

History – one f-ing thing after another

So there we were, four people, two of us experienced journalists supposedly adept at witnessing everyday events and recounting them for public benefit.

We were describing to a newspaper reporter details of a minor shipwreck we'd participated in at sea. A yacht had gone aground off Kawau Island in the Hauraki Gulf north of Auckland, a middle-of-the-night episode that involved people clambering onto a reef and shivering in the cold.

Nobody drowned, but it was dramatic enough, worth a news story in the next day's Sunday paper. Hence, one of its reporters was speaking to each of us in turn over our boat's shortwave radio, gleaning facts.

The facts turned out to be elusive. The differences in our accounts were subtle – who threw the first line to the stranded yacht, what the rescued people said, damage to the boat, sort of stuff – but enough to put the four of us at variance.

Next day's news account cleverly evened out the things we said, so no damage done. Well, not then, anyway. That might come decades later, when someone finds the clipping and includes it as gospel in their family history.

History, then, is a slippery phenomenon. As a schoolboy described it to his teacher in a TV show I watched once: "One frigging thing after another, Miss." He used a stronger adjective, of course.

Experiments prove no two people see a single event exactly the same way, as I've been reminded over my account last week of Kerry Hurley's try. Add that to other complications, such as bias, political pressure, lack of relevant knowledge and so on, and history is indeed in the eyes of the beholder.

A teacher described the challenge this way: "Most history students realise that primary sources - original documents or artefacts - are the cornerstones of written history. But how many really understand that the books they study are just interpretations by authors of primary sources, and that these interpretations may be wrong?"

"When students grasp the crucial fact that written history reflects the historian's own insights, biases, and limitations, they have discovered both the pleasure and the peril of studying history.

"They quickly realise that while they are free to analyse and dissect, and to perceive new meaning and significance, this freedom brings with it the risks of biases, limitations, and subjective points of view."

Those are some of the issues facing our teachers now the government has decreed the subject will soon be compulsory. They are irrelevant, though, to my own experiences of school history, which was a cornerstone subject for academic streams at New Plymouth Boys High School in the 1960s.

I liked it because I could read the boring textbooks on English and European past events – made partly appealing by terrific *Punch* political cartoons – regurgitate it at next day's exam, score highly...and then forget it all.

As other commentators have recently remarked, there was little on New Zealand. I recall just a few “victors' versions” of the first four ships to come to Taranaki, and Dicky Barrett's part in seeing off recalcitrant natives while stirring his whale blubber pots.

The epithet “history is written by the victors” – variously attributed to Churchill, Nehru, Bonaparte, Machiavelli, Orwell and others – is apt when applied to New Zealand, which may be what's causing angst among opponents of the government's move.

Whose history will we teach, they ask, knowing full well that this may be a chance for the “losers” in the New Zealand Wars to achieve some parity when it comes to recounting what happened.

The Waitangi Tribunal and its encouragement of research into the Māori version of our past has gone some way towards balancing copious accounts written by Pākehā historians quoting Pākehā military figures, journalists, politicians, settlers, clergy and clerics.

My cousin - who not long ago retired after a career of teaching history at high school to optional, ever-diminishing classes – would now find himself well-prepared to cope with a new regime of history for all. But his sort are few and far between, so how will the education system cope?

It will need a manageable curriculum, a balanced approach that allows the Māori perspective a fair but not overwhelming place, and newly trained teachers who can deliver in an interesting way a subject that by its nature can be dry as burnt toast.

I'm all for it, because I'm an historian of sorts, writing books that record the lives of today's everyday players. Tomorrow's history.