is most often in times of crisis or celebration that
individuals and societies become self-conscious, more than
usually concerned with questions such as ‘What am I’, ‘How
did we come to be thus?’ In Winton’s texts, whether the cause
is personal, familial or social, characters are revealed through
situations which force them to consider the nature and
meaning of their own experience and, often, of that of their
forebears.

It is claimed that historians and novelists ‘probe the
individual and collective memory of a people and, if com-
petent, assist that community to answer the questions put to
the past.’ While reading Winton, that eye, the past, never
blinks. Its gaze, were we always subject to it, might serve as
our personal and collective conscience. But, in the end, since
books ‘just aren’t real’ perhaps the best Winton is hoping
for is that reading them will cause ‘a disturbance, a stick in
the stagnant pool.’

NOTES
1 Helen Daniels, Liars, Ringwood: Penguin, 1988, pp. 3-4.
2 E. T. Hong in Singh Kirpal (ed.) The Writer’s Sense of the
Past, Essays on Southeast Asian and Australian Literature,
Singapore, 1988 cited in Westerly, Vol. 33, No. 1, March
1988, p. 94.
3 Tim Winton, An Open Swimmer, Ringwood: McPhee
Gribble, 1991, p. 61. Following page references appear in
parentheses.
4 One of the most accessible books on historical practice is E.
5 Daniels, op. cit.
6 Tim Winton, That Eye the Sky, Ringwood: McPhee
Gribble/Penguin, 1986, p. 25. Following page references
appear in parentheses.
7 In An Open Swimmer, Jerra thinks, ‘What a bunch of
cripples . . . to resort to writing diaries and letters . . . and
bloody books!’ (82)
8 Tim Winton, Shallows, Sydney: Unwin Paperbacks, 1984,
p. 142. Following page references appear in parentheses.
9 Tim Winton, Cloudstreet, Ringwood: McPhee Gribble, 1991,
p. 171. Following page references appear in parentheses.
10 See Georg Lukács, The Historical Novel, Harmondsworth:
11 See Peter Murphy and Richard Nile, The Gate of Dreams: the
Western Mail Annual, Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press,
1990.
12 In her review of Minimum of Two, Trudi Tate says, ‘Perhaps
what Winton offers us here is not history in any public sense,
but reminiscence and nostalgia . . . For me, Winton’s writing,
despite its powerful sense of personal history, represses real