SIR JOHN GRAHAM LECTURE

2026

Our Rootless Age

DR SARAH IRVING-STONEBRAKER



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First published in July 2026 by Maxim Institute
PO Box 49 074, Roskill South, Auckland 1445, New Zealand
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ISBN 978-1-997348-00-9 (softcover)
ISBN 978-1-997348-01-6 (PDF)

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ABOUT MAXIM INSTITUTE

Maxim Institute is an independent think tank, working to promote the dignity of every person in New Zealand by standing for freedom, justice, compassion, and hope.

Our work helps leaders make wise decisions by producing rigorous research, forming young leaders, and encouraging thoughtful public conversation.

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We bring our work into the public square through events, media appearances, opinion pieces, and freely available research on our website.

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THE ANNUAL SIR JOHN GRAHAM LECTURE



Sir John Graham was an exemplary New Zealander who displayed the consistency of character and care for others we see in our best leaders. Along with his well-known leadership roles as Captain of the All Blacks, Headmaster of Auckland Grammar, and Chancellor of the University of Auckland, Sir John inspired and led many organisations, including Maxim Institute.

He was recognised with a CBE in 1994 for services to education and the community and was knighted in 2011. As a founding trustee of Maxim, Sir John Graham's deep love for New Zealand, his passion for education, and his concern for those on the margins of life remain at the heart of our work. We are honoured to hold this annual lecture in his name.

DR SARAH IRVING-STONEBRAKER



Dr Sarah Irving-Stonebraker is an Australian-based historian who specialises in British history and the intersection of religion, science, and politics. She received her PhD in History from Cambridge University and held a Junior Research Fellowship at Oxford University.

Annual Sir John Graham Lecture

Friday 17 July 2026

Our Rootless Age: How history grounds us

Dr Sarah Irving-Stonebraker

A little while ago, in a moment of reflection, a young friend of mine confessed to me: "I'm just… disconnected." With her characteristic candour, she had touched upon something profound, something that I felt to be true for society as a whole. And this sense of disconnection is the same thing I am hearing from my students at university.

Maybe this is unsurprising given how divided, polarised, and tribal we are today.

Young people living in Anglosphere countries—that is, New Zealand, Australia, Canada, and the United States—have become significantly less happy over the past 15 years.

Partly this is due to the fact that people feel like they just cannot trust their society's institutions anymore. This widening trust deficit was the subject of Tom Simpson's 2023 Sir John Graham Lecture. Across OECD countries, the share of people with low or no trust in their national government is 44%. Among New Zealanders, 39% trust government to do the right thing most or all of the time, down from 42% in 2024.

People feel disconnected from those who don't share the same political views, and there is a decline in trust that is causing people to reject the historic institutions that

once nurtured and united them, and indeed, which formed their parents and their grandparents.

Even on an individual level, people—especially young people like my friend—are struggling with poor mental health and loneliness.

In public life and academia alike, there are discussions about the increasing sense of isolation and disconnection from community. I want to suggest, however, that there is another—perhaps even a deeper—form of disconnection and rootlessness.

I believe we are becoming increasingly disconnected from our history. In a culture shaped by individualism and digital immediacy, history is often treated as irrelevant—or worse, as divisive. This is evident in younger generations, many of whom are abandoning the study of history at school and university. In Australia's state of Victoria, for example, enrolments in the high school senior history course have plummeted to less than half in the eight years leading up to 2022.

Moreover, we are losing our ability to engage with history in a way that edifies us rather than divides us. Ideas about self-creation and fulfilment replace the histories which once endowed community and social life with meaning and bequeathed a sense that the individual was part of a larger story.

I want to do three things tonight: first, I want to diagnose this phenomenon of rootlessness—what I call our Ahistoric Age. I'm a historian of ideas, so I am not here to tell you about New Zealand's history. Rather, I want to reflect broadly on the state of culture and society in the West, and about why history matters. I aim to do so in a way that resonates with what you might be witnessing here. Second, I will suggest a way forward—out of our ahistoricism—by outlining how we might engage with history well, through the faithful stewardship of the past. Finally, I'll show how this approach to history can help us by giving us hope in our rootless age.

The Ahistoric Age

Let me begin by giving you a personal illustration of the rootlessness of our culture. I was in my early twenties and completing my PhD in Cambridge, UK. I had no grounding in any larger narrative; like a lot of young people, my life was primarily a quest for self-discovery, self-fulfilment, and personal happiness. I did not see myself as a part of any enduring historical communities that might help frame a deeper

purpose for my life. In fact, I would have been deeply suspicious of such an idea. I had few external points of reference as I went about pursuing my desires and aspirations. "Pursue your dreams, live your best life, reach self-fulfilment"—that is what I thought life was all about. I had no larger narrative that might give me a normative vision of human flourishing, a transcendent grounding for morality, nor even a means of addressing life's ultimate concerns. I was also an atheist. I believed that there was no such thing as ultimate meaning and nothing was transcendent. I was proudly authentic and ultimately rootless.

Today, I am an associate professor of history and a Christian, and what strikes me is that just like some of my university students and the friend I mentioned at the beginning, I was disconnected, ironically enough, from *history*! I've coined the term the "Ahistoric Age" to identify the way in which contemporary Western societies have largely lost their meaningful engagement with, and connection to, history. Let me briefly outline three characteristics of what I term the Ahistoric Age: irrelevance, ignorance, and ideology.

First, the past is irrelevant to our culture's sense of what constitutes the good life, which is a life of self-creation, often referred to as "expressive individualism." Expressive individualism is an ahistorical way to live, because rather than receiving stories handed down to us and finding our place in society—that is, in historical communities—we are trained to regard ourselves as highly autonomous subjects of our own creation. In other words, we constantly create our own identities. Younger generations in particular are unmoored from their historic sources of identity, and now carry the existential burden of creating their identity themselves.

The digital revolution and the rise of social media exacerbate this. The constant flow of newsfeeds means that content is updated constantly. It is unsurprising that the generations most impacted by this social media and digital revolution have also become increasingly anxious and suffer from more mental health issues than previous generations, to the point that—as Jonathan Haidt points out in the title of his recent book, *The Anxious Generation*—they are, in fact, the anxious generation. We have basically detached the individual from any larger narrative from which they might derive some given sense of self.

Second, we are increasingly ignorant of history and do not understand why it matters. We have detached ourselves from the wellsprings of our heritage and we do not know the origins even of the ideas that we value. My university students care deeply about

human rights, for example, but when I ask them where human rights came from, they have no idea.

In 2023, a survey of close to 700 school children across Australia found that two-thirds of them thought the ANZAC story—long considered foundational Australian history—was "boring" and "irrelevant" to their lives. This historical apathy made headlines, with one of the researchers saying that the students were less interested these days in "traditional" and "nationalistic" stories.

When I taught a class on the history of Australian politics at my former university, I asked my undergraduate students to name our first prime minister. Out of a class of 25, only one person knew the answer. It's Edmund Barton… but you all knew that, right?

Historical ignorance is particularly pronounced in younger generations; recent research studies show that present-day Americans know less about history than their parents and grandparents. A 2019 study conducted for the Institute for Citizens and Scholars tested Americans' knowledge of their citizenship and history, asking questions about topics including the US Constitution, why the Americans fought the British, the names of significant presidents, and historical figures like Benjamin Franklin. The survey revealed a clear generational age gap. Those aged 65 years and older scored the highest, with 74% answering at least six in 10 questions correctly. Those under the age of 45 scored the lowest: only 19% passed the exam.

Third, we tend to reduce the past to ideology. That is, we are unable to disagree well about the ethical complexities of history without descending into culture wars. This is exacerbated by our social media age and its algorithms which tend to polarise opinions and sensationalise stories into either condemnation or celebration. So, when we do see history discussed in public, it's rare to see civilised and humble disagreement, a recognition that the historical episodes and figures of the past were actually ethically complex. This brings us to the question: why does history matter?

Why history matters

We should think of history not just as an academic discipline, but also as something we inhabit; something we practise; something we pass down as human beings. Here are two of the most pertinent reasons that history matters more than ever today. The first is that people need larger, collective stories to live by. If you have no narrative that enables you to understand yourself as a being in time—with a past, a present,

and a future—then you have no coherent sense of who you are. We know intuitively that this is true on an individual level, but it is also true collectively. There is no human civilisation or society which has managed to survive that has done so without a sense of who they are in time. One of the first things that conquering armies or revolutionaries do when they want to destroy a society or a civilisation is to destroy its history. Individuals and societies need history for stability: they need to know where they have come from, and who they are.

The second reason that history matters is that if you live a life in which you are rootless and disconnected from history, then you deprive yourself of the centuries-long conversations about some of the most important questions that we still wrestle with today. What does it mean to be human? What is "the good life"? Do we have obligations to the poor, the weak and sick, the marginalised? These are questions that civilisations from the ancient Near East, to classical Greece and Rome, to Europe, America, and Australia have engaged with. Reflections on these profound questions have often been taken up through the creative arts. Think of how Renaissance sculpture, or the architecture of the Taj Mahal, can invite us to reflect upon the principles of beauty. Or how we might reflect upon humanity's relationship to nature through hearing the poetry of William Wordsworth or the music of Beethoven, or opening our eyes to the ancient tradition of landscape painting in Japan.

We deprive ourselves of the riches of these conversations—and indeed of the humanities and creative arts more broadly—if we do not know our history. C. S. Lewis put it best when he said that "if you join a conversation at 11 o'clock which began at eight, you miss the full bearing of what's being said."

In other words, we lose the shared stories that bequeath to us not only a sense of collective identity, but also a way of addressing some of life's deeper questions. In previous generations, we were far more adept at passing down these larger narratives. The generations who lived through the world wars of the twentieth century, for example, handed on stories of endurance—on the battlefield, but also on the home front. These were stories of women managing rationing, working in munitions factories, of children making do, and of communities coming together to care for war widows and orphans.

Such stories did more than instil a sense of collective identity. They addressed deeper questions about good and evil, about the nature of the good life—about why it was right to resist Nazism, and why individuals made immense personal sacrifices for the sake of the community and future generations.

But in an age in which such stories are no longer passed down, we lose a compass—an inherited sense of belonging within a multi-generational society shaped by shared meaning and purpose. The stories of the wars are only one example of a wider cultural inheritance. When that inheritance is absent, when there is no sense of mooring, many turn elsewhere. They go online and become captivated by powerful voices such as Nick Fuentes, who has repeatedly praised Adolf Hitler, on one occasion calling him "cool." Identity becomes unmoored, dependent upon self-creation, and increasingly shaped by appeals to outrage, ideology, and the baser passions.

Moving beyond culture wars

Today, the term "culture wars" is often used to describe the way particular issues have been reduced to a simplified black-and-white debate in which certain positions are deemed so morally illegitimate that they are off-limits because they are considered harmful. Social media tends to exacerbate this situation, publicly shaming and silently or explicitly punishing people for their moral transgression.

When it comes to history, the past is often viewed in terms of victims and oppressors and as a story of nothing but domination and oppression. At other times, the past is whitewashed by dismissing the idea that anything lamentable happened.

I believe, however, that it is possible to engage constructively and disagree about the past—recognising both the evil and the good—without deteriorating into culture wars and cancel culture. Here is an illustration of how we might do this.

During the Elizabethan and Jacobean period in England, the renowned philosopher Francis Bacon (1561–1626) was one of England's most prominent statesmen, rising to the position of Lord Chancellor. One of Bacon's interests was in the nature and morality of English colonisation. During the sixteenth century, England began the process of establishing colonies (called "plantations") in Ireland. As a key supporter of the English state, was Bacon nothing more than an ideological apologist for colonisation?

The historical truth is far more complex. It is certainly true that Bacon supported a powerful English state and the expansion of English power through colonial means into Ireland and into North America. But Bacon also had profound anxieties about how the English colonisation of Ireland was conducted. In his essay "Of Plantations," Bacon wrote the rather startling words, "I like a plantation in a pure soil; that is, where people are not *displanted*, to the end to plant in others. For else, it is rather

an extirpation than a plantation."[1] Bacon is articulating a clear preference not to establish colonies if it means the dispossession of the indigenous people of the land. He is giving voice and argument to the anxieties of colonisation long before "decolonisation" or "post-colonialism" were even terms.

Many years ago, the first scholarly journal article I published while a PhD student at Cambridge was on Bacon's colonial anxieties. Bacon was concerned about moral corruption, the dispossession of indigenous people, and the tendency toward greed in the context of the British colonisation of Ireland and America.[2] He advocated naturalising the Irish by incorporating them into the English Commonwealth and bringing just laws to the Irish. In a letter to Sir George Villiers, the Duke of Buckingham, Bacon advised him to "make no extirpation of the natives under the pretence of planting religion: God surely will no way be pleased with such sacrifices."[3]

This brief vignette of Francis Bacon's concerns about colonisation gives us a glimpse of how history is far more complex than the culture wars would have us believe. Bacon was not opposed to colonisation per se, yet he had serious misgivings about various aspects of how the English conducted themselves.

This story is complex. True stories often are, and they diagnose the folly of ideological simplification. Understanding complexity in the past gives us tools to understand complexity in the present. I want to suggest that if we think of ourselves as having a responsibility to *steward* the past, it gives us a way of moving beyond the culture wars.

Stewarding the past

There are two aspects to the work of stewarding the past. First, this vocation involves uncovering overlooked histories, bringing injustices to light, and recognising the flaws, failures, and injustices of earlier generations. I call this "tending the past." Second, what I'm proposing is also an act of conservation—or "keeping" the past, involving the preservation and transmission of historical knowledge. I should note that my vision of *stewarding* the past—and these metaphors of "tending" and "keeping"—is inspired by the Old Testament idea of humanity's responsibility for creation.

The first task—tending the past—requires us both to acknowledge injustice where it arises and to recover overlooked stories. William Cooper's story illustrates what this might look like. You may not know William Cooper, but he was one of the leading figures in the struggle for civil rights for Aboriginal Australians in the early twentieth

century. An Indigenous rural labourer and member of the Yorta Yorta people, he lived at a time when Aboriginal Australians were not fully recognised as citizens; their voting rights were inconsistent across different states and territories. In 1933, he drafted a petition calling for representation in the Federal Parliament and for the extension of voting rights. He spent years travelling between Aboriginal reserves, collecting more than 1,800 signatures, as well as marks from those who could not read or write. In 1937, he presented the petition to the Commonwealth government. It argued that Aboriginal Australians were entitled to the same legal rights as white Australians.

He wrote:

"... we are humans like yourselves with feelings in the eyes of Almighty God, that we can have joys and our sorrows, our likes and our dislikes, that we can feel pain, degradation and humiliation, just as you do ..."

The Australian Parliament failed to deliver the petition to the King. In response, Cooper organised a Day of Mourning in 1938, on the sesquicentenary of colonisation, to draw attention to the injustices suffered by Aboriginal Australians. It is no surprise, then, that he is commemorated on the National Museum of Australia's website, which includes a tribute to his life and work.

Yet, in reading that tribute, one would not necessarily discover a crucial fact about him—one that is essential to understanding both the man and the driving force behind his advocacy. He was a Christian. His life's work was shaped by a conviction that Australia should be held accountable to a biblical understanding of what it means to be human: that the image of God is borne by all people, regardless of race.

As he wrote to the Australian Parliament:

"Are you prepared to admit that, since the Creator said in His word that all men are of 'one blood,' we are humans with feelings in the eyes of Almighty God...?"

Yet every reference to Cooper's deep Christian faith has been audaciously omitted from the National Museum's presentation of his life. No Christianity. No reference to the biblical principles that underpinned his quest for justice for his people. Ironically, this intentional silencing comes from an institution that rails against the silencing of other stories. Such inconvenient narratives are why a genuine stewardship—the "tending and keeping"—of history matters.

Cooper's story also highlights the way in which, for previous generations, most historical stories were themselves understood to be part of an ultimate story that had a telos, a goal. For Cooper, this was a Christian story that gave him a sense of the meaning and purpose of life and history.

In the Ahistoric Age, however, the dominant worldview holds that there is nothing transcendent, and no ultimate story gives time and human life purpose. Stanley Hauerwas has astutely observed that in liberal societies, "our primary story is that we have no story, or that the stories we have must be overcome if we are to be free." The past is not part of the Christian—or indeed any—transcendent story that articulates a vision of where time is heading. The only significance of the past, therefore, is in relation to the present. Even the non-Christian ideologies of modernity, such as Marxism, involved a meta-story or metanarrative. These philosophies, though not Christian, still held a linear conception of time and history. History was heading towards its culmination, whether it was in the form of communism or some other utopian vision. For example, Friedrich Engels, Marx's collaborator, often described history as a progression from "necessity" to "freedom." "Freedom is the insight into necessity," he once wrote, "... Freedom does not consist in any dreamt-of independence from natural laws, but in the knowledge of these laws, and in the possibility this gives of systematically making them work towards definite ends."[4]

Having lost these metanarratives—Marxist, Christian, or otherwise—we no longer think history has any transcendent framing. In other words, time (and therefore history) is not heading anywhere in particular. Even those who subscribe to a highly optimistic view of science, known as scientism—in which it is believed that science will improve human life indefinitely—do not have an actual vision of the purpose of this progress.

Transcendent meaning and purpose are often absent in our Ahistoric Age. Yet this was something William Cooper possessed, because he understood himself to be part of an ultimate story. There is something deeply timely here—a widespread yearning for meaning, purpose, and transcendence. Cooper's sense of belonging to this larger story did more than give him meaning and purpose; it grounded him in something beyond himself. Ultimate stories serve as an anchor outside of us, shaping how we understand what we have inherited from the past. To tend and keep the past, then, is to preserve and pass on such stories—stories that root us, orient us, and give shape to our lives. In this, there is a profound sense of rootedness: of stability and direction.

Putting history into practice

I want to spend these final minutes offering some practical suggestions for how we might tend and keep history across different spheres of our lives. I should note that I actually think there is a hunger for history which is not reduced to partisan agendas. The popularity of the well-known *The Rest Is History* podcast with Tom Holland and Dominic Sandbrook is a good illustration.

I think a historically informed disposition will help us respond to some of the ahistoric symptoms I identified back at the beginning of the speech. First, I would advocate for a more historically informed public conversation about policy—whether in foreign affairs, education, or public health. History helps us to understand the foundations of our assumptions about what we value. For example, the conviction that every human life—regardless of race, gender, illness, or disability—possesses equal moral worth rests upon a long historical inheritance from Christianity concerning the dignity of the human person. In order to have healthy public policy discussions, we also need to be reading, talking about, and teaching robust—and non-ideological—histories of our nations, our culture, and of our public and private institutions. In Australia, for example, we need to understand where parliamentary democracy came from, why we are governed by (and value!) the rule of law, why we have institutions like universities, museums, public libraries, and so forth. Where have these come from? What are they for? What vision did their founders have?

Education policy is a particularly important arena. If we are serious about grounding ourselves in the past, our schools and universities must sustain a rigorous and well-formed history curriculum. It should resist the temptation to politicise and reduce history to simplistic and misleading categories of victims and oppressors. There are ways of understanding the complex histories of empires and nations that enable us to wrestle with the coexistence of good and evil. This will help form young citizens who not only understand where their country has come from, but who can also engage with this history in such a way that enables them to see both the enormous virtues, as well as the shortcomings, of their own country, past and present.

At a local level, there are many ways in which we can pass down and live in the larger histories of which we are a part. This can involve both conserving and uncovering the stories of communities—schools, churches, neighbourhoods, ethnic groups, and families. Such stories are not confined to oral traditions; they are embedded in heritage sites, in buildings, in music, in language, in the arts, and in material objects.

My father, for example, passed down to me the journal kept by my great-great-great-grandmother during her voyage from England to Adelaide in the 1830s. In it, she recounts the death of her four-year-old son, Walter. She describes his personality, his delight in learning to say "coo-ee" after arriving in Adelaide, and the grief of his death—the tiny coffin, the graveside funeral gathering in their new country, which didn't yet feel like home. Five generations later, I find her wrestling with her son's death through faith deeply moving and grounding.

I play my grandfather's violin, which his teacher brought from Poland—a story that gestures toward the wider history of working-class immigrants in the mining towns of the Hunter Valley, and of Jewish migration to Australia. Perhaps, like many, you pass down not only family recipes, but also the stories in which they are embedded. Perhaps you have your grandmother's needlework, a boat your grandfather carved, or the books your grandparents once read.

We are also adopted into stories; such is the nature of the immigrant experience. By our front door at home, we keep a copy of the immigration document of my husband's great-grandparents, marking their arrival from Hungary at Ellis Island, New York, in 1911. The next generation needs to know that they are part of larger stories—that the burden of a life of relentless self-invention is not one they need to bear.

We are living in an age marked by a profound sense of disconnection and rootlessness. But faithfully stewarding history, I believe, can be a powerful source of grounding and renewal. I began this evening by reflecting on the conversations I often have with my students and younger friends, many of whom speak of a deep sense of disconnection. Recently, I have been part of a school community that, recognising this reality, has intentionally reframed its events and traditions—from weekly assemblies to larger fixtures such as Heritage Week on the school calendar—around its own history and the larger Christian story. It is thus helping students and their families understand themselves as belonging to, and participating in, both these stories.

This is the kind of stewarding of the past which can be both helpful and a source of hope. Tending and keeping history can help us move beyond culture wars. It can reinvigorate our public discourse by shaping informed young citizens who engage thoughtfully and with nuance. It can anchor us in a long tradition. In short, history can help to ground us in a rootless age. We aren't self-created. We come from somewhere. We belong.

ENDNOTES

1 Francis Bacon, "Of Plantations," in *The Works of Francis Bacon*, ed. James Spedding, Robert Leslie Ellis, and Douglas Denon Heath, vol. 6 (London, 1858), 457. Emphasis mine.

2 Sarah Irving, "'In a pure soil': Colonial anxieties in the work of Francis Bacon," *History of European Ideas* 32, no. 3 (2006): 249–262.

3 Francis Bacon, quoted in ibid., 260.

4 Friedrich Engels, "XI. Morality and Law. Freedom and Necessity," in *Anti-Dühring* (1877), Marxists Internet Archive, https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1877/anti-duhring/ch09.htm.

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