

**Re-imagining the Convicts:
History, Myth and Nation in Contemporary Australian Fictions of
Early Convictism**

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The candidate confirms that the work submitted is his own and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the way in which a number of contemporary Australian novels use the contested figure of the early convict to reflect on, and participate in, the recent heated debates over Australian history and culture. It argues that while these novels represent an attempt to challenge the traditional narrative of the nation's past promulgated by the Anglo-Celtic settler population, they predominantly reproduce rather than overturn the myths and stories that have been the hallmark of settler Australia. I examine the novels in three overlapping contexts: in relation to the way in which Australia's convict history has shaped and influenced contemporary perceptions of nation and belonging; in relation to the tradition of convict fiction from Marcus Clarke onwards; and in relation to contemporary debates about Australian identity and history.

I start with two contextual chapters: the first considers the foundational role of early convictism in creating the myths and stories that Anglo-Celtic Australians use to order their lives and how the convict legacy has left its mark on contemporary Australian society; the second examines the way in which early convict fiction established key aspects of settler history and identity, before considering how the genre of convict fiction responded to challenges to the nature of Australian society in the 1960s and 1970s. I then go on to examine critically the response of contemporary convict novels to the more fundamental challenges to traditional representations of Australian history and identity posed in the period immediately following the Bicentenary of British settlement, considering them in the contexts of Aboriginal dispossession, myths of exile and settler relationships to the land.

I conclude that while these novels seek to reconceptualize the past they mostly fail to imagine an alternative vision for the country and consequently endorse rather than undermine the narratives they seek to challenge.

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INTRODUCTION

When the English novelist Angela Carter visited Australia in 1987 she noted that Australian society was ‘inexhaustibly curious about itself, about the way it works, how it feels to be Australian’.¹ This introspective gaze has a long history, explored by Richard White in his 1981 book *Inventing Australia*, where he describes Australians’ fascination with their identity as ‘a national obsession’.² At the time Carter visited, the imminent Bicentenary of white settlement, or invasion, may have been prompting more profound soul-searching about aspects of Australian history and identity than had been the case in previous years. However the concern with the concept of Australianness was far from new, and it was to be central to the next twenty years of sharply contested and increasingly polarized argument over the Australian past.

This thesis is concerned with the way in which a number of novels published broadly between 1988 and 2008, between the Bicentenary and the Australian Government’s *Apology to Australia’s Indigenous Peoples*, use the early colonial period, and particularly the contested figure of the convict, as a lens through which to view the arguments over Australian culture and history.³ I will argue that this period saw a fundamental challenge to the Anglo-Celtic narrative of the nation’s past and to the myths and stories that underpin it, and that the historical fictions I discuss represent an attempt to re-imagine and re-envision that narrative. In doing so I will consider the novels in three overlapping contexts: in relation to the way in which Australia’s convict history has shaped and influenced contemporary perceptions of nation and belonging; in relation to the tradition of convict fiction from Marcus Clarke’s foundational novel, *For the Term of His Natural Life* (1874), onwards; and in relation to contemporary debates

¹ Angela Carter, *Shaking a Leg: Journalism and Writings* (London: Vintage, 1998), p. 228.

² Richard White, *Inventing Australia: Images and Identity 1688-1980* (St Leonards, New South Wales: Allen & Unwin, 1981), p. viii.

³ Kevin Rudd, ‘Apology to Australia’s Indigenous Peoples’, Commonwealth of Australia House of Representatives, *Debates*, 13 February 2008, pp. 167-71.

about Australian identity and history.⁴ I will argue that, for all their apparently revisionist attitudes, these novels essentially reproduce rather than overturn the narratives that sustain white settler Australia, refurbishing and re-presenting them in a form appropriate for the twenty-first century.

Before turning to the details of my argument I will use the rest of this introductory section to examine the central contextual issues that underpin my work: how nations and national identities are formed; the role of fictional writing in this work; how these processes operate in the Australian context; and the continuing relevance of the convict as a way of exploring Australian identity. I will conclude by discussing the selection of texts I have used and outlining the key elements of the thesis itself.

Making the Nation

Much of what I have to say in this thesis addresses the way in which the Australian nation and Australian national identity are constructed, and particularly the myths and narratives that underpin the idea of what it means to be Australian. To provide context for the issues I raise, I will look briefly at discussions on the way in which nations are formed before turning to how these processes have worked in Australia.

Between 1960 and 1990 a number of theorists addressed the question of how nations are created, built and sustained.⁵ While adopting different approaches and coming from different theoretical positions, there was a consensus among them that the nation is less an objective entity, defined by geographical factors or by racial or linguistic homogeneity, than a subjective one. Drawing on the earlier insights of Ernest Renan, they saw the nation as a socially constructed formation, rooted in shared

⁴ Marcus Clarke, *For the Term of His Natural Life*, intro. by Laurie Hergenhan (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1996).

⁵ See, for example, Elie Kedourie, *Nationalism* (London: Hutchinson, 1960), Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) and Anthony D. Smith, *Theories of Nationalism* (London: Duckworth, 1971) and *National Identity* (London: Penguin, 1991).

understandings, shared memories and, importantly, shared forgettings.⁶ They also saw it as primarily a modern phenomenon, one which, in Eric Hobsbawm's words, 'is a social entity only insofar as it relates to a certain kind of modern territorial state, the "nation-state"'.⁷ Much of their analysis was influenced by the development of European nation-states in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and was driven in part by a concern at the way in which a concept of nationalism linked to territorialism and ethnicity had been a driving force in the European wars of the preceding hundred years.

In his 1983 book *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson extended the analysis of nationalism, looking particularly at postcolonial states in East Asia and the Americas, and stressed the importance of recognizing that 'nationality, [...], as well as nationalism, are cultural artefacts'.⁸ He saw the nation as 'an imagined political community' whose inhabitants 'will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them or even hear of them' but who are bound together by a common understanding of the national story.⁹ For Anderson, the development of print-capitalism was vital to establishing and disseminating a shared and accepted narrative of the nation and its history. Increased access to books, newspapers and other written material exposed readers to the same ideas and experiences and helped to create the nation as 'a deep, horizontal comradeship'.¹⁰ Importantly, such shared narratives create 'an official story about what the nation means, and how it works', one that 'governs the dominant cultural discussion of what constitutes national identity'.¹¹ These narratives, reinforced by other national symbols, such as flags, anthems, museums and maps, establish the nation as a discursive whole, and structure the way in which its inhabitants are expected to think about and express the nation both to themselves and to others.

⁶ Ernest Renan, 'What is a Nation?', trans. by Martin Thom, in *Nation and Narration*, ed. by Homi K. Bhabha (London: Routledge, 1990).

⁷ Hobsbawm, pp. 9-10.

⁸ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. edn (London: Verso, 2006), p. 4.

⁹ Anderson, p. 6.

¹⁰ Anderson, p. 7.

¹¹ Lauren Berlant, *The Anatomy of National Fantasy: Hawthorne, Utopia, and Everyday Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 11.

The idea of the nation as ‘a narrative, [...] a text that might unfold its secrets and complexities’ has proved beguiling, particularly but not only to postcolonial nations which, because they ‘cannot stretch back into an unbroken past’, have had to create their own national narratives in order to establish a shared community and a common national identity.¹² However national narratives inevitably generate counter-discourses, competing narratives from those who see themselves as excluded from the central story of the nation, whether by virtue of their gender, ethnicity, race or class. We shall see later in this thesis how these issues have operated in the Australian context, where the narrative generated by settler Australians from the 1890s onwards has been increasingly challenged for its failure to address issues of concern to those outside the dominant Anglo-Celtic male group.

More recently the idea of depicting ‘the surface of the globe as compartmentalized into discrete national societies by a limited number of well-defined boundaries’ has come under increasing challenge from the twin pressures of globalization and localization.¹³ Transnational flows of capital, people and culture have exposed national cultures and national identities to external influences, while growing inequalities within the nation have put the idea of a national community, whether imagined or real, under increasing strain. One response to this has been an increasingly desperate search for, and assertion of, national values, a celebration of the nation’s core culture, an issue that has permeated Australian debates over the last twenty-five years and to which I shall return later.

The concept of the nation as a discursive formation, and the centrality of narrative to it, continues to provide a fruitful way of reading postcolonial nations, including settler colonial nations, which have formed themselves both out of and against

¹² Stuart Murray, ‘Introduction’, in *Not On Any Map: Essays on Postcoloniality and Cultural Nationalism*, ed. by Stuart Murray (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1997), pp. 1-18 (pp. 13 & 12). The essays in *Nation and Narration*, ed. by Bhabha, examine the relationship between narrative and the concept of nation across a range of countries and cultures.

¹³ Graham Day and Andrew Thompson, *Theorizing Nationalism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 101.

the culture of the colonizing state.¹⁴ For settler colonial states, national narratives have had to perform a number of functions. At the most basic level they have been used to determine when history began, what point in the past can be claimed as the foundational event from which the nation is to date its existence. They have also created the stories that bond the settlers to their new home, that enable them ‘to think they are indigenous, while distinguishing themselves from aboriginal people’.¹⁵ At the heart of this is the creation of the settler relationship to the land, one in which ‘the land must be represented as a blank slate’ on which the settler writes the story of settlement, a story in which ‘a period of displacement in the wilderness’ is followed by ‘entrance into a district, battling the land, community building, and, eventually, by the “closing in” of the frontier’.¹⁶ This settlement narrative has been accompanied by a parallel story ‘emphasising notions of *peaceful* settlement’, telling of how the pre-existing indigenous peoples disappeared rather than being violently dispossessed, a story intended to suppress the settlers’ responsibility for their erasure.¹⁷ We can see how such narratives work in the way in which Australian nationalism developed at the end of the nineteenth century.

The narrative of Australian nationalism at that time plaited together several strands in an attempt first to deconstruct the story of the Australian past and then to reconstruct it in a form that was suitable for a new nation. The first strand was to redefine the nation’s foundation. While, as I shall argue, convictism was central to forging the key myths and stories that underpinned Australian nationalism, particularly the foundational myths of Australian victimhood and imperial brutality, in the 1890s it was viewed as a shameful part of the past that was best forgotten. Nationalists were keen to create a more positive history for the country, one in which its citizens could take

¹⁴ See, for example, Lorenzo Veracini, *Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), which devotes considerable space to the narrative of settler colonialism, particularly at pp. 95-116.

¹⁵ Stephen Turner, ‘Settlement as Forgetting’, in *Quicksands: Foundational Histories in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand*, ed. by Klaus Neumann, Nicholas Thomas and Hilary Ericksen (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 1999), pp. 20-38 (p. 22).

¹⁶ Veracini, pp. 83 & 99.

¹⁷ Veracini, p. 89.

pride, and they did this by stressing the central importance of the pioneer to Australian history while relegating the convict period to pre-history. As John Hirst has argued, the pioneer legend 'solved the problem which formal historians could never overcome satisfactorily: the embarrassment of the convict origins of the nation'.¹⁸ This move also enabled nationalists of the period to distance themselves from aspects of the British legacy which they saw as inimical to the development of an Australian nation. While retaining a pride in their British heritage, they were increasingly antipathetic to what they regarded as the disdainful way in which the imperial power treated them, and they focused their hostility on the British role in establishing the country as a convict colony. The nationalist view was that 'the British had created an abomination in the convict system, and since its influence was still potent, New South Wales could never establish a truly democratic society until the British connection was severed'.¹⁹ Nationalism, in other words, would enable settler Australians to forget their painful past and to create a new history by suppressing the country's convict foundations.

The narrative of the pioneer setting out to conquer the bush and turn it into fertile and profitable land served more purposes than simply resetting the effective start of Australian history. Importantly it made settling the land 'the chief theme of Australia's history', one that led to the settler view that Australian identity was intimately bound up with the concept that the land belonged to them.²⁰ It also promoted a concept of Australian egalitarianism that was expressed, among other ways, in the concept of mateship, the willingness of one man to stand up for his friend or colleague. Finally it established Australia as essentially a masculine nation, one in which women had little or no part to play outside the domestic sphere. As such, this narrative of the nation was foundational to what Russel Ward, in 1958, called the Australian Legend, a concept that I explore in more detail later.²¹

¹⁸ John Hirst, *Sense and Nonsense in Australian History* (Melbourne: Black, 2006), p. 189.

¹⁹ Hirst, p. 186.

²⁰ Hirst, p. 189.

²¹ Russel Ward, *The Australian Legend*, 2nd edn, repr. with new introduction (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2005).

The settlement of the land was accompanied by ‘a constant insistence that no blood had been spilt in this land’, that settlement had been an essentially peaceful process, a claim that could be sustained in part ‘because the slaughter was simply being forgotten’ and in part because the killing of Aborigines, who ‘were not seen as part of the future nation since they were dying out and in any case unworthy of its citizenship’, was not viewed as something to be remarked on.²² This casual attitude to the indigenous population, of course, formed part of a wider narrative that constructed Australia as a pure, white, nation, one that resisted non-white immigration and whose native population had conveniently disappeared.

Taken together these forces effectively created a fresh narrative of the Australian past, one that saw Australian history in essentially heroic terms as the triumph of the settler over a hostile land and people. That construction of Australian history and Australian identity has, of course, come under increasing challenge for its exclusivity and partiality, issues which I will discuss later.²³ However I will also suggest that it retains its potency and continues to shape the ways in which Anglo-Celtic Australians see themselves and their sense of what it means to be Australian.

The settler narrative was reinforced by what White calls ‘a conscious attempt [...] to create a distinctively national culture’.²⁴ The 1860s and 1870s had seen the emergence of poets such as Charles Harpur, Henry Kendall and Adam Lindsay Gordon who extolled native flora and fauna and celebrated the grandeur of Australian landscape. In the 1880s and 1890s, the forms of cultural nationalism hardened as writers such as A. B. ‘Banjo’ Paterson and Henry Lawson established the image of the heroic pioneer and the democracy of the bush in popular poems and stories. At the same time the work of

²² Hirst, pp. 201 & 202.

²³ For discussions of Australian settler narratives in the period with which I am concerned see, for example, Graeme Turner, *National Fictions: Literature, Film and the Construction of Australian Narrative* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1986) and *Making it National: Nationalism and Australian Popular Culture* (St Leonards, New South Wales: Allen & Unwin, 1994), Ross Gibson, *Postcolonialism and the Narrative Construction of Australia* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), *The Australian Legend and Its Discontents*, ed. by Richard Nile (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2000) and Catriona Elder, *Being Australian: Narratives of National Identity* (Crows Nest, New South Wales: Allen & Unwin, 2007).

²⁴ Richard White, p. 85.

the Heidelberg school of artists provided a widely acclaimed visual representation of both the beauties of the land and the work of the pioneer settler, establishing the archetypal image of Australia as a country characterized by ‘a sunlit landscape of faded blue hills, cloudless skies and noble gum trees, peopled by idealised shearers and drovers’.²⁵ Importantly they also created an image of the country as empty of its Aboriginal inhabitants, whose elimination from the land and the constitution was reinforced by their elimination from the country’s cultural representations.

Despite John Docker’s claim that the 1890s were not ‘a great age of literary and cultural nationalism’, and that the literary community did not stand for ‘the nationalist assertion of a single cultural identity or set of “Australianist” values’, I would argue that there was a strong strand of what has been called ‘assertive Australianism’ in the cultural productions of the period.²⁶ This, as I will suggest shortly, both privileged Australian values and attitudes and contrasted them favourably with those of the British. This cultural nationalism was nourished by a range of popular journals and magazines, of which the Sydney *Bulletin*, established in 1880, was perhaps the most influential, with its radical republican nationalist slant and its publication and championing of work that it saw as authentically Australian. The circulation of nationalist novels, stories, poems and journals created Australia as a form of Anderson’s imagined community in which, as he suggests, ‘fiction seeps quietly and continuously into reality, creating that remarkable confidence of community in anonymity which is the hallmark of modern nations’.²⁷ It gave Anglo-Celtic Australia a shared history and a sense of identity suitable for the nation it wanted to be.

Australian nationalism, and with it the sense of Australian national identity, have, I will argue, largely been created by literary productions which, as Graham Huggan suggests, have been ‘constitutive, rather than merely reflective, of the history of

²⁵ Richard White, p. 85.

²⁶ John Docker, *The Nervous Nineties: Australian Cultural Life in the 1890s* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 238; Richard White and Hsu-Ming Teo, ‘Popular Culture’, in *Australia’s Empire*, ed. by Deryck M. Schreuder and Stuart Ward (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 336-62 (p. 343).

²⁷ Benedict Anderson, p. 36.

social relations in Australia'.²⁸ Literary works have established and reinforced the myths and stories of the past, stories of settler victimhood, the heroic conquest of the land, peaceful settlement and the rightness of whiteness, that have their roots in the representation of early convictism. At the same time as creating shared memories, these writings have also established shared forgettings, seen in the willed amnesia about both the centrality of convictism to the nation and the brutal violence against Aborigines that were the dark side of the pioneer legend.

Writing the Nation

In his 1937 work *The Historical Novel*, Georg Lukacs argued for the importance of the genre of historical fiction for both explaining history to the reading public and relating it to the present, for 'without a felt relationship to the present, a portrayal of history is impossible'.²⁹ Lukacs suggests that the historical novel as we now understand it is coeval with 'the awakening of national sensibility and with it a feeling and understanding for national history' that stemmed from 'the mass experience of history' at the time of the Napoleonic Wars.³⁰ He argues, using Sir Walter Scott as his primary example, that the importance of historical fiction lies in showing how the nation has responded to past moments of crisis and social instability, and so suggesting how more contemporary challenges might be resolved. In short the development of the historical novel is tied to the rise of European nationalism while also helping to constitute that nationalism.

We can see a similar pattern in Australian fiction. Huggan has pointed out that:

many of the nation's best-known novels and romances have a strong historical component, from Marcus Clarke's convict novel *For the Term of His Natural Life* (1882) to Richardson's epic Gold-Rush trilogy *The Fortunes of Richard*

²⁸ Graham Huggan, *Australian Literature: Postcolonialism, Racism, Transnationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. vi.

²⁹ Georg Lukacs, *The Historical Novel*, trans. by Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), p. 57.

³⁰ Lukacs, pp. 22-23.

Mahony (1917-29), to popular outlaw/bushranger romances like *Robbery Under Arms* (Rolf Boldrewood, 1888) and *Outlaw and Lawmaker* (Rosa Praed 1893).³¹

Others might be added to the list, including Eleanor Dark's trilogy *The Timeless Land* (1941-53) and Patrick White's *Voss* (1957).³² For Australian writers the question 'Where have we come from?' is of critical importance both in itself and as a way into answering the question of 'Who are we?'. The nation has been constructed as much through historical fictions as through ostensibly more factual accounts of the country's past.

Historical fictions, particularly those concerned with convicts and convictism, have played a significant role in creating the myths and stories that constituted the emerging nation. I will discuss in more detail the way in which Marcus Clarke's convict novel, *For the Term of His Natural Life*, established the fundamental elements of Australian national identity that continue to exert a powerful influence on contemporary Anglo-Celtic Australian self-imaging today. However Clarke's novel was not the only broadly historical fiction that contributed to the construction of the nation and national identity. Robert Dixon has drawn attention to the role that the adventure story, the 'ripping yarn', has played in creating Australia, stressing the way in which 'popular fictions narrate the nation's unity by differentiating it externally from other nations and by the inscription of a hierarchy of internal discriminations'.³³ In Rolf Boldrewood's *Robbery Under Arms* (1888), for example, Dixon suggests that we see 'young Australian men grow to maturity in a nation that is uncomfortable with both its convict history and its dependency on Britain'.³⁴ Such discomfort can, in principle, be relieved by the creation of a more united and independent Australian Federation. However, Dixon suggests, such a move will at the same time reveal the 'irreconcilable ideas of

³¹ Huggan, p. 61.

³² Eleanor Dark, *The Timeless Land, Storm of Time and No Barrier*, intro. by Barbara Brooks (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 2002); Patrick White, *Voss* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1957).

³³ Robert Dixon, *Writing the Colonial Adventure: Race, Gender and Nation in Anglo-Australian Popular Fiction, 1875-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 1 & 10.

³⁴ Dixon, p. 32.

class, nation and gender' that lie beneath the surface of Boldrewood's text and which will haunt the country in future.³⁵

Elsewhere in novels of the period there is much emphasis on the distinctiveness both of Australia and of the Australian character. For example, Rosa Praed's *Outlaw and Lawmaker* (1893) revolves around the contrast between Australian and British characters and ways of life with the aim of validating Australia both to its own inhabitants and to the British. In doing so it undermines the pretensions of British imperialism and exposes its condescending attitudes to Australia, which is regarded primarily as a source of local colour and excitement for retailing to a British audience. Lord Horace is unable to take the Australia to which he has migrated seriously while his sister, Lady Waveryng, uses her visit primarily to gather material for 'a book of her doings and impressions in the Antipodes'.³⁶ By contrast, Elsie Valliant, with her frank views, bold spirit and boundless energy, is figured as 'the typical Australian girl'.³⁷ Similarly Frank Hallett is presented as an idealized Australian settler, 'a capital fellow and a clear-headed man of business. He was particularly popular with ladies, being a good match and a sociable person who [...] liked to amuse himself and other people' while also 'having taken high honours at the Sydney University, and [...] likely to distinguish himself in politics'.³⁸ Praed's novel, like Boldrewood's earlier *Robbery Under Arms*, also establishes the bush rather than the town or city as the archetypal setting for Australian life, the site where the lives both of the respectable pioneer and of his disreputable counterpart, the bushranger, intersect.³⁹ Novels such as Praed's helped both to construct an Australian identity that was separate from, and superior to, that of the British, and to affirm the centrality of the pioneer and the land to Australian history.

³⁵ Dixon, p. 38.

³⁶ Rosa Praed, *Outlaw and Lawmaker*, intro. by Dale Spender (London: Pandora Press, 1988), p. 204.

³⁷ Praed, p. 5.

³⁸ Praed, p. 3.

³⁹ Rolf Boldrewood, *Robbery Under Arms*, intro. by Dr Thomas Wood (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1947).

At the same time, as Dixon argues, fictions of the period also helped to construct the racial purity that was an important component of Australian nationalism. Both before, and particularly immediately after, Federation, novels and stories both ‘construct[ed] discursive boundaries between Australia, Asia and the Pacific’ and created the genre of ‘literature of imagined invasion’ in which Australia was prey to attack by various Asian countries.⁴⁰ Such fictions helped to create the paranoia about the non-white other that was an important element in the discourse of Australian nationalists at the time. Moreover, by emphasizing the risks to the nation from infiltration through permeable borders these novels established the idea of a beleaguered Fortress Australia which has been a central issue in the country’s recent history.

These novels also helped to create the melodramatic as, in Peter Pierce’s words, ‘the governing temper of the national literature [...] in Australia’.⁴¹ Dixon has traced the importance and influence of melodrama in late nineteenth-century Australian writing and argues that although it had considerable popularity it ‘was not *essentially* a popular mode, but a site of cultural mediation whose protean form allowed it to negotiate conflicts between popular and bourgeois, metropolitan and regional, masculine and feminine identities’.⁴² The widespread use of the form, and its appeal across Australian society, helped to ensure the diffusion of the myths and stories that it encoded. At the same time the foundational nature of the melodramatic, which, as we shall see, is very evident in Marcus Clarke’s work, entrenched it as the preferred mode for writing about the convict past. As Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra say of Clarke’s *For the Term of His Natural Life*, ‘it put Australia’s convict origins on the agenda while constructing a melodramatic substitute for historical understanding’.⁴³ As we shall see later, the

⁴⁰ Dixon, pp. 118 & 136.

⁴¹ Peter Pierce, *Australian Melodramas: Thomas Keneally’s Fiction* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1995), p. 26.

⁴² Robert Dixon, ‘Literature and Melodrama’, in *The Oxford Literary History of Australia*, ed. by Bruce Bennett and Jennifer Strauss (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 66-88 (p. 68).

⁴³ Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra, *Dark Side of the Dream: Australian Literature and the Postcolonial Mind* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1991), p. 130.

emphasis on the melodramatic in contemporary writing still serves to obscure a clear view of the early colonial period.

Popular historical novels of the late nineteenth century, then, helped both to create the settler narrative of the past, and to construct a national history and a national character drawn from an exclusively Anglo-Celtic perspective. Historical fictions in the first half of the twentieth century moved on from this to play a central role in nation-building, with the aim of ‘consolidating and enhancing the legend of the nineties and imposing the orthodoxy of that version of the Australian experience’.⁴⁴ Central to this approach was the family saga which Harry Heseltine has characterized as:

the classic pioneering novel which charted the course of an Australian family from its (usually humble) beginnings through a whole maze of good and evil fortune, and against a background of assorted natural phenomena – the inevitable floods, fires, droughts.⁴⁵

While some fictions, such as Eleanor Dark’s *Timeless Land* trilogy, did look back to the early days of settlement, historical sagas tended to focus on the later, heroic, periods of nineteenth-century Australian history which could be seen as the progenitors of national growth and development.

More recently Ken Gelder and Paul Salzman have noted a change of perspective, arguing that while historical fiction has continued to dominate the literature of the 1990s and early 2000s, ‘a great deal of contemporary Australian fiction returns almost compulsively to the colonial scene, to all the fortunes and misfortunes of settlement in the early days of the frontier’.⁴⁶ This focus on the early colonial past was driven in part, no doubt, by the focus on the commemoration of historical events around the turn of the last century, particularly the Bicentenary of British settlement in 1988 and the centenary

⁴⁴ Adrian Mitchell, ‘Fiction’, in *The Oxford History of Australian Literature*, ed. by Leonie Kramer (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1981), pp. 27-172 (p. 106).

⁴⁵ H. P. Heseltine, ‘Australian Fiction Since 1920’, in *The Literature of Australia*, ed. by Geoffrey Dutton (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964), pp. 181-224 (p. 185).

⁴⁶ Ken Gelder and Paul Salzman, *After the Celebration: Australian Fiction 1989-2007* (Carlton, Victoria: Melbourne University Press, 2009), p. 6.

of Federation in 2001. Gelder and Salzman suggest that the return to Australian beginnings has been seen as a sign of an unhealthy Australian introspection, citing Eva Sallis's satisfaction that more recently 'the novelist's question, "Who are we?" changed into "a more outward looking question", "What are we becoming?"'.⁴⁷ However I would argue that this is not the simple dichotomy Sallis suggests. Rather, in order to understand both how current Australian society has been formed, and how it might be re(-)formed, it is necessary to look back to its origins. Writing about maroon societies in the Caribbean, Eric Hobsbawm argued that such societies 'raise fundamental questions. How do casual collections of fugitives of widely different origins, possessing nothing in common but the experience of transportation in slave ships and of plantation slavery, come to form structured communities? How, one might say more generally, are societies founded from scratch?'.⁴⁸ The same questions can be applied to early colonial Australia – how did the assortment of convicts and officers who landed in 1788 create a society, what sort of society was it, how has it left its marks on contemporary Australia, and how might it be improved in the future? The apparently compulsive wish to scratch the itch of settlement and colonization that emerges particularly strongly, as I will suggest, at times of political turbulence and stress, should be seen not simply as a sign of Australians' obsession with their history but also as an engagement with wider issues of the country's social and cultural formation. As I will argue, for contemporary Australian writers the past is of interest not only for its own sake but for what it says about the state of Australian society today and tomorrow.

In this context it is important to stress that, as Gelder and Salzman say, recent Australian historical novels 'cannot be understood outside the framework of a politicised discussion that argued over the way in which colonial history is represented'.⁴⁹ The (re)turn to early colonial history gave authors an opportunity to engage with the highly partisan debates of the time both over the representation of the past and over contemporary cultural values. Their attempts to recast the fictional

⁴⁷ Gelder and Salzman, p. 12.

⁴⁸ Eric Hobsbawm, *On History* (London: Abacus, 1998), p. 256.

⁴⁹ Gelder and Salzman, p. 10.

representation of early settlement both responded to, and contributed to, the arguments over Australian history and identity at the end of the last century.

This debate has been central to what Pierce, in a 1992 article, calls ‘neo-historical fiction’.⁵⁰ These are novels, Huggan argues, whose ‘primary concern is perhaps less to recover than to re-imagine the past’.⁵¹ They seek to confront both ‘the partiality and unreliability of the sources from which formal and fictitious histories are constructed’ and ‘the assumptions and procedures of Australian historical fiction’.⁵² They recognize that, as Hayden White has argued, historical narratives themselves use fictional devices to tell their stories, that ‘the events are *made* into a story by the suppression or subordination of certain of them and the highlighting of others, by characterization, motific repetition, variation of tone and point of view, alternative descriptive strategies, and the like’.⁵³ By engaging with the arguments over the reading of history, these writers have sought to reconstitute the nation, to challenge the received narratives of Australian identity and history, and to suggest alternative ways of defining what it means to be Australian that celebrate the country’s multicultural present rather than its monocultural past.

Pierce contrasts neo-historical fiction, with its collapsing of the traditional boundaries between history and imagination, its questioning of the reliability of the historical record, and its creation of ‘expressionistic versions of the past’, favourably with what he sees as the ‘glum business of repentance and attempted redress, frequently for the dispossession of the Aboriginal peoples’ that characterizes much traditional Australian revisionist fiction.⁵⁴ For Huggan, too, this neo-historical fiction ‘at its best [...] allows for a spirited re-engagement with the past that is both ethically responsible and aesthetically satisfying’.⁵⁵ However while, as we shall see later in relation

⁵⁰ Peter Pierce, ‘Preying on the Past: Contexts of Some Recent Neo-Historical Fiction’, *Australian Literary Studies*, 15 (1991-92), 304-12.

⁵¹ Huggan, p. 61.

⁵² Pierce, ‘Preying on the Past’, pp. 310 & 312.

⁵³ Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), p. 84.

⁵⁴ Pierce, ‘Preying on the Past’, p. 310.

⁵⁵ Huggan, p. 61.

particularly to the work of Peter Carey and Richard Flanagan, such fictions can provide an energetic challenge to the traditional representations of the Australian past, their imaginative reconstructions of that past do not always lead to a fundamental change to the underlying stories they tell.

In recent years, then, the turn to historical fiction that is concerned with Australia's beginnings has provided a platform for writers to participate in and shape the debates about the nation's past in ways that have the potential to engage a different and wider audience from that captured by the historians' debate. It has given novelists an opportunity to rethink the construction of the nation and national identity in ways that move beyond what Huggan calls the 'nostalgia-ridden narratives of sanctified victimhood which continue to block access to Australia's colonial past', and in doing so to challenge the continued commitment to what Graeme Turner identifies as 'a particularly exclusive, Eurocentric definition of the nation'.⁵⁶ However, as I shall argue, too often such novelists, despite their commitment to rewriting and re-righting the nation, have ended up by reconstituting and re-presenting the traditional settler narrative of history and identity because of an inability effectively to envision an alternative story of the past.

Convict Nation

Convictism is one of the defining features of Australian history and identity. It provides a frame through which Australians both see themselves and are seen by others, particularly the British. Marian Quartly claims that convict history is 'carried by Australia as a beloved burden' and that the convict experience 'continues to fascinate Australian historians', being 'the subject which every generation invests with its own significance'.⁵⁷ It increasingly also fascinates the Australian public, who now take pride in, rather than disowning, their convict forebears. The continuing attempts to recover

⁵⁶ Huggan, p. 65; Turner, *Making It National*, p. 122.

⁵⁷ Marian Quartly, 'Convict History', in *The Oxford Companion to Australian History*, ed. by Graeme Davison, John Hirst and Stuart Macintyre, rev. edn (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 154-56 (pp. 154 & 156).

details of the convict past, the marketing of convict sites such as Port Arthur as visitor destinations, and the inclusion of a number of convict sites on the UNESCO list of World Heritage sites, all attest to the continuing hold of the convict past on the contemporary imagination. Furthermore convictism has played, and continues to play, a central role in the cultural and literary life of the nation. Russel Ward has argued for the importance of the convict influence in forming the national character and social mores, while Graeme Turner has commented that ‘imprisonment, convictism, is a rich source of imagery and meaning within Australian culture’ and that it has ‘a more central place in our history, our language, and thus in our patterns of representation, than in other colonial nations’.⁵⁸ Convictism, then, however much it may have been played down in early nationalist discourse, remains central both to Australian history and, I will argue, to Australian fiction.

In *Unnatural Lives*, his 1983 survey of convict fiction, Laurie Hergenhan claimed that:

of all the novels concerned in a major way with Australia’s past, a noticeable proportion of those commonly considered to be among the better ones, and among Australia’s better novels generally, are concerned with the convicts.⁵⁹

He attributed this to the importance of convictism to the Australian psyche, suggesting that ‘for a long time the convicts displaced the Aborigines as a focus for the doubts and fears about white settlement in the Australian continent; that convicts, not Aborigines, provided a guilty past’.⁶⁰ For all the attempts to suppress the country’s convict past, Hergenhan traced a continuing thread of convict novels throughout the period from the 1840s, with the convict James Tucker’s *Ralph Rashleigh* (1845?), to the 1970s, with Patrick White’s *A Fringe of Leaves* (1976), a thread that has continued into the present

⁵⁸ Ward, p. 15; Turner, *National Fictions*, p. 60.

⁵⁹ Laurie Hergenhan, *Unnatural Lives: Studies in Australian Convict Fiction*, new edn (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1993), p. 1.

⁶⁰ Hergenhan, p. 1.

century.⁶¹ He also argued that the production of convict fiction over the years testifies to the importance of convictism as ‘a continuing source of myth and revaluations both of the myths themselves and of changing society’.⁶² Finally he saw such fictions as playing a crucial role in ‘showing that for Australians the past is not something that exists only abroad but is part of the dynamic of history in which we all share’, in short that their readings of the past are relevant to an understanding of modern Australian society.⁶³ I will discuss these issues in more detail later in this thesis. For the present it will suffice to say that the more recent convict fictions with which I am primarily concerned continue to connect the past with the present while also re-creating and re-presenting that past from the perspective of the present.

Although, as I have indicated, convict novels are a feature of most periods of Australian fiction, novelists’ interest in Australia’s early colonial past has tended to correlate with periods of political and social turbulence. In the late nineteenth century the works of Marcus Clarke and Price Warung helped to promote the cause of Australian nationalism, not least by presenting the convict experience in terms of a brutal exercise of imperial power. As I shall discuss in Chapter 2, in the 1960s and 1970s a clutch of convict fictions reflected on and contributed to the challenges to the deeply conformist attitudes prevalent in Australia at the end of the Menzies era. More recently, and centrally for my purposes, there has been a significant revival in convict fictions in the 1990s and 2000s, and these have contributed to the fundamental debates of the period over the reading of the Australian past. During this period novelists as much as historians could have been accused both of trying to rewrite the nation’s history and of undermining the national narrative of Anglo-Celtic Australia.

The convict past of Australia is, then, still very much a live issue, both as a subject of historical debate and in its fictional representation, and as such I believe that the genre of convict fiction constitutes a valuable way of approaching the arguments

⁶¹ James Tucker, *Ralph Rashleigh*, intro. and ed. by Colin Roderick (London: Folio Society, 1977); Patrick White, *A Fringe of Leaves* (London: Vintage, 1997).

⁶² Hergenhan, p. 172.

⁶³ Hergenhan, p. 173.

about how contemporary Australians see themselves, the stories they tell about their past, and the ways in which they present themselves to others. In looking at recent convict fiction I have deliberately focused my attention on a small number of texts by elite, white, writers (Thomas Keneally, Kate Grenville, Debra Adelaide, Peter Carey, Richard Flanagan and Rodney Hall) rather than attempting a survey of the field akin to that undertaken by Hergenhan. This approach reflects a number of factors. First, I am concerned with the way in which non-indigenous Australians have constructed and contested their past and as such it is logical to centre my study on works produced within that community. Second, the popular sagas of the period tend, like their predecessors, to be invested in the concept of family and national progress and use the convict period, if at all, as a form of pre-history, a necessary back-story to their tales of pioneering success.⁶⁴ Third, these writers play a significant role as public intellectuals in contributing to discussions about Australia's past and future not only through their fictions but also through their contributions in other media. Flanagan is well-known for his ecological concerns, Grenville has spoken on the need for reconciliation between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians, while Carey and Keneally have both been leading protagonists of the Australian republican movement. Furthermore for all their literary reputation they have a significant readership both within and outside Australia that enables their work to influence the wider discourse about the Australian past and its connection to the present. Finally, the works I have chosen reflect different experiences of convictism, from life in early colonial Sydney to the world of the emancipist on the Hawkesbury, and as such provide a range of perspectives on early colonial Australia.

Convict fiction, I will argue, continues to provide an important prism through which to consider the vexed issue of the creation of Australian identity and of the

⁶⁴ One exception to this pattern is the late Colleen McCullough's novel *Morgan's Run* (London: Century, 2000), the second half of which is set first in Sydney and then on Norfolk Island between 1788 and 1793. However, even here the period of the saintly Richard Morgan's imprisonment is essentially a purgatory which he must endure before he attains his freedom and with it marriage and a family. There is a sense that the real story of Morgan's life would have been told in the unwritten sequels, where we would have learnt more of the 'adventures, disasters and upheavals' (p. 601) that befell him in what promised to be a traditional family saga.

Australian past. Historically such fictions have been complicit in creating a conservative narrative of Australian history, one that plays to the prejudices of the dominant Anglo-Celtic community. I will suggest that while apparently re-writing that narrative, the contemporary novels I have examined predominantly continue to collude with it.

Thesis Structure

While centrally concerned with literary contributions to the debates over the construction, deconstruction and reconstruction of Australia's past and national identity, this thesis necessarily works across disciplinary boundaries, looking at key aspects of Australian history and cultural formation as well as its literary representation. This is reflected in the organization of the material in the main body of the text.

Chapter 1 traces the ways in which the early convicts have been viewed both in writings of the time and subsequently, and the ways in which representations of convictism have served to construct the national myths and narratives of settler Australia. I argue that core aspects of settler Australians' sense of identity, of what it means to be Australian, can be seen as a legacy of the convict experience of life in early New South Wales. These include the image of the white Australian as victim, the settler relationship to the land, the centrality of the Anglo-Celtic 'core culture' to the stability of the nation, and the misogyny that continues to infect parts of the settler community. I also argue that the convict past has helped to shape contemporary Australian attitudes in a number of areas, particularly in relation to the nation's history and to ideas about the formation of the Australian character. Finally I look at the way in which the legacy of convictism has influenced aspects of Australian fiction.

Chapter 2 opens with an analysis of Marcus Clarke's foundational novel, *For the Term of His Natural Life* (1874), showing how it created and articulated the myths and narratives that settler Australians use to order their lives while also determining the key elements of the convict novel and establishing it as a lens through which to view Australian society. I then go on to examine three convict novels of the 1960s and 1970s,

Thomas Keneally's *Bring Larks and Heroes* (1967), Jessica Anderson's *The Commandant* (1975) and Patrick White's *A Fringe of Leaves* (1976). I consider particularly how they responded to the political turbulence of the time, how far they reframed the genre of the convict novel, and to what extent they effectively challenged the prevailing settler narrative of history.

Chapter 3 considers four contemporary convict novels – Thomas Keneally's *The Playmaker* (1987), Kate Grenville's *The Secret River* (2005) and *The Lieutenant* (2008), and Debra Adelaide's *Serpent Dust* (1998) – whose writers have sought to use the form to re-imagine Australian history and identity. I look particularly at their response to the major challenges to traditional attitudes posed by the Bicentenary of British settlement, the Mabo and Wik judgments which reaffirmed certain Aboriginal land rights, and the *Bringing Them Home* Report on the forcible removal of Aboriginal children from their families.⁶⁵ I argue that the contested nature of these events provided an opportunity for writers to interrogate and re-present the traditional stories of the past, to return the dispossessed to the mainstream of Australian history, and to unsettle the dominant settler narratives. I suggest, however, that despite many good intentions, these novelists have largely failed to do this and that in the end they have reinforced rather than undermined the Anglo-Celtic myths of the nation.

Chapter 4 looks at the relationship between the imperial centre and the colonial periphery through Australian myths of exile and return. It centres on a study of Peter Carey's *Jack Maggs* (1997) as a rewriting both of Dickens and of the traditional construction of the relationship between colonial centre and colonized periphery. I argue that Carey reverses the normal terms of trade between the two to create an inhospitable and unattractive England from which Jack is ultimately relieved to escape to an idyllic Australia. I also relate the representation of home and exile to contemporary debates about the future constitutional arrangements for Australia, and the referendum on the republic. Finally I interrogate the extent to which *Jack Maggs* can be seen as a

⁶⁵ Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, *Bringing Them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families* (Sydney: Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997).

postcolonial novel and conclude that it might best be seen as at heart a traditional convict fiction, retelling rather than questioning the narratives of the Anglo-Celtic settlers.

Chapter 5 explores the ways in which settler Australians have constructed their relationship to the land and the environment, and the contested nature of belonging. I look at how the different approaches to the land and the natural world of the colonists and the Aborigines affected relations between the groups and then use two novels – Richard Flanagan’s *Gould’s Book of Fish* (2001) and Rodney Hall’s *The Second Bridegroom* (1991) – to critique the validity of settler claims to belong on, and to be at home in, the land in the context of recent ecocritical thinking. I also argue that these novels, particularly Hall’s, provide a more sustained attempt to rewrite the traditional settler narratives of Australian history than the other novels I have discussed. Finally I argue that Hall, uniquely among the writers I have studied, provides a vision of how the relationship between colonizers, colonized and the land might fruitfully be re-imagined.

CHAPTER 1

THE CONVICTS AND THEIR LEGACY

The Convicts in History

Contemporary Australia, for all its multicultural vitality, remains haunted by the monocultural ghosts of its transported convicts. For Australians of Anglo-Celtic descent in particular, these ghosts of their country's founders are inescapable, and profoundly affect their views of history, their contemporary attitudes, their mythology – the stories they tell themselves to make sense of, and justify, the past – and their literature. Since the late eighteenth century, the figure of the convict has been re-invented and re-imagined for different times and different purposes, for attitudes towards the convicts are coloured by 'values and assumptions [...] which still pervade the arguments of even the most insistently objective historians'.¹ Every school of interpretation 'seeks to release the convicts from the shackles of prejudice, yet every attempt is caught inextricably in the tangle of language and imagery used to describe them'.² However, as I will argue in this chapter, despite these changing perspectives, one image of the convict, that of the suffering innocent male victim of oppression, dominates the myths and fictions of Anglo-Celtic settlers, and its influence is central to the construction of Australian identity.

There are few accounts by early convicts of their lives in their new home (probably the best-known is Thomas Watling's series of letters to his aunt, first published in 1794).³ As a result, most of what we know of them comes reflected through 'the more or less distorting mirror of the First Fleet chroniclers'.⁴ As well as recording their impressions of the new country to which they had been sent, these military men

¹ Stuart Macintyre, *A Concise History of Australia*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 41.

² Macintyre, p. 41.

³ Thomas Watling, *Letters from an Exile at Botany-Bay, to His Aunt in Dumfries*, with an introduction by George Mackaness (Dubbo, New South Wales: Review Publications, 1976).

⁴ Paul Carter, *The Road to Botany Bay: An Essay in Spatial History* (London: Faber and Faber, 1987), p. 295.

used their writings to provide accounts of convict behaviour and attitudes, accounts which ‘for the most part [...] treat the convicts as irrational beings little superior in either intellect or morals to the Aborigines’.⁵ They also generally regard them as incorrigible criminals. For example David Collins, the Colony’s first Judge-Advocate, says at one point that ‘there were but few among them who were honest enough to resist any temptation that was placed in their way’.⁶ Collins viewed the convicts as thriftless, taking no heed for the future, so that ‘there were many who knew not how to husband their provisions through the seven days they were intended to serve them’, with the result that ‘he who had three days to live, and nothing to live on, [...], must steal from those who had been more provident’.⁷ For Collins, the bad habits and moral degeneracy that had led to the convicts’ criminality and transportation still attended them in New South Wales, and his journal is punctuated by reports of crimes and punishments. These start as early as 11 February 1788, a bare fortnight after the initial landing, when three convicts were tried and sentenced, one to 150 lashes for assault, one to ‘a week’s confinement on bread and water, on a small rocky island near the entrance of the cove’ for stealing biscuit from another convict, and one to 50 lashes for stealing a plank (a sentence later remitted).⁸ These punishments, described by Collins as mild, had, he claims, little deterrent effect, and the next trial, of a group alleged to have stolen provisions from the stores, resulted in the first execution in the new colony.⁹ As in England, crime was followed by harsh and apparently arbitrary punishment, exacerbated by the fact that in the colony ‘magistrates and officers felt free to invent other punishments as the occasion seemed to require’, an approach that helped to stimulate the convicts’ self-imaging as the oppressed victims of a capricious and overbearing state.¹⁰

⁵ Carter, p. 295.

⁶ David Collins, *An Account of the English Colony in New South Wales*, ed. by Brian H. Fletcher, 2 vols (Sydney: A. H. & A. W. Reed, 1975), I, 167.

⁷ Collins, I, 26.

⁸ Collins, I, 7.

⁹ Collins, I, 7 & 8.

¹⁰ Alan Atkinson, *The Europeans in Australia: A History – Volume One: The Beginning* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 92.

While Collins's attitudes may have been coloured by his judicial role in the colony, his sentiments were shared by other First Fleet annalists. Governor Phillip lacked faith in the convicts, arguing in his account of the settlement that 'so inveterate were their habits of dishonesty that even the apparent want of a motive could not repress them'.¹¹ Ralph Clark, a Marine Lieutenant whom we shall encounter later, in fictionalized form, in the work of Thomas Keneally, wrote, after Phillip had pardoned a number of men, that 'I think after his goodness the[y] ought to behave now well but I am almost certain that befor I am a fortnight older Some of them will be brought to tryal for Capital offences'.¹² Similarly the colony's first Surgeon General, John White, calls the convicts 'miserable delinquents', many of whom are 'so hardened in wickedness and depravity' as to be 'insensible to the fear of corporal punishment, or even death itself'.¹³

As well as reproducing their previous criminal activities, the convicts are also accused of provoking the Aborigines, something which particularly annoyed Phillip, who sought to establish good relations with the indigenous peoples, writing that 'conciliation is the only plan intended to be pursued'.¹⁴ White attributes the murder of two convicts by Aborigines to provocation, given 'the civility shewn on all occasions to the officers by the natives'.¹⁵ Similarly Collins, commenting on an incident where convicts were injured by Aborigines, says that it was difficult to believe them when they denied provoking the Aborigines given both that they knew that they would be prosecuted for doing so and that the Aborigines subsequently seemed more fearful of the colonists.¹⁶ Both Collins and Marine Captain Watkin Tench, perhaps the most self-aware of the writers, with his eye on future publication, record an incident where a

¹¹ Arthur Phillip, *The Voyage of Governor Phillip to Botany Bay*, ed. and annotated by J. J. Auchmuty (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1990), p. 40.

¹² Lt. Ralph Clark, *The Journal and Letters of Lt. Ralph Clark 1787-1792*, ed. by Paul G. Fiddlon and R. J. Ryan (Sydney: Australian Documents Library, 1981), p. 103.

¹³ John White, *Journal of a Voyage to New South Wales*, ed. by Alec H. Chisholm (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1962), p. 118.

¹⁴ Phillip, p. 79.

¹⁵ John White, p. 135.

¹⁶ Collins, I, 18-19.

group of convicts ‘marched to Botany Bay, with a design to attack the natives’.¹⁷ The attack was repelled and, after an inquiry by Phillip, who was ‘justly incensed at what had happened’, the convicts were flogged for their action.¹⁸

By contrast, the journals take a more positive view of the Aborigines. Although Tench says that ‘as a nation, [...], they certainly rank very low, even in the scale of savages’, he adds that individually ‘the persons who compose this community, [...] certainly rise in estimation’.¹⁹ In this context he cites a group of Aborigines who helped him and his companions cross a river, saying ‘let him whose travels have lain among polished nations, produce me a brighter example of disinterested urbanity, than was shewn by these denizens of a barbarous clime, to a set of destitute wanderers, on the side of the Hawkesbury’.²⁰ Elsewhere Collins records that:

Several native boys, [...] were found capable of being made extremely useful; they went cheerfully into the fields to labour, and the elder ones with ease hoed in a few hours a greater quantity of ground than that generally assigned to a convict for a day’s work.²¹

By presenting the Aborigines as in some ways superior to the convicts, and suggesting that the convicts sought to undermine the attempts of their rulers to establish friendly relations with them, the First Fleet chroniclers reinforce the convicts’ reputation as the untrustworthy, troublesome and violent dregs of their country.

Of course the presentation of the convicts in the First Fleet narratives is not uniformly negative, any more than the presentation of the Aborigines is consistently positive. Tench feels able to ‘record with pleasure, that they behaved better than predicted of them’ despite having to undertake ‘the most slavish and laborious

¹⁷ Capt. Watkin Tench, *Sydney’s First Four Years, Being a Reprint of A Narrative of the Expedition to Botany Bay and A Complete Account of the Settlement at Port Jackson by Captain Watkin Tench of the Marines*, with introduction and annotations by L. F. Fitzhardinge (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1961), p. 144.

¹⁸ Tench, p. 145.

¹⁹ Tench, p. 281.

²⁰ Tench, p. 236.

²¹ Collins, I, 339.

employments'.²² This encomium is, however, delivered as part of a somewhat tendentious presentation of the colony in which Tench claims that 'severity was rarely exercised on them [the convicts]; and justice was administered without partiality or discrimination'.²³ That said, the generally negative Collins also records that 'with very few exceptions, [...], the uniform good behaviour of the convicts was still to be noted and commended', and welcomes the industry of at least some convicts in cultivating the land.²⁴ However, despite these testimonials, the early convicts are generally presented as irrational, improvident, vicious, unrepentant and dangerous, needing to be controlled by a combination of hard labour and harsh punishment.

The image of the convict created by the early chroniclers, and widely disseminated by the publication of their works in Britain, helped to establish the idea of Australia as a place peopled by the worst type of criminal, people so depraved and wicked that they would not and could not be reformed. This image, popularized by Dickens in his depiction of Magwitch at the start of *Great Expectations* (1861) as 'a fearful man, all in coarse grey and with an iron on his leg', made the threat of being transported to Botany Bay a terrifying one, something that early Victorian parents would use 'to frighten children into being good'.²⁵ For early English visitors, 'to be Australian, whether convict, native-born or free settler, was to be tainted with the brutality and depravity of the convict system'.²⁶ Within Australia, while there was 'a reluctance to acknowledge the convict stain', the increasing number of free settlers sought to make a distinction between 'the exclusive and the emancipist'.²⁷ However the idea that some fostered, that 'depravity was not only inherited but contagious', was contested both from outside and particularly from inside the penal colony, where the children of convicts were seen as displaying the 'industry, sobriety and respectability which were the great

²² Tench, p. 134.

²³ Tench, p. 134.

²⁴ Collins, I, 193.

²⁵ Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*, ed. by Angus Calder (London: Penguin, 1985), p. 36; Richard White, *Inventing Australia: Images and Identity 1688-1980* (St Leonards, New South Wales: Allen & Unwin, 1981), p. 17.

²⁶ Richard White, p. 23.

²⁷ Macintyre, pp. 70 & 72.

virtues of the age’.²⁸ While the convicts were increasingly seen as the progenitors of the authentic Australian, however, it was not until the twentieth century that the image of the convicts themselves was transformed, when George Wood popularized the idea that they were the victims of an unjust legal system which meant that ‘the atrocious criminals remained in England, while their victims, innocent and manly, founded the Australian democracy’.²⁹ Wood presented the convicts as perpetrators of minor crimes and misdemeanours or, in the case of many Irish convicts, victims of political oppression. Following their rehabilitation, they were increasingly celebrated by writers such as Russel Ward, in his 1958 book *The Australian Legend*, as a group whose ‘influence on Australian society was very much more important than has usually been supposed’, a view to which I shall return later in this chapter.³⁰

Historians have continued to try to look through the image of the convicts as innocent victims of an oppressive state and to reclaim the men and women whose ghostly traces survive in fragmentary records and stories. In the 1960s, Lloyd Robson aimed to ‘answer two questions – what sort of people were the convicts transported to New South Wales and Van Diemen’s Land, and what sort of lives did they lead in Australia?’.³¹ His work, and that of George Shaw, did much to undermine Wood’s presentation of the convicts as innocent victims of an oppressive judicial system.³² As Robson put it, while ‘the convicts were neither simply “village Hampdens” nor merely “ne’er-do-wells from the city slums”’, overall ‘the scale must tip toward the ne’er-do-wells’.³³ In the 1980s, writers such as John Hirst sought to show that, despite the First Fleet chroniclers’ allegations of idleness and incorrigibility, the majority of convicts

²⁸ Richard White, pp. 22 & 26.

²⁹ George Wood, ‘Convicts’, *Royal Australian Historical Society: Journal and Proceedings*, 8.4 (1922), 177-208 (p. 187).

³⁰ Russel Ward, *The Australian Legend*, 2nd edn, repr. with new introduction (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 15.

³¹ L. L. Robson, *The Convict Settlers of Australia: An Enquiry into the Origin and Character of the Convicts Transported to New South Wales and Van Diemen’s Land 1787-1852* (Carlton, Victoria: Melbourne University Press, 1965), p. v.

³² A. G. L. Shaw, *Convicts and the Colonies: A Study of Penal Transportation from Great Britain and Ireland to Australia and Other Parts of the British Empire* (London: Faber and Faber, 1966).

³³ Robson, pp. 157-58.

became useful members of society, whose work helped to build Sydney and feed its growing population.³⁴ As they gained their freedom they became ‘socially indistinguishable from the free immigrants of the 1830s and 1840s’, since ‘no bar was placed on their economic activities and they enjoyed the same legal rights as those who had come free’.³⁵ These writers argue that, despite the unusual foundations of the colony, ‘the charge that transportation created abnormal societies is hard to maintain’.³⁶ More recently still, as Stuart Macintyre has argued, the ‘emphasis on the utility of the convict worker and normality of the convict experience’ has been challenged by ‘cultural historians fascinated by the otherness of the convicts’.³⁷

However these attempts to reconstruct the image of the convict have found little purchase in the popular imagination, where ‘even though convicts are acknowledged as pioneers of the nation and the founders of families, the stereotypes of convicts – comical figures dragging ball-and-chain shackles, demonised criminals, degraded victims of gruesome punishment – still dominate and fascinate’.³⁸ The continuing strength of the myth of the convict as oppressed, innocent victim can be seen in the reception given to Robert Hughes’s best-selling 1987 book *The Fatal Shore*.³⁹ For all its recognition that ‘this folklore of the System [...] did not bother with the general experience of convicts’, Hughes’s book, published shortly before the commemoration of the Bicentenary of British settlement, spends much of its prodigious length in doing the same thing,

³⁴ John Hirst, *Convict Society and its Enemies* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1983). See also *Convict Workers: Reinterpreting Australia’s Past*, ed. by Stephen Nicholas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), particularly the chapter ‘Unshackling the Past’ by Stephen Nicholas and Peter R. Shergold (pp. 3-13), which sets out a new analysis of the data about transported convicts.

³⁵ Marian Quartly, ‘Convicts’, in *The Oxford Companion to Australian History*, ed. by Graeme Davison, John Hirst and Stuart Macintyre, rev. edn (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 156-57 (p. 157); Hirst, p. 82.

³⁶ Quartly, p. 157.

³⁷ Macintyre, p. 70. See, for example, *Representing Convicts: New Perspectives on Convict Forced Labour Migration*, ed. by Ian Duffield and James Bradley (London: Leicester University Press, 1997), which addresses issues such as convict autobiographies and the ways in which the convict body was used both to classify convicts and to challenge such classifications.

³⁸ Grace Karskens, *The Colony: A History of Early Sydney* (Crows Nest, New South Wales: Allen & Unwin, 2010), p. 10.

³⁹ Robert Hughes, *The Fatal Shore: A History of the Transportation of Convicts to Australia, 1787-1868* (London: Collins Harvill, 1987).

focusing on the exceptional, the brutal and the violent aspects of convictism.⁴⁰ It tells the story of the early convicts as a form of melodrama, an existential struggle between good and evil, a mode which, I shall argue, strongly influences fictional accounts of convictism.

Hughes's book was greeted with acclaim both in Australia and elsewhere, and was praised as a work that made Australians face up to their origins, that, in the words of expatriate Australian poet Peter Porter, 'won't let us console ourselves about the past, whatever we choose to do with the present'.⁴¹ However, it can better be seen as a work that reassured settler Australians about the continuing validity of their chosen narratives of the past, particularly the stories that present it as a triumph of enterprise over oppression and victimization. The popularity of Hughes's book stemmed in large part from its role in reproducing the hackneyed myths of convictism in ways that played to the prejudices of its readers. As Marian Quartly lamented in her article on 'Convict History' in *The Oxford Companion to Australian History*:

Hughes energetically (if erratically) dismissed the rationalists. Botany Bay was no proto-capitalist workplace, it was a place of exile, privation and death – a gulag. Hughes's central concern was to display the suffering of the convicts and the viciousness of their gaolers. He revived the moral language and the pornographic detail of the nineteenth-century reformers and novelists to create a story as compelling, and as partial, as theirs.⁴²

As the response to Hughes's work shows, despite the changing perceptions of the nature of convict society there is, at least for Anglo-Celtic Australians, a continuing, deeply-rooted desire to maintain and valorize the traditional, conservative, image of the convict as suffering victim. The transmutation of the convict figure into that of the bushworker (and his dark counterpart the bushranger), the digger and what Graeme Turner

⁴⁰ Hughes, p. xiii.

⁴¹ Peter Porter, 'The Building of Hell on Earth', *Times Literary Supplement*, 23 January 1987, p. 79.

⁴² Marian Quartly, 'Convict History', in *The Oxford Companion to Australian History*, ed. by Davison, Hirst and Macintyre, pp. 154-56 (p. 156).

has called ‘the common man of authentic values, who is constantly oppressed and victimised by British imperialism or by authority generally’, continues to foreground that image.⁴³ Moreover the figure of the oppressed convict underpins a range of foundational myths about settler Australian identity and nationalism whose continuing strength affirms Turner’s view that ‘once established, discourses of nationality are notoriously hard to dislodge or deconstruct’, not least because of ‘their canny flexibility, their readiness for continual appropriation and deployment as they participate in the construction of a national culture’.⁴⁴ In the next section I shall look at the ways in which the convict legacy has shaped the settler Australian view both of what it means to be Australian and of the Australian past.

Myths and Stories

Deborah Bird Rose has argued that ‘while Australia refuses any single founding myth, it is founded more on the myth of expulsion than on any other’ and that ‘in Australian foundation narratives, Eden was home in England, the monarch was God and the convicts were cast out into a life of toil and sweat among thorns and thistles’.⁴⁵ Her argument is borne out by the frequency with which the trope of convict transportation as a form of expulsion from an English Eden, and a fall into the purgatory, if not outright hell, of New South Wales, is used in historical, critical and cultural writings about early settlement. For example, Ross Gibson has argued that the early settlement ‘was a community aware of its exile’, one which ‘could be seen as a fallen society, banished not just over hills east of Eden, but to the end of the world’; Robert Hughes has said that for Englishmen of the time Australia was ‘another planet – an exiled world’; Sneja Gunew has commented that from its beginning ‘Australia was resolutely postlapsarian’;

⁴³ Graeme Turner, *National Fictions: Literature, Film and the Construction of Australian Narrative* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1986), p. 108.

⁴⁴ Graeme Turner, *Making it National: Nationalism and Australian Popular Culture* (St Leonards, New South Wales: Allen & Unwin, 1994), p. 10.

⁴⁵ Deborah Bird Rose, ‘New World Poetics of Place: Along the Oregon Trail and in the National Museum of Australia’, in *Rethinking Settler Colonialism: History and Memory in Australia, Canada, Aotearoa New Zealand and South Africa*, ed. by Annie E. Coombes (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), pp. 228-44 (p. 241).

and more recently Ann Curthoys has pointed out that in Australian foundational mythology we see both ‘the story of the Fall and expulsion from Eden, and the story of the exodus from Egypt for the promised land’.⁴⁶ This representation of transportation as a form of Biblical exile also figures in convict writings such as *Moreton Bay*, also known as *The Convict’s Lament*, written about 1840, where the poet, having been ‘banished’ from Ireland, writes of how the prisoners were ‘like the Egyptians or ancient Hebrews, / [...] sorely oppressed’.⁴⁷ For the poet, transportation is easily equated with stories of Old Testament exile though without the hope of return, for the convicts were expected to remain permanently in their new home.

The trauma of expulsion and exile from home was reinforced for the convicts by the discovery that their new country was a land which ‘could scarcely have been more alien to all European ideas either of natural beauty or of physical amenity; its unknown plants and animals, its odd reversals of all that British invaders knew and understood of their own country’.⁴⁸ It appeared to be a world turned upside down, full of strange birds and beasts, where crops failed in a climate of extremes and where survival was a challenge. It was, appropriately, a post-Edenic world where ‘nature assumes the aspect of a chaotic and violent enemy against which man must struggle to win back his proper humanity or godlike nature’.⁴⁹

The inhospitable nature of the environment, the strangeness of the vegetation, birds and animals, and the struggle to tame the land, were extensively commented on by the First Fleet writers. Tench said that ‘the species of trees are few, and, [...], the wood

⁴⁶ Ross Gibson, *The Diminishing Paradise: Changing Literary Perceptions of Australia* (Sydney: Sirius, 1984), p. 37; Hughes, p. 2; Sneja Gunew, ‘Denaturalizing Cultural Nationalisms: Multicultural Readings of “Australia”’, in *Nation and Narration*, ed. by Homi K. Bhabha (Abingdon: Routledge, 1990), pp. 99-120 (p. 103); Ann Curthoys, ‘Mythologies’, in *The Australian Legend and Its Discontents*, ed. by Richard Nile (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2000), pp. 11-41 (p. 17).

⁴⁷ Anonymous, ‘Moreton Bay’, in *The Literature of Australia: An Anthology*, ed. by Nicholas Jose (New York: Norton, 2009), pp. 89-91 (p. 90).

⁴⁸ Judith Wright, *Preoccupations in Australian Poetry* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. xii.

⁴⁹ Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), p. 158.

universally of so bad a grain, as almost to preclude the possibility of using it', that the soil was poor and 'ill repaid our toil' (though he believed, rightly, that there might be better land for agriculture elsewhere), and that there were few wild fruits that could be picked and eaten.⁵⁰ He also remarked on the 'difficulty of penetrating the country' because much of it consists of 'nothing but precipices, wilds, and deserts [*sic*']'.⁵¹ White, in his detailed description of the strange wildlife he encountered, wrote of one bird that he called the Anomalous Hornbill because it 'is so very singular in its several characteristics that it can scarcely be said to which of the present known genera to refer it'.⁵² Tench again, while generally praising the climate, commented on its extreme variability, noting that 'the thermometer has been known to alter, at Rose Hill, in the course of nine hours, more than 50°', and that in extreme heat 'all the plants, which had not taken deep root, were withered by the power of the sun'.⁵³ The combination of unproductive soil and climatic extremes made cultivation difficult, leading to 'the want of fresh provisions and vegetables' for the colonists, a want exacerbated by what was seen as 'a country destitute of natural resource'.⁵⁴ The alien and inhospitable nature of the land is a continuing feature both of Australian writing and of writing about Australia. For example, in his 2003 book about the photographic collection of the National Gallery of Australia, Peter Conrad asked 'how could those who were not native feel at home in Australia, since the land itself was their penance?' adding that 'to foreign eyes the earth looked inhospitable, un-nutritious'.⁵⁵ The nature of the land added to the sense that the convicts, and their gaolers, had been expelled from the civilized world.

John Rickard, in one of the many books about the Australian past that were published at the time of the Bicentennial celebrations, argued that it is 'an enduring cultural myth that Europeans found the Australian environment hostile, alien, oppressive, and that they had great difficulty in coming to terms with it aesthetically'.⁵⁶

⁵⁰ Tench, p. 65.

⁵¹ Tench, pp. 65 & 261.

⁵² John White, p. 124.

⁵³ Tench, pp. 264 & 265.

⁵⁴ Tench, pp. 136 & 137.

⁵⁵ Peter Conrad, *At Home in Australia* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2003), p. 41.

⁵⁶ John Rickard, *Australia: A Cultural History* (Harlow: Longman, 1988), p. 43.

More recently, Karskens has suggested that the negative accounts of the Sydney environment were ‘initial responses to a *particular* environment’ which were modified with time and greater understanding.⁵⁷ She points out that, soon after settlement, convict huts ‘were surrounded by practical vegetable patches and fruit trees’, and that far from the country being un-nutritious there is evidence from the First Fleet chronicles that ‘convicts and soldiers spent a great deal of time collecting native foods’, so that ‘early 1800s Sydney was considered wonderfully healthful’.⁵⁸ Furthermore, for all its apparent deficiencies, there was an early appreciation of the beauty of the country. Tench, even while commenting unfavourably on the local environment, noted that ‘a variety of flowering shrubs abound, most of them entirely new to an European, and surpassing in beauty, fragrance, and number, all I ever saw in an uncultivated state’, while Surgeon General White wrote of going on an expedition where the trees were ‘filled with loraquets and paroquets of exquisite beauty’.⁵⁹ However, as Rickard recognized, the myth of the alien and inhospitable country was self-sustaining, ‘an all too convenient landmark for the creative artist or social commentator’.⁶⁰ As a result, despite the recognition of the sublime beauty of the Australian bush, it is the struggle of the former convict to make a home in an alien natural world that remains the enduring settler myth. In part at least this is because the re-creation of the despised convict as the heroic pioneer, conquering and taming the bush, established Australian history as a redemption narrative in which the sins that led to exile are expiated by the fight to establish a new home and a new life.

The land was not only harsh and inhospitable in itself but was also home to indigenous peoples who presented a threat to the settler occupation of the land. As a result, the settlers’ drive to tame and cultivate the land necessitated their removal. The concept of *terra nullius*, that the country was effectively empty and that British possession of it was justified because the native population did not cultivate or use the land, underpinned the settler narrative of their right to the land and provided a

⁵⁷ Karskens, p. 237.

⁵⁸ Karskens, pp. 266, 273 & 274.

⁵⁹ Tench, pp. 64-65; John White, p. 129.

⁶⁰ Rickard, p. 43.

convenient excuse for the dispossession of its previous occupants. However, contrary to the settler narrative of peaceful dispossession, the Aborigines did not disappear quietly. Rather, as convicts and former convicts dispersed, first across New South Wales, then across other areas of the country, frontier battles flared up and died away as the colonists strengthened their hold on the land. Henry Reynolds has traced the disputes to the early days of settlement, writing that ‘before the settlement at Sydney was a year old, Governor Phillip and his officers were complaining about “a state of petty warfare” and that ‘an “open war” started with Hawkesbury River clans as the settlers began to farm the valley in 1795’.⁶¹

The wars were stimulated by what Reynolds characterized as the desire of the first settlers, both emancipists and free settlers, ‘to own the land and everything on it “in the most absolute manner”’.⁶² To achieve this they ‘preferred to drive the blacks away whenever they were seen, both for security and to consummate that burning passion for property’.⁶³ However, to justify their actions, the Aboriginal victims of settler violence had to be recast as aggressors in order that Aboriginal action to defend their lands could be presented as unprovoked violence against innocent settlers. This was achieved by the claim that ‘all Aboriginal property rights disappeared in 1788’ so that Aboriginal resistance to their expulsion from their own country could then be rewritten as aggression, their walking of ancient tribal routes as trespass, and their taking of animals as theft.⁶⁴ Furthermore the Aborigines themselves had to be figured as untamed savages. While the First Fleet writers had allowed them some degree of nobility, later writers placed increasing emphasis on their moral and physical degeneracy, their treachery, and their inherent violence. As a result, Aborigines were ‘portrayed as the enemy’ and ‘the figure of the homicidal native passed into folklore’.⁶⁵ Making these moves allowed the settler claim to the land to be enforced by violence against the threat posed by the Aborigines. However it was important for the settler story of the heroic conquest of the

⁶¹ Henry Reynolds, *Frontier: Aborigines, Settlers and Land* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1987), p. 5.

⁶² Reynolds, p. 190.

⁶³ Reynolds, p. 190.

⁶⁴ Reynolds, p. 180.

⁶⁵ Gibson, *The Diminishing Paradise*, p. 157.

land as a redemption from past oppression that the extent and nature of the early colonial violence against the Aborigines should be denied and disavowed, mythicized as a last resort to remove particularly recalcitrant natives rather than a process whereby ‘the pattern of violence established by the First Fleet was neither gratuitous nor random but systemic to settler-colonization’.⁶⁶ The narrative of peaceful settlement required the suppression, the screening out, of the uglier story of how the land was cleared of its original occupants. I shall discuss this further in the next section in the context of the wider issue of settler willed amnesia about the discomfiting events of the past.

The combination of permanent exile from home, the apparent hostility of the land and the alleged aggression of the Aborigines all contributed to the central settler myth, that of the settler as victim. It was a myth that was accentuated by the presentation of convict life as the brutal oppression of the convicts by the harsh and unjust punishment of the colonial rulers. As discussed earlier, the idea that the experience of the majority of convicts was one of brutal treatment and harsh punishment is an oversimplification. While, as Karskens says, the image of Australia as a ‘gaol colony’ has ‘a basis in truth, of course, in the few places of secondary punishment, especially in the later, more severe, convict period after 1822’, most transported convicts, particularly in the early colonial period, had a very different experience.⁶⁷ They ‘did not live in prisons, [...] wore their own clothes, [...] were not summarily chained and lashed unless they committed more crimes and had been tried in a court of law’.⁶⁸ Moreover, ‘since the colony depended upon their labour, the convicts largely called the tune, insisting on task-work which left them time to themselves to do as they chose’.⁶⁹ In practice, ‘the normal experience of convicts in early Sydney was not the gaol or barracks, but the

⁶⁶ Patrick Wolfe, *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology: The Politics and Poetics of an Ethnographic Event* (London: Cassell, 1999), p. 27.

⁶⁷ Grace Karskens, ‘The Settler Evolution: Space, Place and Memory in Early Colonial Australia’, *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature*, 13(2) (2013), 21 pp. (p. 1) <<http://www.nla.gov.au/openpublish/index.php/jasal/article/view/3103/3717>> [accessed 26 November 2013].

⁶⁸ Karskens, *The Colony*, p. 11.

⁶⁹ Karskens, *The Colony*, p. 11.

house', from which they went to work building the town and cultivating the land.⁷⁰ Rather than enslaved prisoners, they were for the most part workers, servants and householders.

However the image of the brutalized, degraded and victimized convict came to dominate the Australian imagination, not least because it was reinforced by the selective focus on the vicious treatment of convicts in early stories of convict life, epitomized by Marcus Clarke's foundational novel *For the Term of His Natural Life* (1874).⁷¹ As I shall explore in the next chapter, Clarke's focus on the extremities of the convict regime, and his presentation of this as typical of the treatment of convicts, played a central role in creating the image of the convict as the innocent victim of a brutal imperial power which helped to fuel the nationalism of the 1890s. Moreover, as we have seen, it continues to grip the public imagination today despite the many attempts to undermine it.

Importantly, this image of the convict as one expelled from home, confined in a country at the far ends of the earth for life, harshly treated by the British gaolers, and forced to labour in alien surroundings, became central to the enduring, and constantly refreshed, myth of the Anglo-Celtic Australian as victim and its concomitant creation of the myth of heroic failure. It is an image that has been reinforced by all manner of events and individuals, from the Eureka miners to Ned Kelly, from the ANZACs at Gallipoli to the Australian cricketers of the 1932-33 Bodyline Test series against England, which have enabled settler Australians to present themselves as 'courageous battlers in the face of enormous odds'.⁷² What Curthoys calls 'the victimological narrative, protean, durable and endlessly resurrected' retains its power today.⁷³ In particular it conditions the ways in which Anglo-Celtic Australians respond to such events as Aboriginal land claims and the arrival of Asian migrants (including, despite

⁷⁰ Karskens, *The Colony*, p. 312.

⁷¹ Marcus Clarke, *For the Term of His Natural Life*, intro. by Laurie Hergenhan (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1966).

⁷² Curthoys, p. 29.

⁷³ Curthoys, p. 19.

their own narrative of harsh treatment by an oppressive power, those who are themselves victims of similarly brutal regimes).

The response to the decisions of the Australian High Court, in the 1992 Mabo and 1996 Wik judgments, that Aboriginal land rights had not been extinguished in 1788, showed the continuing strength of the convict narratives of expulsion, oppression and victimization. In the aftermath of these cases Aborigines were again represented as the oppressors of innocent settlers, trying to take their land. Many of those most resistant to these judgments, notably the pastoralists who ‘constitute some of Australia’s wealthiest people and corporations’, recreated themselves as modern versions of the early convict farmers, ‘casting themselves not only as embattled, but utterly impotent’ in the face of Aboriginal rights.⁷⁴ The reimagining of pastoralists as early convict farmers fighting to protect their land against marauding Aborigines was accompanied by the reanimation of the foundational expulsion myth, the ‘fear of being cast out, exiled, expelled, made homeless’, which accompanied the – false – suggestion that ‘much property title had been thrown into question, encompassing even the backyards of the average citizen’.⁷⁵ This fear of renewed dispossession was summed up by Pauline Hanson, newly elected Independent, later One Nation, member for Oxley, Queensland, in her impassioned maiden speech in the House of Representatives in September 1996, when she said ‘I am fed up with being told “This is our land.” Well, where the hell do I go? I was born here, and so were my parents and children’.⁷⁶ The contemporary white settler discourse of expulsion and impotence used to reject Aboriginal land rights atavistically reproduces the foundational Anglo-Celtic narrative of convict exile and victimhood that stemmed from the earliest days of Australian colonization.

⁷⁴ Ken Gelder and Jane M. Jacobs, *Uncanny Australia: Sacredness and Identity in a Postcolonial Nation* (Carlton, Victoria: Melbourne University Press, 1998), p. 137.

⁷⁵ Curthoys, p. 35; Andrew Markus, ‘Between Mabo and a Hard Place: Race and the Contradictions of Conservatism’, in *In the Age of Mabo: History, Aborigines and Australia*, ed. by Bain Attwood (St Leonards, New South Wales: Allen & Unwin, 1996), pp. 88-99 (p. 89).

⁷⁶ Pauline Hanson, ‘Maiden Speech in the House of Representatives’, 10 September 1996 <<http://australianpolitics.com/1996/09/10/pauline-hanson-maiden-speech.html>> [accessed 7 November 2013].

The figure of the convict is also foundational to the Anglo-Celtic cultural identity that Miriam Dixson sees as the Australian ‘core culture’, and which she presents as being under threat from non-white, and particularly Asian, migrants.⁷⁷ The homogeneity of the early convict population contributed to the imagining of Australia as a white, Anglo-Celtic, nation. John La Nauze, in his biography of politician Alfred Deakin (1856-1919), sets out the arguments he used to justify what became the White Australia policy, quoting Deakin’s belief that ‘the unity of Australia is nothing, if that does not imply a united race [...] one inspired by ideas, and an aspiration towards the same ideals, of a people possessing the same general cast of character, tone of thought’, in short a common culture.⁷⁸ The fear was that without restricting immigration to white, and preferably Anglo-Celtic, people the country would find itself like the United States, with a large group of the population with different attitudes, perceptions and views from the majority.

As in the years around Federation in 1901, ethnic homogeneity is now used to promote the role of the core culture in ‘imparting its steady sameness and cohesion to institutional patterns and broad values’ which would otherwise fracture under the pressures of multiculturalism and globalization, whose flows of people and cultures threaten traditional Australian values.⁷⁹ Dixson argues that ‘popular culture figures the old identity, our Britishness reshaped, as authentic, desirable and alive’, despite the attacks made on it by the protagonists of multiculturalism.⁸⁰ Her desired model of contemporary Australian identity as based around ‘common ancestry myths, historical memories, shared culture, and with some link with historic territory’ is one which is at heart exclusively white and Anglo-Celtic, and is rooted in the convict past which she sees as ‘a foundational cultural presence’.⁸¹ While Dixson recognizes the brutality and racism associated with the convict settlers, these elements of their legacy are redeemed

⁷⁷ See her book *The Imaginary Australian: Anglo-Celts and Identity – 1788 to the Present* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 1999).

⁷⁸ J. A. La Nauze, *Alfred Deakin: A Biography*, 2 vols (Carlton, Victoria: Melbourne University Press, 1965), I, 279-80.

⁷⁹ Dixson, p. 6.

⁸⁰ Dixson, p. 36.

⁸¹ Dixson, pp. 56 & 118.

by their role in establishing the ‘old-identity Australian characteristics and values shaped during our history [that] continue to find a crucial anchorage in their Anglo-Celtic historical bearers’.⁸² In reinvigorating the Anglo-Celtic narrative of the past, Dixon seeks to deny the patterns of more recent Australian history in which ‘since the Second World War, and particularly since the 1970s, the British presence in Australia has declined, politically, economically and culturally. America and Asia have progressively taken over the cultural role once the exclusive role of the British’.⁸³ The tensions between the British past and the Asian future of Australia underlie many of the current national anxieties about immigration and its effect on the country’s sense of identity which I shall discuss shortly.

Dixon is not alone in celebrating the virtues of the white Anglo-Celtic culture brought by the convicts and their masters, or in seeing its continuation as critical to Australian social cohesion. Pauline Hanson, in the speech quoted earlier, prefigured Dixon’s arguments when she said that ‘a truly multicultural country can never be strong or united’, and that ‘abolishing the policy of multiculturalism will [...] allow those from ethnic backgrounds to join mainstream [for which read white Anglo-Celtic] Australia, paving the way to a strong, united country’.⁸⁴ Former Prime Minister John Howard ‘on more than one occasion explicitly noted [...] that Australian democracy was the organic product of a British inheritance’, while also criticizing multiculturalism as ‘an “aimless, divisive” policy’.⁸⁵ And David Malouf opened his 1998 Boyer Lectures by stressing that ‘what arrived here with those eleven ships [of the First Fleet] was the European and specifically *English* culture of the late Enlightenment in all its richness

⁸² Dixon, p. 29.

⁸³ Richard Cashman, ‘Australia’, in *The Imperial Game: Cricket, Culture and Society*, ed. by Brian Stoddart and Keith A. P. Sandiford (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), pp. 34-54 (p. 51).

⁸⁴ Hanson, ‘Maiden Speech’.

⁸⁵ Tim Soutphommasane, *The Virtuous Citizen: Patriotism in a Multicultural Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 59; Macintyre, p. 277.

and contradiction’, and went on to associate the positive aspects of Australian culture with that inheritance.⁸⁶

The contemporary pressure for Australia to abandon, or at least significantly rewrite, its policy of multiculturalism responds to the continuing construction of Anglo-Celtic Australia as a vulnerable country, one that needs to be defended against both physical and psychic threats from outside. Richard White has drawn attention to the 1890s nationalist ‘obsession with happy youth, health and wholesomeness’ and its hostility to ‘the decadence of Europe’, expressed in both its morals and its art.⁸⁷ Stuart Macintyre has also argued that ‘the Australian nation was shaped by the fear of invasion and concern for the purity of the race’.⁸⁸ These fears, which helped to drive the White Australia policy established at the time of Federation, continue to surface in the Australian discourse about migration. The 1980s debates over Asian immigration, John Howard’s emphasis on the importance of protecting the integrity of the country’s borders, and current debates around refugees and asylum-seekers, all bear witness to the continuing potency of concerns about the potential for non-white migrants to overrun and contaminate the traditional settler population. As Tim Soutphommasane has argued:

the issue of asylum-seekers became a lightning rod for Australian political debate because it raised questions about whether Australians still understood themselves in terms of a ‘Fortress Australia’ mentality, in which a White Australia had to be protected from threatening (non-White) outsiders.⁸⁹

Despite the concerns of many Australians, the adherents of Fortress Australia seem currently to have the upper hand, particularly since the election of Prime Minister Tony Abbott’s government in 2013. This administration, with its almost obsessive commitment to policing the country’s borders and turning back boats in order to prevent the arrival of refugees and potentially illegal migrants, has reprised the nationalist

⁸⁶ David Malouf, *A Spirit of Play: The Making of Australian Consciousness* (Sydney: Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 1998), p. 20.

⁸⁷ Richard White, p. 116.

⁸⁸ Macintyre, p. 148.

⁸⁹ Soutphommasane, p. 97.

rhetoric of the 1890s about the threat to the country from an Asian invasion to create a new narrative of the danger to the nation from small boats landing asylum-seekers somewhere on the country's unprotected shores, a particularly ironic narrative given that most settler Australians are descended from people who arrived in the country by boat.

The continuing strength of the Anglo-Celtic tradition, and the image of the early convict that underpins it, remains evident in contemporary politics more generally. Commenting on the results of the 2013 Australian general election, where the Liberal government was elected after a campaign that appealed to traditional Anglo-Celtic settler values, stressed border security and disparaged multiculturalism, expatriate Australian academic Ross McKibbin noted the weakness of the Labor party in Western Australia and Queensland, states which are 'disproportionately Anglo-Celtic', and added that 'the higher the non-Anglo vote, the higher the Labor vote'.⁹⁰ In this thesis I will argue that recent novels drawing on the convict past have helped to reinforce, rather than challenge, the continuing grip of Anglo-Celticism and the British inheritance on Australia.

Finally, the figure of the convict also lies at the heart of the construction of Australia as an essentially masculine society, an 'imagined fraternal community', one in which 'women's work in both reproductive and productive realms has had to be silenced in historical constructions of the nation'.⁹¹ In *The Colony*, Karskens retails 'the legend of the "foundational orgy", said to have occurred during a furious Sydney storm, after the convict women first disembarked on 6 February [1788]'.⁹² While arguing that there is no evidence for such an occurrence, she points out that the story 'is about rape, and it is told as rough comedy about loose whores and randy drunken men in a way that validates certain types of male behaviour as "normal", funny even' and that such

⁹⁰ Ross McKibbin, 'Abbott's Victory', *London Review of Books* blog, 9 September 2013 <<http://www.lrb.co.uk/blog/2013/09/09/ross-mckibbin/abbotts-victory>> [accessed 26 September 2013].

⁹¹ Gail Reekie, 'Contesting Australia: Feminism and Histories of the Nation', in *Images of Australia: An Introductory Reader in Australian Studies*, ed. by Gillian Whitlock and David Carter (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1992), pp. 145-55 (pp. 145 & 146).

⁹² Karskens, *The Colony*, p. 313.

behaviour establishes ‘the *foundations* of sexual and gender relationships in early Australia. Brutal, drunken rapes, sex lacking in any kind of commitment or feeling; this is how it would be’.⁹³ The story of the orgy, however questionable, together with the presentation of female convicts in early writings, have helped to shape the essentially masculine construction of Australian identity.

The First Fleet chroniclers had little positive to say about the female convicts they brought with them. Soon after the settlement was established, Clark commented on the ‘Seen of Whordome [that] is going on there in the womans camp’ while Tench noted, in the summer of 1788, that ‘the female convicts have hitherto lived in a state of total idleness; except a few who are kept at work in making pegs for tiles, and picking up shells for burning into lime’.⁹⁴ Surgeon General White wrote that, on the voyage out, ‘the desire of the women to be with the men was so uncontrollable, that neither shame [...], nor the fear of punishment could deter them from making their way through the bulk heads to the apartments assigned the seamen’.⁹⁵ His placing the blame for sexual misconduct on the transported women is echoed by Clark when he writes that in Sydney ‘three of our Men were Punished about going to see these d..... B..... of convict women they will bring our men into many Such Troubles’.⁹⁶ They were seen not only as dissolute themselves but also as the cause of male dissolution, and a burden on rather than an asset to the colony. As Robson was to put it later, they generally ‘had little to recommend them’ and ‘although not surrendering themselves to abandonment completely, they yet were an indifferent group of settlers’.⁹⁷ More recently, Gibson has drawn attention to the way in which convict women were denigrated, ‘regarded as the sexual merchandise of the men of their class and of their free white masters’, and linked with Aboriginal women as savages and slaves in a ‘representational “web” which ensnares convict women along with their native counterparts’ as the dregs of society.⁹⁸

⁹³ Karskens, *The Colony*, p. 315.

⁹⁴ Clark, p. 97; Tench, p. 71.

⁹⁵ John White, p. 63.

⁹⁶ Clark, p. 100.

⁹⁷ Robson, pp. 145-46.

⁹⁸ Gibson, *The Diminishing Paradise*, p. 192.

The view of the female convicts as ‘disobedient, refractory, untalented, abandoned, vice-ridden creatures’ who performed no useful function in the colony, has been challenged by feminist historians.⁹⁹ Indeed Karskens has argued that ‘Sydney Town was shaped, created by women themselves, by their very presence, their determined, ceaseless activities, the way they re-established old ways and forged new ones’.¹⁰⁰ However, the prevailing historical perception that ‘tended to write off convict women as lewd prostitutes who were a burden to the colony’ and which ‘made invisible all those women who were householders, workers, business- and tradeswomen, mothers and makers of community in early Sydney’ has continued to exercise a powerful influence.¹⁰¹ It was instrumental in the construction of the white Australian national narrative around an iconography showing the nation as effectively a male creation, the work of the pioneer settlers, the gold diggers, the bush-workers and the ANZAC troops. The celebration of the ex-convict bush-worker as the idealized Australian culture-hero fed into an 1890s nationalism which excluded women from its vision of the nation, leaving them trapped firmly in the domestic sphere, with the *Sydney Bulletin* being ‘the most influential exponent of the separatist model of masculinity which lay at the heart of the eulogies to the Bushman’.¹⁰² If the image of the early female convict as depraved whore had by this time been replaced by an image of her daughter as respectable married woman whose role was to act as moral guardian of both the family and the country, it was essentially the replacement of one stereotype by another. Both images

⁹⁹ Deborah Oxley, *Convict Maids: The Forced Migration of Women to Australia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 198. See also Portia Robinson, *The Women of Botany Bay: A Reinterpretation of the Role of Women in the Origins of Australian Society* (Sydney: Macquarie Library, 1988) and Kay Daniels, *Convict Women* (Crows Nest, New South Wales: Allen & Unwin, 1998). More recently Joy Damousi’s book, *Depraved and Disorderly: Female Convicts, Sexuality and Gender in Colonial Australia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), has considered the ways in which issues of transgression and punishment, resistance to power, and understandings of sexuality and motherhood in the convict period have shaped cultural meanings in Australia.

¹⁰⁰ Karskens, *The Colony*, p. 330.

¹⁰¹ Karskens, *The Colony*, p. 321.

¹⁰² Marilyn Lake, ‘The Politics of Respectability: Identifying the Masculinist Context’, in *Debutante Nation: Feminism Contests the 1890s*, ed. by Susan Magarey, Sue Rowley and Susan Sheridan (St Leonards, New South Wales: Allen & Unwin, 1993), pp. 1-15 (p. 3).

excluded ‘female lived experience’ and contributed to the construction of women as marginal figures who had little to contribute to the national narrative.¹⁰³

Anne Summers and Miriam Dixson suggested in the 1970s that the continuing sexist culture of Australia can be traced to its convict origins since ‘social and economic conditions in the first fifty years of colonization of this country gave rise to an indigenous variety of the ideology of sexism’.¹⁰⁴ As a result of this, Summers argued, ‘Australian culture ignores women except in its taken-for-granted assumption that they are all safely enshrined within families as wives and mothers’.¹⁰⁵ More recently, national histories and national celebrations, such as the 1988 Bicentennial, have ‘tried to integrate women into the national community’ but have ‘demonstrated that simple incorporation is not possible’.¹⁰⁶ A more fundamental challenge to the exclusion of women from national histories and national imagery is needed if the role of women in the creation of Australia is to be properly recognized. In the meantime, the continuing strength of the view that women should concern themselves with the private and domestic world and not participate in the public sphere has been seen recently in the frankly misogynistic attacks on Julia Gillard, Australia’s first female Prime Minister, for venturing outside that traditional role.

The figure of the convict, then, lies at the heart of the foundational myths and narratives of settler Australia. As we shall see later, this mythology, and the central Anglo-Celtic narrative of the past, have come under pressure, particularly since the 1988 Bicentennial. However the figure of the oppressed and victimized white male convict overcoming the trauma of exile, conquering the land, suppressing the antagonistic natives and establishing a new society has proved remarkably resilient and continues to play a central role in contemporary political discourse.

¹⁰³ Reekie, p. 145.

¹⁰⁴ Anne Summers, *Damned Whores and God’s Police: The Colonization of Women in Australia* (Ringwood, Victoria: Penguin, 1975), p. 21. See also Miriam Dixson, *The Real Matilda: Woman and Identity in Australia – 1788 to the Present*, 4th edn (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 1996).

¹⁰⁵ Summers, p. 145.

¹⁰⁶ Susan Magarey, Sue Rowley and Susan Sheridan, ‘Introduction’, in *Debutante Nation*, ed. by Magarey, Rowley and Sheridan, pp. xiv-xxiv (p. xv).

Convicts and Settler Attitudes

The constructed figure of the convict is, of course, not only the carrier of Australian foundational myths but also the progenitor of a range of contemporary settler attitudes, though the connections are often elusive. The convict past is, said Hughes in 1987, ‘a shadowy behavioural catch-all today’, with many, often contradictory, current Australian attitudes being attributed to it, so that it can be argued that it either ‘made Australians cynical about Authority; or else it made them conformists’.¹⁰⁷ However, while few would agree with Russel Ward’s wholesale attribution of the stereotypical Australian character to the convict and bush-worker heritage, an issue I explore more fully below, there have been continuing attempts to establish a connection between convict behaviour and values and those of contemporary Australians. For instance Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra argued in 1991 that, while ‘it might seem fanciful to suggest that contemporary Australia is in some respects only a more complex and extensive disciplinary machine than Botany Bay was in 1800’, nevertheless ‘mechanisms for constructing deviance and maintaining surveillance still exist, in direct line of descent but more efficient and better resourced’.¹⁰⁸ They went on to attribute ‘the characteristic Australian double-think towards authority’ at least partly to the legacy of the convict era.¹⁰⁹ Peter Carey has argued that Australia was ‘really shaped by the convict experience’ for good and bad.¹¹⁰ In particular he suggested, in a 2001 look at Sydney life, that the Australian obsequiousness to the rich and powerful, and their tolerance of corruption, represents a continuation of the early colonial period in which ‘[Captain John] Macarthur was like an early version of Rupert Murdoch or Kerry Packer. It was he who wielded power over those ostensibly in charge’.¹¹¹ More recently Gideon Haigh has linked the shamelessness of new Australian nationalism, ‘shallow, thick-skinned, sure of

¹⁰⁷ Hughes, p. 596.

¹⁰⁸ Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra, *Dark Side of the Dream: Australian Literature and the Postcolonial Mind* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1991), p. 120.

¹⁰⁹ Hodge and Mishra, p. 137.

¹¹⁰ Peter Carey, ‘Author Interview with Powells.com’, 18 June 2009

<<https://www.powells.com/author/carey.html>> [accessed 29 June 2011].

¹¹¹ Peter Carey, *30 Days in Sydney: A Wildly Distorted Account* (London: Bloomsbury, 2001), p. 114.

itself, aloof from the world's problems, impervious to the sufferings of others – then retracting in angry confusion at the hint of questioning, raging petulantly when crossed, impassioned and empurpled about “their” country’ to ‘the origins of white settlement’.¹¹² Despite the attempts of Hirst and others, discussed earlier, to argue that the convict settlement of Australia did not lead to the growth of an abnormal society, the view that dysfunctional contemporary attitudes and social deformations can be traced to the peculiarity of early settlement remains strong. In that context I will look at two particular areas where the convict past can be seen to have shaped contemporary attitudes, first in relation to Australian views of history and the country's past and second in relation to ideas of the Australian national character.

It is a truism that, as Patrick Wolfe puts it, ‘selective amnesia would seem to be particularly congenial to settler-colonial nationalism’.¹¹³ In such societies, as elsewhere, ‘remembering the past is a central mechanism’ in the process of creating the nation, but at the same time ‘forgetting is one of the most powerful forces that shape national remembering’.¹¹⁴ However, Australians’ attempts to forget aspects of their past is both deeply-rooted and persistent. As discussed earlier, Australians were keen to put behind them the trauma of expulsion and exile which shadowed their early history, and as a result their gaze was from the first fixed on the future rather than the past, on building a new society rather than mourning a lost one. History was seen in terms of progress and triumph, in which those who opened up the country and developed the land were memorialized for their role in delivering the Australian dream. Above all history was presented as a story of progress in which conflict and hostility were downplayed, forgotten or ignored. In particular what was forgotten was anything that challenged the

¹¹² Gideon Haigh, ‘In Matters of Prejudice’, in *Tolerance, Prejudice, Fear: Sydney PEN Voices; The 3 Writers Project*, by Christos Tsiolkas, Gideon Haigh and Alexis Wright (Crows Nest, New South Wales: Allen & Unwin, 2008), pp. 57-128 (pp. 124-25).

¹¹³ Patrick Wolfe, ‘Islam, Europe and Indian Nationalism: Towards a Postcolonial Transnationalism’, in *Connected Worlds: History in Transnational Perspective*, ed. by Ann Curthoys and Marilyn Lake (Canberra: ANU E-Press, 2005), pp. 233-65 (p. 235).

¹¹⁴ Paula Hamilton, ‘The Knife Edge: Debates about Memory and History’, in *Memory and History in Twentieth-Century Australia*, ed. by Kate Darian-Smith and Paula Hamilton (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 9-32 (p. 23).

settler mythology of the creation of a peaceful, orderly, productive and democratic nation from a savage and hostile wilderness.

As part of this process of forgetting there was a deliberate attempt to ‘play down or to suppress the convict past as shameful, through censorship, such as its removal from histories and the school syllabus, and through the destruction of records’.¹¹⁵ However erasing the convict past was only the first act in what Peter Pierce called, in 1987, ‘the wider neglect or suppression of history in this country’, albeit a critical first act in that it established the pattern for later historical suppressions.¹¹⁶ The attempt to forget the country’s origins made it easier to try to erase other inconvenient aspects of the Australian past from the historical record. This applied most obviously in relation to settler-Aboriginal relations. More recently, Curthoys has pointed out that while nineteenth-century histories ‘varied widely in their attitudes to Aboriginal people and cultures’, at the same time ‘they usually did exhibit an awareness of a history of frontier conflict, and worried over its moral implications’.¹¹⁷ By contrast ‘in the twentieth century, Aboriginal existence almost disappeared from the historical archive’ and ‘Australian history began with the European early visitors and then the establishment of a British settlement at Sydney Cove’.¹¹⁸ Nor was it only in historical studies that the Aborigines seemed to disappear. In 1991 Hodge and Mishra claimed, sweepingly, that ‘until recently, Aboriginal literature was treated as not even “literature”, much less part of Australian literature, and Aborigines appeared only on the margins of works in the mainstream of White literature’.¹¹⁹ And while early colonial artists represented Aborigines in their works, by the end of the nineteenth century they had all but vanished from the artistic view. Ron Radford, in the catalogue to the major exhibition of Australian art held in London in 2013, says of H. J. Johnstone’s 1880 painting *Evening Shadows, Backwater of the Murray, South Australia* that it was ‘a valedictory homage to

¹¹⁵ Laurie Hergenhan, *Unnatural Lives: Studies in Australian Convict Fiction*, new edn (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1993), p. 3.

¹¹⁶ Peter Pierce, ‘Sydney: The First Gulag’, *Sydney Morning Herald Saturday Review*, 7 February 1987, p. 45.

¹¹⁷ Curthoys, p. 29.

¹¹⁸ Curthoys, p. 31.

¹¹⁹ Hodge and Mishra, p. 27.

the Aboriginal people – the last major painting in the nineteenth century on that melancholy theme’, for the nationalist artists of the Heidelberg School were centrally concerned with images of the settler and the land free of any indigenous presence.¹²⁰

The (unsuccessful) attempt to suppress the convict stain was repeated in the more effective attempt to suppress the extent and brutality both of frontier violence in the early colonial period and of the more recent policy of removing Aboriginal children from their families which is set out so eloquently in the *Bringing Them Home* report of 1997.¹²¹ The refusal to look at the Aboriginal past, and the belated asking ‘why weren’t we told?’ about the forced removal of children, betray a lack of historical curiosity that is founded in a desire to see the past as an uncontentious and uncontested narrative of national progress. In practice, as can be seen from the History Wars, the bitter public and political arguments about both the interpretation of Australian history and the nature of Australian national identity that became a dominant feature of Australian historical and political discourse in the 1990s, Australian history is far from uncontested.¹²² A key aspect of that conflicted past revolves around the way in which the early colonial encounter is seen, and it was the re-emergence of the repressed Aboriginal history, and with it the requirement to re-evaluate convict and settler history, that disrupted the traditional narrative of Australian history, an issue I will discuss more fully in Chapter 3.

It was, suggests Curthoys, ‘from around the middle 1980s, [that] Aboriginal accounts of the colonial past were increasingly heard by non-Aboriginal audiences’.¹²³ However the 1988 Bicentennial commemoration of the arrival of the first convicts provided a stage on which history could be replayed, and the intrusion of Aboriginal history into what was largely seen as a white celebration meant that it ‘was in many ways successfully converted from a celebration to a renaming and reconceptualisation of

¹²⁰ Ron Radford, ‘Land and Landscape: The Colonial Encounter 1800-80’, in *Australia* (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2013), pp. 90-101 (p. 101).

¹²¹ Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, *Bringing Them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families* (Sydney: Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997).

¹²² For a full account see Stuart Macintyre and Anna Clark, *The History Wars*, new edn (Carlton, Victoria: Melbourne University Press, 2004).

¹²³ Curthoys, p. 34.

white settlement itself'.¹²⁴ While the legacy of that reconceptualization can be questioned, the extent of Aboriginal protest at the celebration of what they termed Invasion Day undoubtedly marked a significant change in public perceptions of early colonization. Rather than being perceived as an arcane argument between scholars, the issues of how the land had been taken by white settlers, initially convicts and emancipists, and the impact of that taking on the indigenous peoples, became a subject for wider public debate which polarized commentators, readers and viewers. In effect the frontier wars fought in the nineteenth century were reprised at the end of the twentieth century, but the battleground was history and the weapons polemic and vitriol, because the recovery of Aboriginal history necessarily also required the reappraisal of convict and emancipist history. That history had told a story in which 'the Aboriginal people simply "disappeared", faded away, died out, at the hands of the mysterious forces of colonisation, not the agency of real people'.¹²⁵ It now had to be replaced by one that recognized and condemned the active participation of early colonists in the slaughter of Aborigines. This demanded an often painful reassessment of the role of convict settlers, and was fiercely resisted by many of their descendants who resented attempts to rewrite and re-right Australian history.

Just as the repressed convict past had been opened up and included in national history, so the repressed Aboriginal past cried out to be accepted as an element in a new, more inclusive, more multicultural, Australian narrative which gave that history its proper and distinct status. But while it had been relatively easy for white Australians to incorporate the convicts in the national story, because they could easily take on the role of Anglo-Celtic founders of the nation, it was harder to find a place for an Aboriginal history. In many ways the Aborigines are recreating the role of the convicts in modern society, oppressed and abused by authority, disproportionately punished (in 2014, while Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders represented some 2% of the Australian population they accounted for 27% of the prison population), and subject to acts of

¹²⁴ Curthoys, p. 35.

¹²⁵ Curthoys, p. 33.

brutal violence.¹²⁶ However, acknowledging the past and present discrimination against them would directly challenge the heroic role attributed to the early convicts and emancipists and their successors, which in part depended on the story of the peaceful removal of the Aborigines. It would also recognize that Australian history was not the unitary story of settler triumph the national narrative made it out to be, an issue to which I shall return later. Finally it would require an acknowledgement of the plural nature of Australian society, something to which, as we shall see, many white settler Australians remain hostile.

To counteract the fear of a reconstruction of the past, strenuous efforts have been made to reinstate the approved Australian history in which the convict settlers and their successors resume their rightful places as maligned heroes and the violence against Aborigines is portrayed as occasional and necessary if the land was to be effectively settled. In particular, Keith Windschuttle's tellingly named book *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History* explicitly seeks to turn the clock back by challenging:

the major claims of the prevailing consensus that 'violence was ever present along the ragged line of early interaction', that 'invasion and conquest prepared the way for settlement' and that the Aborigines put up a brave but futile resistance through a century-long campaign of guerrilla warfare.¹²⁷

Windschuttle complains about historians 'cook[ing] up something dramatic from the most meagre ingredients' in order to enliven an Australian history that is:

so uneventful. There were no revolutions, civil wars or struggles for independence. The campaigns for reforms from which Australian democracy most benefited were all made in England. The great issues that at several times

¹²⁶ Australian Bureau of Statistics – Release 4517.0 - Prisoners in Australia, 2014
<<http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/4517.0>> [accessed 9 January 2015].

¹²⁷ Keith Windschuttle, *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History Volume 1: Van Diemen's Land 1803-1847*, repr. with corrections and revisions (Sydney: Macleay Press, 2005), p. 3.

over the last two centuries shook Europe and America to their foundations were all resolved here without much fuss.¹²⁸

He seeks – as politically as those he maligns – to put the historical genie back in the bottle and to reinstate the suppression of history which has been such a notable feature of Australian life. In this re-suppression of the past the convict settler is absolved from any responsibility for the process of Aboriginal slaughter in the cause of possessing the land.

More fundamentally, the emphasis on what Lorenzo Veracini calls the ‘historylessness’ of Australian history, the idea that it was devoid of ‘conflict, class struggle, sectarian divisions, Indigenous survival, ethnic strife, etc.’ can only be achieved by a willed refusal to look squarely at the nation’s past.¹²⁹ Greg Dening has said that ‘histories – all the ways in which we transform lived experience into narratives – are metaphors of the past and metonymies of the present’, that they are ‘as much about us as about something else’.¹³⁰ Australian settler narratives, with their suppressions, erasures and repressions of the past, demonstrate this, concerned as they are as much to justify possession of the land as to present an historical account of how and why it was taken, to defend the actions of ancestral generations rather than to look carefully at what occurred. And I would suggest that their reluctance to face the past stems from another area where the convict legacy remains potent, the much-debated issue of the Australian national character and particularly the concept of mateship.

Richard White has commented that ‘most new nations go through the formality of inventing a national identity, but Australia has long supported a whole industry of image-makers to tell us what we are’, to ‘get Australia down on paper and to catch its essence’.¹³¹ Central to this work has been the attempt to pin down the Australian

¹²⁸ Windschuttle, p. 412.

¹²⁹ Lorenzo Veracini, ‘Historylessness: Australia as a Settler Colonial Collective’, *Postcolonial Studies*, 10 (2007), 271-85 (p. 282).

¹³⁰ Greg Dening, *Performances* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 34.

¹³¹ Richard White, p. viii. For a more recent discussion of this issue see Catriona Elder, *Being Australian: Narratives of National Identity* (Crows Nest, New South Wales: Allen & Unwin, 2007).

national character, the ‘national type’ with its own ‘moral, social and psychological identity’.¹³² Perhaps the fullest attempt to describe that character can be found in Russel Ward’s ambiguously titled *The Australian Legend*, in which he sought ‘to trace and explain the development of this national *mystique*’ that is the Australian character.¹³³

Ward argued that national character is ‘a people’s idea of itself’ and that it ‘springs largely from a people’s past experiences’: it is something that ‘modifies current events by colouring men’s ideas of how they ought “typically” to behave’.¹³⁴ He set out the attributes of the mythical ‘typical Australian’ as practicality, a rough and ready approach to life, a willingness to improvise and have a go at things but not to seek perfection, a sceptical approach to culture, religion and intellectual pursuits, a strongly independent view that is hostile to authority, and a basic egalitarianism, a belief that Jack is as good as his master, accompanied by a habit of taciturnity, a view that doing is better than talking.¹³⁵ Above all, perhaps, Ward imbued him (and for Ward the national type is very firmly male) with a commitment to ‘stick to his mates through thick and thin, even if he thinks they may be in the wrong’, the essence of that iconic white male Australian concept of mateship.¹³⁶ For Ward, these qualities of Australianness, which he attributed particularly to bush-workers, stemmed from the country’s convict origins, for the conditions of convict life were such that convicts ‘brought with them to the bush the same, or very similar, attitudes’.¹³⁷ A few years later, in 1964, Donald Horne, in *The Lucky Country*, saw the Australian character in similar terms, but also stressed ‘the pressures to conformity’ in Australian life, with its distrust of, and distaste for, the unorthodox and the novel, another trait that can be traced back to convict origins, where, as we shall see, to conform was to survive.¹³⁸

¹³² Richard White, p. 64.

¹³³ Ward, p. 1.

¹³⁴ Ward, p. 1.

¹³⁵ Ward, pp. 1 & 2.

¹³⁶ Ward, p. 2.

¹³⁷ Ward, p. 2.

¹³⁸ Donald Horne, *The Lucky Country*, 6th edn (Camberwell, Victoria: Penguin, 2008), p. 23.

Of course, this construction of the Australian character, and its relationship to the convict past, has not gone uncontested. Humphrey McQueen argued in 1970 that Ward's attribution of egalitarianism to the convict experience suggested that he 'knows little about the convicts and that he misinterprets the little he does know'.¹³⁹ McQueen saw the convicts and their successors as individualists concerned with their own material well-being, seeking 'opportunities for economic and political advance within the framework of the existing society' rather than looking to change it.¹⁴⁰ In 1987, Hughes argued against idealizing 'the roots of Australian egalitarianism', suggesting that 'bush comradeship was real, but so was the defensive, static, levelling, two-class hatred that came out of convictry', the antagonism between the convict and the free settler.¹⁴¹ Ward's characterization of the Australian Legend has also been criticized for what it omits as much as for what it includes. Miriam Dixson has pointed out that 'the single most striking feature of our national identity', as retailed not only by Ward but also by those who criticized him, is 'a womanlessness that amounts in some senses to her obliteration'.¹⁴² Nor, of course, did Ward's construction of the Australian type provide any room either for indigenous Australians or for non-white, and particularly non-Anglo-Celtic, migrants. As Richard Nile put it in 2000, while the narrative of the Australian legend appeared to be 'wide-ranging and generously embracing, as a story whose heroes are the common stock of the nation', it was in truth 'exclusive, narrow and hierarchical'.¹⁴³ By tracing the formation of the Australian national character back to the supposed attitudes of the early convicts and their pioneer descendants, Ward effectively constructed Australianness as white, male and rural.

However, despite the critique of its narrowness, the legend has continued to be a potent concept, proving the validity of Hodge and Mishra's argument in 1991 that 'so

¹³⁹ Humphrey McQueen, *A New Britannia: An Argument Concerning the Social Origins of Australian Radicalism and Nationalism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), p. 126.

¹⁴⁰ McQueen, p. 136.

¹⁴¹ Hughes, p. 596.

¹⁴² Dixson, *The Real Matilda*, p. 58.

¹⁴³ Richard Nile, 'Introduction', in *The Australian Legend and Its Discontents*, ed. by Nile, pp. 1-7 (p. 1).

protean and inexhaustible a form is likely to have many more years of excessive use'.¹⁴⁴ In particular, as Graeme Turner suggested in 1994, its strength could be seen in the period running up to the Bicentenary of white settlement, with the reassertion of 'a newly confident Australian nationalism' which celebrated the familiar figures of 'the cheeky, resourceful larrikin who populates Henry Lawson's stories and who was enshrined as the "national type" in the work of Russel Ward'.¹⁴⁵ Since then there have been continuing attempts to revive at least some aspects of the convict-derived nineteenth-century national character and to represent them as central to the idea of being Australian. In particular the concept of mateship was promulgated as a core Australian value in the proposed preamble to the Australian constitution drafted by then Prime Minister John Howard and poet Les Murray in 1999, which included the phrase 'we value excellence as well as fairness, independence as dearly as mateship'.¹⁴⁶ Coming at the same time as Dixson's work on Australian core culture, the reference to mateship represented a clear attempt to link Australian identity and values to the original convict settlers and to repudiate the claims of multiculturalism, a concept to which, as we have seen, Howard himself was hostile. The proposed reference to mateship generated considerable hostility, not least from women's groups, given the exclusively male connotations of the term, and was dropped from the final version, though Howard expressed regret at having to do so. For Howard, who saw himself as 'the defender of old Australia', it would have been another example of victimization by the advocates of political correctness, a repudiation of all that he saw as best in Australia's past.¹⁴⁷

While Ward saw mateship essentially as a form of male loyalty code, more recently Linzi Murrie has seen it more broadly, as a form of male homosociality which operates to define and enforce Australian masculine values and in doing so 'to control

¹⁴⁴ Hodge and Mishra, p. 177.

¹⁴⁵ Turner, *Making it National*, pp. 4 & 5.

¹⁴⁶ Mark McKenna, 'First Words: A Brief History of Public Debate on a New Preamble to the Australian Constitution 1991-99', *Australian Parliamentary Library Research Paper 16 1999-2000*

<http://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/rp/rp9900/2000RP16> [accessed 19 May 2013].

¹⁴⁷ Macintyre and Clark, p. 122.

gendered power relations'.¹⁴⁸ Both Ward and Murrie trace its formative period to the 1800s. However while Murrie, following Dennis Altman, finds the concept of mateship in 'a bush working relationship in an isolated and predominantly homosocial environment', Ward, as we have seen, argues that its origins lie in the world of the convict settlements.¹⁴⁹ The concept of convict mateship has its shortcomings. For instance, Tom Inglis Moore has suggested that it 'failed too often to fulfil the basic element of loyalty' and attributed it primarily to 'self-interest, fear and intimidation' rather than more fundamental solidarity.¹⁵⁰ Similarly Laurie Hergenhan has questioned the way in which Price Warung's convict stories have been used to argue for the strength of convict mateship, suggesting instead that in these stories 'betrayal among convicts is a major motif'.¹⁵¹ However, Hergenhan also recognizes that Warung laments 'the lack or perversion of solidarity' among the convicts, seeing it as something that has been 'crushed out of them by the System'.¹⁵² In 1987 Hughes argued that 'there is no doubt about the ties of mutual recognition, sometimes amounting to a non-ideological sort of class loyalty, that could bind convicts together'.¹⁵³ I would suggest that the idea of mateship is founded in the early convict period and that it stemmed from the homosocial nature of much convict experience. Many of the convicts worked in male groups or gangs, where masculine codes could be maintained and transmitted. Writing about the First Fleet convicts, Judge-Advocate David Collins noted that there was considerable collusion between gang members and their overseers, few of whom 'chose to exert the authority that was requisite to keep the gangs at their labour'.¹⁵⁴ Furthermore men joined together for leisure pursuits across the lines separating convicts and gaolers in an early display of the apparently egalitarian nature both of mateship and of the

¹⁴⁸ Linzi Murrie, 'Australian Legend and Australian Men', in *The Australian Legend and Its Discontents*, ed. by Nile, pp. 81-94 (p. 92).

¹⁴⁹ Murrie, p. 89. See also Dennis Altman, 'The Myth of Mateship', *Meanjin*, 46 (1987), pp. 163-72, particularly pp. 165-66.

¹⁵⁰ T. Inglis Moore, *Social Patterns in Australian Literature* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1971), p. 208 and 'The Meanings of Mateship', *Meanjin*, 24 (1965), 45-54 (p. 48).

¹⁵¹ Laurie Hergenhan, 'Convict Legends, Australian Legends: Price Warung and the Palmers', *Australian Literary Studies*, 9 (1979-80), 337-45 (p. 342).

¹⁵² Hergenhan, 'Convict Legends', p. 343.

¹⁵³ Hughes, p. 353.

¹⁵⁴ Collins, I, 7.

national character more generally. Tench writes that ‘a serjeant of marines, with three convicts, [...] went out on a shooting party’, clearly a common activity as he goes on to note that ‘it is customary on these parties to sleep until near sunset, and watch for the game during the night, and in the early part of the morning’.¹⁵⁵ As the colony dispersed and small groups of male convicts were increasingly employed on farms and estates, these homosocial bonds were reinforced. However it seems clear that the bush working relationships which are often seen to epitomize mateship, particularly in the late nineteenth century, were built on the bonds forged among convicts.

Altman, writing just before the Bicentenary, noted that while ‘Australia is not the only country where bonds between men were romanticised into the basis for social solidarity and political action’, it was unique in the way that mateship had been mythologized, and had ‘provided so useful a basis for a nationalist ideology, and one that was to mark the country indelibly for the following century’.¹⁵⁶ A mark of its myth-status is that, like settler victimhood and the Australian Legend, mateship has become a protean concept, one which has been endlessly renewed and reframed over the years, transmuting from convict solidarity and the mateship of bush-workers to embrace soldiers, trade unionists and entrepreneurs. It has become an intrinsic element of Australian identity and has contributed to creating that identity as essentially male and white. As Murrie argues, it both ‘positions women and other (marginalised) men outside the “Australian”, the “national” and the “masculine”’ and ‘authorises masculinity within the group, ensuring that dominant masculine values are reproduced in the male subject’.¹⁵⁷ Mateship, by legitimizing the power of male homosociality, acts as ‘a mechanism of control both attractive to, and appropriate for a diverse range of political interests’ concerned to retain their social and economic dominance.¹⁵⁸ As such, mateship essentially maintains and strengthens the foundational masculinity of early convict Australia, tying the values of that society to contemporary Australia. It also acts as a powerful force for maintaining traditional narratives of settlement, for mateship is not

¹⁵⁵ Tench, p. 205.

¹⁵⁶ Altman, p. 167.

¹⁵⁷ Murrie, pp. 90-91.

¹⁵⁸ Murrie, p. 92.

only concerned with social and economic control but also with controlling the representation of the past against insurgent challenges. To admit alternative readings of the past would be to betray the mates of history and so to transgress that most fundamental convict commitment to one's fellows whether right or wrong.

The convict legacy can, then, be seen to hang heavily over both the ways in which the Australian past is represented, and the ways in which aspects of that past are silenced. The valorization of mateship and the desire to control the depiction of the past can be seen as two sides of the same coin, a coin that is concerned with the construction of an Australian history that is congenial to the white men who currently rule the country. However that legacy is not maintained solely by historical narratives. As this thesis will argue, it has also been created, and carried, by fictional narratives.

The Convicts in Fiction

As I discussed briefly in the Introduction, given the centrality of the convict to Australian notions of identity and nation it is unsurprising that convict life and experiences have figured large in Australian fiction from the mid-nineteenth century on, providing a vehicle for exploring both the Australian national character and the presentation of the Australian past. Hergenhan, in *Unnatural Lives*, his study of convict fiction, noted that 'the comparatively high quality of the fiction about convicts [...] may suggest that the convict theme has offered writers special possibilities'.¹⁵⁹ He suggested that just as historical views of the convicts have changed, so 'in the field of convict fiction, changes in interpretation have similarly reflected the importance of the eye of the beholder and his times'.¹⁶⁰ Elizabeth Webby has argued that early writers such as Marcus Clarke invested their convicts with an heroic innocence sustained under great pressure from brutal treatment, considering whether 'a naturally good man [will]

¹⁵⁹ Hergenhan, *Unnatural Lives*, p. 1.

¹⁶⁰ Hergenhan, *Unnatural Lives*, p. 5.

become corrupted if placed in an overwhelmingly evil and negative environment'.¹⁶¹ However, for much of the twentieth century the convict novel has been used more flexibly. Kerryn Goldsworthy has claimed that 'Australia's convict past is of central importance to the development of its national character', and has been used both to explore 'the complex issue of inherited historical responsibility' and to produce 'moral fable[s] about injustice and the abuse of power'.¹⁶² More broadly, writers have been drawn to use the convict novel as a vehicle for 'speculation about the possibilities and contingencies of the human condition' and for debates over conscience relevant as much to the late twentieth century as to the 1780s.¹⁶³ As a result, Hodge and Mishra have argued that:

there is, then, not a single image of the criminal or the delinquent that defines Australian culture. On the contrary what the culture contains is a rich and complex meaning-resource, one that allows a range of different issues of power and authority to be explored or mystified or both.¹⁶⁴

In short, the convict is a plastic and protean figure capable of carrying a multiplicity of meanings and values for fiction-writers as much as for historians.

However I would suggest that while the way in which convict history has been imagined and used has changed over time, the dominant figure of the convict as victim has remained central to the fictional debate over issues of Australian national identity and history. As I shall show in the next chapter, Clarke's *For the Term of His Natural Life* created, rather than simply represented, the Australian national character as later celebrated by turn of the century nationalists and subsequently valorized as the Australian Legend. In particular, his novel established the convict victim as crucial to

¹⁶¹ Elizabeth Webby, 'Colonial Writers and Readers', in *The Cambridge Companion to Australian Literature*, ed. by Elizabeth Webby (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 50-73 (p. 62).

¹⁶² Kerryn Goldsworthy, 'Fiction from 1900-1970', in *The Cambridge Companion to Australian Literature*, ed. by Webby, pp. 105-33 (p. 112).

¹⁶³ A. W. Baker, *Death is a Good Solution: The Convict Experience in Early Australia* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1984), pp. 144-45.

¹⁶⁴ Hodge and Mishra, p. 140.

Australian writers' perception of national identity. It also established the concept of convictism as, in Graeme Turner's words, 'a rich source of imagery and meaning within Australian culture', providing 'a central paradigm for the depiction of the self in Australian narrative'.¹⁶⁵ Convictism, he suggests, provides 'our most enduring literary and mythic image [...] one of imprisonment, its result death and suicide'.¹⁶⁶ In the same way, Gillian Whitlock, discussing Clarke's novel, has argued that it shows 'a community failing to escape from the prison of the past' in a land where 'the carceral cell has been perceived as a defining characteristic of the national literature', a place of darkness that 'overwhelms all opposition'.¹⁶⁷ Finally, Clarke's novel, itself an historical fiction written after the end of transportation, plays a key role in placing the convicts in relation to Australian history. His story of the struggles of convicts against oppressive authority ensures that convict fiction is not 'simply part of Australian literary history; it is part of the larger historical process itself'.¹⁶⁸ It is, I will suggest, central to the production of the settler narrative of the nation.

Convictism has not only put its imprint on the content of Australian fiction but also on its form. Moore has argued that the realistic turn in Australian fiction can be largely attributed to the convict system, whose nature militated against the depiction of the romantic.¹⁶⁹ The horrors of that system, and the draining effects of the battles with the land, left little or no scope for the Australian novelist to look inward and explore the personal and emotional life, nor to engage with the sublime in nature. Certainly Patrick White's image of the Australian novel as 'the dreary, dun-coloured offspring of journalistic realism' was, while stereotypical, not an unreasonable description of much Australian writing from the 1890s to the 1950s.¹⁷⁰ Indeed, as Graham Huggan has said,

¹⁶⁵ Turner, *National Fictions*, p. 60.

¹⁶⁶ Turner, *National Fictions*, p. 74.

¹⁶⁷ Gillian Whitlock, "'The Carceral Archipelago': Marcus Clarke's *His Natural Life* and John Richardson's *Wacousta*", in *Australian/Canadian Literatures in English: Comparative Perspectives*, ed. by Russell McDougall and Gillian Whitlock (North Ryde, New South Wales: Methuen, 1987), pp. 49-67 (pp. 62, 51 & 61).

¹⁶⁸ Hergenhan, *Unnatural Lives*, pp. 9-10.

¹⁶⁹ Moore, *Social Patterns*, p. 123.

¹⁷⁰ Patrick White, 'The Prodigal Son', in *The Oxford Book of Australian Essays*, ed. by Imre Salusinszky (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 125-28 (p. 127).

realist fiction enjoys an ‘enduring popularity [...] throughout the twentieth century and right up to the present day’, despite the growth of interest in more varied literary forms.¹⁷¹ However, to argue, as Moore did, that convict fictions are essentially realistic works seems to me to misread them. While such fictions, from Clarke onward, are ostensibly grounded in a depiction of the experience of convicts that draws on the historical record, they are far from simply realistic. As Hergenhan has pointed out, ‘convict fiction does not show anything like the degree of broad social detail and interaction of [Joseph Furphy’s] *Such is Life* and [Henry Handel Richardson’s] *Richard Mahony*, more predominantly realist works’, going on to emphasize that convict fictions have to present the system as ‘both real in itself and yet supra-real’.¹⁷² They give the illusion of presenting a realistic picture of the lives both of the convicts and their masters while also drawing attention to the unreality, the abnormality, of the society they portray. In doing so they use the hideous nature of the convict system ‘to call up society at large’, to show the horrors that lurk beneath the surface of the seemingly normal.¹⁷³ The apparent realism of convict fiction simultaneously masks and exposes the unreality of convict society, and the later society which is descended from, and influenced by, it.

Finally, while Hergenhan has argued that convict fictions ‘show most of the possibilities of aesthetic form explored throughout the history of Australian fiction’, I would suggest that in practice they essentially exemplify the melodramatic mood which, as I discussed in the Introduction, is central to Australian literature.¹⁷⁴ Robert Dixon, drawing on the work of Michael Booth, argues that the salient features of melodrama are ‘its concentration on plot at the expense of characterisation, its reliance on sensation, the recurrence of character stereotypes, and the rewarding of virtue and the punishment of

¹⁷¹ Graham Huggan, *Australian Literature: Postcolonialism, Racism, Transnationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 88.

¹⁷² Hergenhan, *Unnatural Lives*, p. 12.

¹⁷³ Hergenhan, *Unnatural Lives*, p. 12.

¹⁷⁴ Hergenhan, *Unnatural Lives*, p. 10.

vice according to a moral scheme of stark simplicity'.¹⁷⁵ For Peter Brooks, melodrama involves 'the indulgence of strong emotionalism; moral polarization and schematization; extreme states of being, situations, actions; overt villainy, persecution of the good, and final reward of virtue; inflated and extravagant expression; dark plottings, suspense, breathless peripety'.¹⁷⁶ Peter Pierce, writing of Thomas Keneally but in terms that can be used more generally, characterizes convict melodrama as a clash between the primal forces of good and evil played out by characters who:

make their ways in a world where moral bearings have been lost, or wilfully abandoned; in which the innocent are preyed upon unreasonably by the malevolent, and yet expect such a fate; and where dichotomies are ruthlessly insisted upon – between Europeans and Aborigines, gaolers and convicts, English and Irish, rich and poor.¹⁷⁷

All these aspects of the melodramatic temper are to be found in Clarke's novel, a fiction that reworks the historical record, drawing on the English conventions of Gothic fictions, adventure stories and sensation novels while displacing them to a specifically Australian setting. Where Clarke led, others followed, and as I will show in later chapters, convict fictions continue to use the melodramatic as a way of exploring the struggle to conquer the land, to overcome indigenous resistance and to expiate the trauma of exile. As such they are complicit in the continued focus on convict history as a tale of extremes and conflicts, violence and brutality.

I have argued in this chapter that the figure of the early convict lies at the heart of the foundational myths that underpin white Australians' sense of identity and nation, particularly the myth of the settler as victim; that the convict legacy is responsible for

¹⁷⁵ Robert Dixon, 'Literature and Melodrama', in *The Oxford Literary History of Australia*, ed. by Bruce Bennett and Jennifer Strauss (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 66-88 (p. 66).

¹⁷⁶ Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess*, repr. with a new Preface (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), pp. 11-12.

¹⁷⁷ Peter Pierce, *Australian Melodramas: Thomas Keneally's Fiction* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1995), p. xi.

the ways in which contemporary settler Australia constructs its history and identity; and that fictional representations of convictism have been central to the creation of those settler attitudes. I shall argue in the next chapter both that Marcus Clarke was instrumental in creating the Anglo-Celtic story of the past and that fiction writers a century after him, while reassessing early colonial history at a time of political turbulence and pressure on traditional concepts of Australian identity, ultimately reinforced, rather than challenging, the well-worn contours of the settler national narrative.

CHAPTER 2

CONTINUITY AND CHANGE: CONVICT FICTION 1870-1980

Foundational Fiction: Marcus Clarke's *For the Term of His Natural Life*

In March 1870, the *Australian Journal* carried the first instalment of a serial about convict life in the 1830s and 1840s. The serial ran for some two years and was then published, in revised and shortened form, first under the title *His Natural Life* in 1874 and subsequently as *For the Term of His Natural Life*.¹ The novel was later acclaimed as 'the best novel produced in nineteenth-century Australia; in fact, the only one with claims to greatness'.² While not the first novel about the convict experience, it was the first both to attract and to retain public interest. And despite having been written by an English migrant to Australia, it has, as I indicated in the previous chapter, come to be regarded as a foundational Australian text, one that is, in Graham Huggan's words, 'foundational in several different ways'.³ As I will suggest, the novel served to create and articulate the key myths and stories that settler Australians used to establish their sense of identity and their story of the past. As such it played a crucial role in the formation of Australian nationalism in the 1880s and 1890s, and also established convictism as a lens through which to view Australian society.

Huggan has argued that *For the Term of His Natural Life* has achieved its classic status above all because 'the novel operates as a foundational victim narrative' in its presentation both of the fate of Rufus Dawes and more broadly of 'the iniquities of the Australian penal system'.⁴ Although the novel is set predominantly in the prison colonies of Van Diemen's Land and Norfolk Island, places of secondary punishment for recidivist offenders, it constructs the experiences of these offenders as typical of the way

¹ Marcus Clarke, *For the Term of His Natural Life*, intro. by Laurie Hergenhan (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1996). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

² Laurie Hergenhan, *Unnatural Lives: Studies in Australian Convict Fiction*, 2nd edn (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1993), p. 47.

³ Graham Huggan, *Australian Literature: Postcolonialism, Racism, Transnationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 52.

⁴ Huggan, p. 52.

in which all convicts were treated. Indeed Clarke, in his Preface to the novel, says, without qualification, that he has sought to ‘set forth the working and results of an English system of transportation carefully considered and carried out under official supervision’ (p. 19). Clarke’s detailed depiction of the harsh treatment of the prisoners gives a narrow and distorted picture of convict life, one that stresses the innocence of the convicts and the callous brutality of their gaolers, and one that, as we saw in the previous chapter, was not the experience of the majority of transported convicts. However, Clarke’s picture of the convict as victim has, as we have seen, strongly influenced settler Australians’ self-imagining to this day.

In particular, Clarke’s presentation of the innocent convict and the brutal gaoler played into the rising tide of Australian nationalism, with its anti-imperial tenor, its desire to distance itself from the country’s convict origins and its emphasis on a positive future free from the shackles of the past. As I argued in the Introduction, at the time of the novel’s publication there was ‘an increasing cultural fetishism for the distinctively Australian’ that was intimately linked both to the developing forms of Australian nationalism and to the desire among at least some to slough off the imperial yoke.⁵ This could be seen clearly a few years later, in 1888, when the Sydney *Bulletin* condemned the idea of celebrating the centenary of British settlement because what was being commemorated was the arrival of the British convicts rather than any specifically Australian event or achievement.⁶ Clarke’s novel, which portrayed the quarrel between the imperialist British and their colonial victims in graphic terms, provided a means of capturing the public imagination for the cause of Australian nationalism, and in doing so helped to create the ‘deep, horizontal comradeship’ that Benedict Anderson saw as essential to the creation of the nation as an imagined community.⁷

⁵ Richard White, *Inventing Australia: Images and Identity 1688-1980* (St Leonards, New South Wales: Allen & Unwin, 1981), p. 73.

⁶ For a fuller discussion of this, see the Introduction to *Celebrating the Nation: A Critical Study of Australia’s Bicentenary*, ed. by Tony Bennett and others (St Leonards, New South Wales: Allen & Unwin, 1992).

⁷ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. edn (London: Verso, 2006), p. 7.

At the same time, Clarke's work is central to the creation of the Australian national type that was later to be celebrated by Russel Ward and others.⁸ Brian Elliott has argued that a central trope of Australian historical fiction is the story of 'the fine young Englishman who battles with the bush and in the end qualifies as an Australian pioneer, but at the cost of all his conscious English inheritance', and who resembles 'a kind of phoenix-figure from whose ashes rises the archetypal Australian character' purged of 'false values, artificial culture, unreal distinctions of rank and class'.⁹ In the central figure of Rufus Dawes, Clarke epitomizes this idea. He creates Dawes as a man who displays what Ward sees as the convict qualities of endurance, solidarity, mateship and laconic anti-authoritarianism that are later to be seen in the pioneer settlers. In doing so he contrasts him with two English 'types', the cowardly and treacherous bully Maurice Frere and the weak and delicate Kirkland, who cannot survive his brutal flogging.

As an historical novel, *For the Term of his Natural Life* provides an account of an Australian past that had long been left behind when Clarke was writing. By depicting events that were safely in the past, Clarke helped to reset the historical clock, to place the convict era in a shadowy and shameful past from which Australia had now freed itself. The legendary brutality of that period had been replaced by the equally mythical stories of pioneering heroism, and Clarke's contemporaries, increasing numbers of whom were free settlers, could pride themselves on their success in civilizing the country. In particular they could reassure themselves that 'the virtues of the convicts, their enterprise and self-reliance, [...] have been passed on to the Australian type, while their faults had been bred out'.¹⁰ The children of the convicts had become the Australian pioneers, settling the country and turning it from a wilderness into productive land.

Furthermore, the settler amnesia about the past, the suppression both of the convict story and of the relations between settler and indigenous Australians, who are

⁸ Russel Ward, *The Australian Legend*, 2nd edn, repr. with new introduction (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2005).

⁹ Brian Elliott, *Marcus Clarke* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958), p. 149.

¹⁰ Richard White, p. 75.

notably absent from Clarke's novel, eliminated from Van Diemen's Land fictionally as much as in reality, is prefigured by Sylvia Vickers's amnesia about her past. In particular she is unable to remember the details of her rescue from Macquarie Harbour until the novel's closing pages. She has created Dawes as a monstrous figure about whom she has 'the strangest, the most horrible dreams', believing him to have 'tried to murder me when a child' (p. 406). It is only 'the shock of recovered memory' (p. 439) as she faces death that brings the suppressed story to light so that 'the agony and shame of the man's long life of misery became at once apparent to her' and 'she understood how her husband had deceived her' (p. 439). It has required similar shocks, such as the publication of the *Bringing Them Home* Report, to force settler Australia to look more clearly at its past and to question the stories it has told itself about the nation's history.¹¹

Clarke's novel is also foundational in two other ways. First, it establishes, in Kay Schaffer's words, that 'the nature of man's relationship to the land is a central concern' for Australian writers.¹² Clarke, like the First Fleet writers, pictures the land as both harshly alien and sublimely beautiful. For the most part he constructs the land as inhospitable and dangerous, monstrous and tortured. When Dawes tries to escape from the prison at Sarah Island he finds it almost impossible to make his way across country for 'dense scrub and savage jungle impeded his path; barren and stony mountain ranges arose before him. He was lost in gullies, entangled in thickets, bewildered in morasses' (p. 127). Similarly when Gabbett and his companions escape from Port Arthur they find themselves in a barren wilderness with little food or water to sustain them, a wasteland where Gabbett kills and eats his colleagues to survive. Clarke here presents the land as a place 'of exile and terror from which there is no escape', a place where survival is all that can be hoped for.¹³ However the novel also establishes the land as a place that is 'fertile, rich and fair', where the 'blue waters of the Derwent' wind through 'a succession of reaches, narrowing to a deep channel cleft between rugged and towering

¹¹ Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, *Bringing Them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families* (Sydney: Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997).

¹² Kay Schaffer, *Women and the Bush: Forces of Desire in the Australian Cultural Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 59.

¹³ Schaffer, p. 60.

cliffs' (p. 95). It is also a place of more sublime beauty, with 'the rugged grandeur of Pirates' Bay' and Tasman's peninsula 'hanging, like a huge double-dropped earring, from the mainland' (p. 94). By presenting the land as simultaneously alien and beautiful, a place of exile and of possible redemption, Clarke establishes one of the fundamental dichotomies that will underpin later Australian fiction.

Second, the novel constructs an Australia that is based on masculine values. *For the Term of His Natural Life* is set in the world of male prisons and explores the qualities thought to be needed for men to survive in extreme circumstances, with little attempt to explore the domestic world. The masculine society that Clarke creates valorizes those qualities which, as discussed earlier, Russel Ward attributed to the 'typical Australian' - practicality, taciturnity, protectiveness to comrades and hostility to authority.¹⁴ In particular Clarke presents early Australia as a homosocial world, with the prison camps at the heart of a process of male bonding where we can see the concept of mateship first developing. From the early days of the convict ship to the ring on Norfolk Island, the novel promotes a concept of male convict solidarity that is accompanied by a willingness to silence those who betray secrets. On the voyage over, Dawes is nearly killed when he accidentally overhears other prisoners discussing the plans for a mutiny – and his betrayal of the plot sparks their revenge by incriminating him as a conspirator. Later, on Norfolk Island, the Parson, North, records that 'the members of this Ring are bound by an oath to support each other, and to avenge the punishment of any of their number', an oath so strongly held that when informants are killed 'not a man out of the ninety in the ward would speak a word' (p. 366). While these may be extreme and arguably perverse examples of mateship, the concept of prisoner solidarity threads through the novel. When Gabbett returns from an attempted escape, Vickers asks where his mates are while Frere inquires about how many mates he had 'as though a "mate" was something a convict was born with - like a mole, for instance' (p. 110). Moreover while prisoner solidarity is flawed and fragile, Frere recognizes its dangers, suggesting that 'if the prisoners were as faithful to each other as we are, we couldn't hold the island a week', and setting himself to break down their mateship so that 'no prisoner should

¹⁴ Ward, pp. 1 & 2.

say a word to his right hand man, but his left hand man should tell me of it. I'd promote the men that peached, and make the beggars their own warders' (p. 244).

The masculine nature of Clarke's Australia is reinforced by the stereotypical presentation of the two central female characters. Sarah Purfoy is described by Laurie Hergenhan, in his introduction to the novel, as a 'dark lady of romance' (p. 11), obsessed by her passion for her husband, the villainous John Rex, a passion not returned. She is depicted as abnormal and unwomanly because she 'possesses masculine force of intellect' (p. 351), which she uses in developing ever more ingenious plans to free Rex and later to track him down when he flees to England. Sylvia Vickers, on the other hand, is the image of virginal purity, intended to play domestic helpmeet to her husband and not expected to have views or opinions of her own. Clarke says of her that 'marriage made her a woman, by developing in her a woman's trust and pride in the man to whom she had voluntarily given herself' (p. 284). However Frere's interest in her diminishes when she takes exception to his monomaniacal views about the prisoners and his refusal to acknowledge the legitimacy of other opinions – he dismisses her concern for Dawes curtly, saying 'your fancies mislead you. Let me hear you no more' (p. 384). In the world of Clarke's novel women are either bad and dangerous or pure and innocent, but in either case they are expected to be subservient to their husbands and not to interfere in their business. As such they anticipate the position of women over the next century in an Australia where men and women were thought to operate in separate, public and domestic, spheres. We shall see similar patterns recurring in later convict fictions, and the continuing strength of the presentation of Australia as a masculine society says much for its early representation by Clarke.

As discussed in the previous chapter, *For the Term of His Natural Life* also established imprisonment and convictism as central to Australian fiction. Not only is the novel set, for the most part, in prison camps, but it is saturated by metaphors of imprisonment. Even those characters who are nominally free find themselves trapped; Sarah by her passion for Rex, Sylvia by Frere's determination to confine her to a domestic role, and Frere himself by his obsession with winning his battles with Dawes

and the other prisoners. Moreover the land itself is seen as imprisoning, creating an impenetrable barrier that keeps the prisoners firmly in their gaol. In Clarke's world, 'the possibilities of amelioration, resolution or alternatives are thus minimal'.¹⁵ It is futile to attempt to escape or to resist what is depicted as a form of total institution, a place where all are watching and spying on one another and that breeds paranoia. Clarke's prison requires the complete subjection of the prisoner. It is a place where punishment is intended to act on 'the heart, the thoughts, the will, the inclinations', and to 'supervise the individual, to neutralize his dangerous state of mind, to alter his criminal tendencies'.¹⁶ The prison is intended to produce conformity and submission to authority and to eliminate individuality and unconventionality.

Clarke's novel also shows how the early convict world helped to create Australia as a land where conformity was valued and individualism was regarded with suspicion and scepticism. Survival in Clarke's prison colonies requires a willingness to suppress the individual in favour of the collective. Those who challenge authority, like Dawes, find themselves punished severely by men like Frere who, when Dawes breaks down and asks to be killed at once, 'rejoiced at this proof of his power', saying "'You've given in; that's all I wanted'" (p. 387). Authority, however arbitrary and unreasonable, cannot be challenged effectively. When North complains about the flogging to death of Kirkland after his attempted suicide, he is rebuffed by Major Vickers, who says 'my position here is to administer the law to the best of my ability, not to question it', and whose stiff bow to North suggests that 'authority, [...], has in its official capacity a natural dislike to those dissatisfied persons who persist in pushing inquires [*sic*] to extremities' (pp. 281-82). As Graeme Turner has put it:

within both the pioneering myth of the land, and the submissive myth of the convict system, the difficulty of survival becomes the justification for failing to do more than that. The context becomes one in which the bush and the prison

¹⁵ Graeme Turner, *National Fictions: Literature, Film and the Construction of Australian Narrative* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1986), p. 66.

¹⁶ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin, 1991), pp. 16 & 18.

offer the same limited range of possibilities for the individual: the environment is tough, but survivable if one accepts its basic dominion over the self.¹⁷

Turner suggests that the emphasis on surviving rather than transcending the convict experience contributes to the subordination of the individual to the collective, and helps ‘to naturalise an ideological view of the power relations between self and society which proposes the futility of individual action against the status quo’.¹⁸ *For the Term of His Natural Life*, then, contributed to the forging of those values of collectivism and conformity that marked Australian society for much of the next hundred years and that still retain their power.

The importance of conformity in Australian society is reflected in the narrow and exclusive nationalism of the 1890s that Clarke’s novel helped to create. Australian nationalism of the period was, as we have seen, based on a shared, Anglo-Celtic, culture and characterized by an almost paranoid hostility both to the indigenous population and to people and ideas from outside the country. It was a nationalism that was intertwined with the perception of Australians as victims, continually threatened by hostile forces, and it continues to infect the country today both in its sensitivity to external criticism of its policies and actions and, as discussed in the last Chapter, in attitudes to immigration and diversity. Leigh Dale has pointed out that:

any acknowledgement of cultural diversity is quickly countered by a firm emphasis on the rights and needs of the mainstream, a tidal surge of opinion and belief that brings the ordinary to the centre of social and cultural life and sweeps aside the ugly debris of difference.¹⁹

The continuing strength of Anglo-Celticism, the calls for the dominance of a core culture, and the desire to suppress multiculturalism as an un-Australian attempt to

¹⁷ Turner, p. 52.

¹⁸ Turner, p. 84.

¹⁹ Leigh Dale, ‘Mainstreaming Australia’, in *The Australian Legend and Its Discontents*, ed. by Richard Nile (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2000), pp. 311-25 (p. 312).

fracture the unity of the nation, all point to the grip that Clarke's foundational depiction of convict Australia retains today.

In the world created by Clarke, death provides the only realistic escape from the prison, and is a route taken by prisoners as varied as the boys at Point Puer, the hardened Norfolk Island prisoners, and Dawes himself, whose death, while necessary to preserve Sylvia's virtue, is also necessary 'because the novel's world has offered no context wherein he could convincingly renovate his life'.²⁰ Turner sees his death as illustrative of a wider move in Australian fiction, one in which 'both excluded and disaffected, and totally without a supporting mythology to convert the predicament into either quest or revolt, the central character in our narratives is firmly trapped' in a prison from which there is no escape.²¹ As a result, he argues, 'it should hardly surprise us, then, that our most enduring literary and mythic image is one of imprisonment, its result death and suicide'.²² It is a move that we shall see repeated in other convict fictions discussed in this chapter.

Finally, *For the Term of His Natural Life* established the melodramatic as the central aesthetic mode of Australian fiction. Elliott has said that Clarke was impressed by Balzac as a schoolboy, and Balzac may have influenced his use of melodrama.²³ Certainly Balzac's approach to writing the melodramatic, which has been summarized by Peter Brooks as 'within an apparent context of "realism" and the ordinary, [he] seemed in fact to be staging a heightened and hyperbolic drama, making reference to pure and polar concepts of darkness and light, salvation and damnation', is central to Clarke's novel.²⁴ From the opening confrontation between Dawes (or Devine as Dawes is then known) and his parents to the final hurricane that sinks the ship on which Dawes and Sylvia are seeking to escape, the novel stages a series of melodramatic tableaux in

²⁰ Turner, *National Fictions*, p. 80.

²¹ Turner, *National Fictions*, p. 74.

²² Turner, *National Fictions*, p. 74.

²³ Elliott, p. 13.

²⁴ Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess*, repr. with a new Preface (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), p. xiii.

which good and evil confront each other in scenes of extreme emotion and passion. While Clarke makes a claim to realism, saying in his Preface that the book records ‘events which have actually occurred’ (p. 19), in practice he transforms the real into a mix of the Gothic and the melodramatic, placing his characters at the heart of an epic battle between good and evil, one in which ‘evil, at least externally, wins over good’.²⁵ This mythical struggle is, as we shall see, a central feature of the convict novels of the 1960s and later.

For the Term of His Natural Life is, then, a foundational text in the way in which it writes the central myths of settler Australian history and identity that have shaped how contemporary Australians think about both their past and their present. Most obviously it presents the convicts as the victims of the brutal exercise of colonial power and so establishes the fundamental self-image of Anglo-Celtic Australians as victims. At the same time it helps to establish a national narrative of progress that seals off the past as a foreign country from whose grim reality the nation has now escaped, and whose links with the present – both the present of Clarke’s contemporaries and the present of later readers – are best forgotten. Clarke creates the land as an actor in Australian fiction, both malevolent and benign, and also helps to create an Australian identity based on the masculine values of mateship and stoicism, where survival is of itself a success. However he also portrays the society that gave rise to those values as essentially unnatural – authoritarian, amnesiac, paranoid, claustrophobic and death-obsessed. Finally, Clarke establishes the melodramatic as the genre for writing about the convict era. The stories of convictism mythicized in Clarke’s novel have since become firmly established as part of the nation’s collective memory, of the Australian imaginary, and as such resistant to historical enquiry.

²⁵ Harold J. Boehm, ‘The Pattern of *His Natural Life*: Conflict, Imagery, and Theme as Elements of Structure’, *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 7.1 (1972), 57-71 (p. 58).

The Fable of Colonization: Thomas Keneally's *Bring Larks and Heroes*

A century after Clarke, the convict novel had become a recognized genre of its own, and Laurie Hergenhan has argued that such novels 'reveal links in the development of Australian fiction and in the viewing of Australian history'.²⁶ I believe that they go further, that they both construct that history and use it to expose and comment on aspects of contemporary Australian society. In particular, as I suggested earlier, at times of crisis, of unsettlement and disturbance, Australian fiction writers turn to early colonial history as a way to understand their times, and in doing so subject that history, and the stories which it has engendered, to critical review. Before turning to examine how writers in the much-contested period between 1988 and 2008 have done this work, I want to look briefly at convict fictions written in another period of turbulence, the decade between the retirement of Robert Menzies in 1966 and the dismissal of Gough Whitlam in 1975, in order to provide a frame for considering the later works.

It was a decade that started with Australia joining the Vietnam War in support of the Americans, a decision that both marked a symbolic change in Australia's relations with Britain, given the British decision not to participate in the war, and at the same time recognized the importance of the United States and Asia to Australia's future. It was a decision that, with the conscription it entailed, led to widespread protests and demonstrations. At the same time younger Australians challenged the conformity, control and conservatism of their society by campaigning against sexual and racial discrimination, censorship and capital punishment, campaigns that echoed those in other Western countries. These challenges to historic Australian values were reinforced by the decisions formally to end the White Australia policy in 1966, leading to increasing migrant diversity, and, following a national referendum, to give the Commonwealth government the power to legislate for Aborigines where states were unwilling to do so. Its refusal to use these powers, and particularly its rejection of land rights cases, led to increased Aboriginal protest, culminating in the establishment of a tent embassy outside the Parliament buildings on Australia Day 1972. The election of a Labor government

²⁶ Hergenhan, p. 172.

under Gough Whitlam in 1972 led to the promotion of Australia as ‘a pluralistic, tolerant, multi-cultural society’, and to work to create a ‘new nationalism’ that took ‘a general pride in Australian achievement, particularly cultural achievement’.²⁷ This shift was accompanied by moves to ‘disentangle Australia’s political, constitutional, and sentimental symbolism from its outmoded British moorings’.²⁸ Although the Whitlam government was short-lived, dismissed as it was in controversial circumstances in 1975, the changes it set in motion marked a further loosening of Australia’s historic connections with Britain.

This decade, then, presented an unprecedented challenge both to the historic foundations of Australia as a white, Anglo-Celtic, monocultural nation indissolubly linked to Britain, and to its conformist, introspective culture. In the rest of this chapter I will look at the response to these challenges in three novels set in early colonial Australia and centrally concerned with convictism. They are Thomas Keneally’s *Bring Larks and Heroes* (1967), Jessica Anderson’s *The Commandant* (1975), and Patrick White’s *A Fringe of Leaves* (1976). Given my argument that *For the Term of His Natural Life* performed a foundational role in creating the central myths and stories that form the narrative of Australian nationalism and Australian national identity, I will also read the novels against Clarke’s work. What are the continuities, and the discontinuities, between Clarke’s 1870s (hi)story of convicts and those written more recently? And how do these more recent novels engage with his foundational stories of Australia?

Bring Larks and Heroes is the first of Keneally’s two convict novels (the second, *The Playmaker* (1987), will be discussed in the next chapter).²⁹ As Peter Pierce argues, it is ‘a complex tale of origins’ that examines how ‘the Australian past left its traces in

²⁷ Richard White, p. 169.

²⁸ Stuart Ward, ‘The “New Nationalism” in Australia, Canada and New Zealand: Civic Culture in the Wake of the British World’, in *Britishness Abroad: Transnational Movements and Imperial Culture*, ed. by Kate Darian-Smith, Patricia Grimshaw and Stuart Macintyre (Carlton, Victoria: Melbourne University Press, 2007), pp. 231-63 (p. 247).

²⁹ Thomas Keneally, *Bring Larks and Heroes* (London: Penguin, 1988). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

the worst of the nation's present'.³⁰ It addresses the central questions of how to construct a society from a group of convicts and their gaolers abandoned at what Keneally characterizes as 'the world's worse end' (p. 1), and what legacy such a society will leave for the future. It is profoundly pessimistic on both counts. Clarke and the nationalists of late nineteenth century Australia believed that the country had 'cast off its penal function' and that a 'new nation was beginning to emerge'.³¹ That nation was one built around settlement, pastoralism and the land, and the convict period was viewed as a time best forgotten. For Keneally, however, the ills of the convict period are intimately connected to those of his own time, and he seeks to trace the connections between the two.

Like Clarke, Keneally sets his novel in the confines of a penal colony. However, whereas Clarke places *For the Term of His Natural Life* in a series of named prisons in specific years in the 1830s and 1840s, Keneally says that *Bring Larks and Heroes* 'is set in a penal colony in the South Pacific. The time is the late eighteenth century. [...] The geography of the colony suggests that of Sydney, but is not meant to be identified with it' (Author's Note). Where Clarke particularizes, Keneally generalizes. The non-specific nature of the setting establishes his novel as a form of fable, a tale relevant across time and space. It enables him to universalize his concern with the conflict between individual conscience and properly constituted authority, which, in the novel, is realized in the figure of Corporal Halloran, an Irish convict who has been taken into the army and sent to Australia as a marine guarding transported prisoners, and who finds himself increasingly questioning his obedience to his military oath. In Halloran's slow but inevitable transition from loyal soldier to rebel, as he comes to understand the depth of corruption and deceit among his superiors, we see how many Australians in the 1960s came to protest both against Australian involvement in Vietnam and against the conformist morality of the time.

³⁰ Peter Pierce, *Australian Melodramas: Thomas Keneally's Fiction* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1995), pp. 32 & 42.

³¹ Anne Summers, *Damned Whores and God's Police: The Colonization of Women in Australia* (Ringwood, Victoria: Penguin, 1975), p. 292.

By setting the novel in a penal colony, a place that ‘embodies the basic structures of authority and power in three main areas: military, civil and religious’, Keneally, like Clarke, can question both the way in which authority is used and misused and the way in which the colonial project has been played out in Australia.³² Like Clarke, he presents the convicts as innocent victims, transported for minor crimes or none – Halloran is arrested because ‘I went to a meeting of a body called the Land Tenure Committee’ (p. 54) – and subject to the absolute power of their gaolers in Australia. The British rulers are figured as rigid, self-obsessed and hierarchical, concerned with orders and precedents. When the convict Quinn claims to be due for release because he has served his sentence, the Governor will not act on his own authority, refusing to release him because ‘the convict indentures for the *Catania* have not yet arrived. There is no way of our knowing how long a term you were sentenced to, or the date of your sentencing’ (p. 109). In their unimaginative reliance on convention and conformity, the British rulers foreshadow the Australian governments of the time when Keneally was writing.

The British attitude to the convicts veers between indifference and brutality. Quinn’s ingenuous comments that the Provost-Marshal is accepting bribes from prisoners to arrange a passage home for them when released lead to his trial and flogging in order to protect the good name of the military. As with Clarke, the misuse of power is exemplified by the brutal flogging of prisoners. In Clarke, the flaying of Kirkland causes Dawes to revolt. In Keneally it is the sight of the flogged body of Eris Mealey that starts to undermine Halloran’s belief in the system he serves. Mealey, like Kirkland, is represented as weak and effeminate, having ‘one of those blue, girlish skins’ (p. 51) and a ‘querulous soprano’ voice (p. 50). Like Kirkland, he is an archetypal victim of imperial brutality, especially as he has been ‘flayed to get evidence’ (p. 55) rather than as a punishment for a crime. The arbitrary nature of his punishment, and the likelihood that he will not survive it, cause Halloran to question what is being done in the name of the King he has sworn to serve.

³² Hergenhan, p. 141.

However, Keneally's presentation of early colonial Australia differs in a number of ways from that of Clarke. His penal colony is not simply a site of oppressive brutality and violence. Rather the setting of *Bring Larks and Heroes* reflects what we have seen was the more common experience of transported convicts. It is an open prison, one in which convicts have considerable freedom and form an integral part of the public world rather than being cut off and separated from it. Furthermore, where Clarke focuses narrowly on the ill-treatment of the convicts, Keneally places it in a wider context, seeing it as part of a pattern of colonial abuse, and giving it an ethnic and religious dimension by centring his novel on Irish prisoners and gaolers. The imperial attitudes to the Irish, whether in Australia or Ireland, are summarized in the Governor's statement that 'they are an abomination, whether subservient or rebellious. Any officer quickly learns it. I detest them when they keep to their gods' (p. 113). Their ill-treatment in Ireland is sedulously used by the Government Clerk, Hearn, to persuade Halloran to join a revolt, and recognized by Halloran himself when, at the novel's end, he hears an Irish mourning cry for his dead lover and is moved to anger: "Hell fry the balls off your damned Empire!" he tried to tell the Provost' (p. 245). The prejudice against Irish Catholics also enables Keneally, himself a Catholic, to connect their abuse in early colonial Australia to the emerging protests of Irish Catholics against oppressive Protestant rule in Northern Ireland in the 1960s.

More importantly, Keneally draws a parallel between the British treatment of the convict Irish and their treatment of the Aborigines, seeing both as victims of British colonialism and bestowing on them what Pierce characterizes as his 'imaginative sympathy to history's outcasts'.³³ If the Irish were stereotyped by the Victorian British as 'a simianized and degenerate race', then so also were the Aborigines, who were regarded as occupying 'the base of the chain of being' at the bottom of the evolutionary ladder, and as such not worthy of consideration.³⁴ Just as Irish land rights were removed by the British, so too are aboriginal rights as the British lay claim to the country. In the

³³ Pierce, p. 33.

³⁴ Ann McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 52; Ross Gibson, *The Diminishing Paradise: Changing Literary Perceptions of Australia* (Sydney: Sirius, 1984), p. 183.

same way as the Irish were left to die of famine, so the Aborigines are abandoned to die of smallpox which, after killing two colonists, ‘found a better mark’ among the Aborigines who are ‘dying of smallpox. Or, perhaps, dying out’ (p. 20). The cause of their deaths is the arrival of the British, who are ‘the demonic element, bringing death and disease into the landscape’.³⁵ The arrival of the British is destructive both of the Aborigines and of their way of life, and foreshadows the continuing abuse of the indigenous peoples over the succeeding years.

Like Clarke, Keneally sees early colonial Australia as an essentially masculine world. While the men of the colony are active participants in the creation of the new town, women are given no role to play beyond the domestic. The female convicts are dismissed, in terms reminiscent of First Fleet writers, as the ‘idle transported ladies’ (p. 30), while the central female characters are stereotypical heroines and villains. The sexually predatory Mrs Daker falsely accuses the eunuch Ewers of assaulting her and so causes his death. The religiously obsessed Mrs Blyth plots and manipulates from within her house where she is confined by the ulcerated leg with which she is ‘blessed [...] as other women are by children’ (p. 4). She is intent on exacting obedience from Halloran over his relationship with her servant, Ann Rush, and full of ‘delicious fury’ (p. 124) against him when he betrays his oath not to sleep with her. She sees their arrest and condemnation as ‘God redeeming his pledge’ (p. 241), and her leg is healed when they are executed. Ann herself is a more knowing version of Sylvia Vickers, a sexually aware guardian angel who seeks unsuccessfully to protect Halloran from himself.

However Keneally reconstructs aspects of the masculine world of Clarke’s novel. In particular, where Clarke portrays the relationship between convicts and gaolers as one of hostility, Keneally depicts a degree of fraternization between the two groups, the development of a form of mateship, often driven by a shared Irish heritage, that cuts across the lines of power. When Halloran rows Ewers up to the Crescent ‘the other four in the boat’ are ‘two Marine privates, two transport oarsman [*sic*]’ (p. 31), and when Allen goes on his expedition to explore the country the party includes ‘two transports’

³⁵ Patricia Monk, ‘Eden Upside-down: Thomas Keneally’s *Bring Larks and Heroes* as Anti-Pastoral’, *World Literature Written in English*, 21 (1982), 297-303 (p. 298).

(p. 130). More fundamentally the plot to steal food involves both convicts and guards. In short, where Clarke saw mateship as the preserve of the convicts, Keneally suggests that the formation of homosocial bonds goes much wider and becomes an organizing principle for society, one that is as prevalent in the 1960s as in the 1780s and is used to protect men from the consequences of their actions.

Similarly Keneally revises Clarke's presentation of the land. As in *For the Term of His Natural Life*, the country is presented ambivalently as both beautiful and hostile. However Keneally suggests that this hostility is an artefact of the way in which the colonists view and treat the land. While Halloran can recognize its beauty, seeing, on his journey to the Crescent, how 'the river went west quite royally, spangled with sun, miles wide. Before its massive kindness, the coves and beaches, cliffs and islands stood back' (p. 32), the other colonists are unwilling or unable to appreciate it. For them, the land has no attractions and is damned for failing to live up to their expectations. The colonists' assumption that the land should be farmed in the same way as the British countryside results in a failure that is attributed to the Australian climate and soil, as a result of which:

the leaves of carrots and turnips had tattered and split, shot full of holes by antipodean summer. The grain had already rusted hard beside the little creek called Collett's Brook; and there would be no harvest at Government Farm, where muddied stooks of young corn stood like the camp wreckage of a beaten army. (p. 16)

At the same time the hungry colonists ignore the food that is available to them and which Ann and Halloran easily recognize, commenting on the waste when 'a fleet of jew-fish tended slowly north [...] passing by the hungry town without a flick of their tails' (p. 24). The British are unable and unwilling to learn how to survive in the land they have invaded.

More generally, Keneally suggests that the attempt to transplant British culture into a new world is less 'an affirmation of normalcy, a denial that something terrible and

strange was being created at the antipodes' than an example of overweening arrogance that will inevitably fail.³⁶ So the new Government House, intended to be 'a sort of Palladian townhouse, with a little Ionic portico' (p. 30) in imitation of Bath, is, when completed, 'somehow primitive, like a child's drawing of a merchant-class home [...] the portico with its poor square, wooden columns, at the head of which some dredged-up village talent had carved Ionic capitals like the noses of Dorset rams' (p. 107). Essentially the colonists create a fake British civilization around them, an issue to which I shall return in later chapters. However, Keneally suggests that the failings of the early colonial attempt to recreate Britain in Australia persists in the Australia of the 1960s, with its unwillingness to shed its ties to the mother country.

Central to Keneally's novel is his challenge to the idea that the Australian society that emerged from the convict period was healthy and sound. Instead, he suggests that early colonial Australia was a rotten society, and this is reflected in the insistent imagery of disease and decay in the novel. Two sawyers are 'lepered' by red dust (p. 32) and Halloran describes himself as 'coffined in flesh' (p. 148). Disease not only affects human beings but also the wider natural world, where 'the dementia of summer insects' (p. 36) troubles the colonists and where sunlight 'burrows like a worm in both eye-balls' (p. 1). It is a society that is not only physically but mentally diseased, a world, as in Clarke, of lies, deceptions, spying and misrepresentation. We have already seen that Mrs Daker's wrongful allegation that she has been sexually assaulted by Ewers leads to his death, while Quinn's truthful account of the actions of the Provost-Marshal is used to justify flogging him. In the same way, Captain Allen's disingenuous assurance that he will 'save as many lives as I am able' (p. 142) in dealing with a convict uprising leads Hearn to betray his fellows to their deaths. Moreover, despite the openness of the prison there is, in practice, no greater freedom either for Keneally's convicts or for their gaolers than for those in Clarke's fiction. The novel's opening image of Halloran 'caught in a mesh of sunlight and shade' (p. 1) sets the mood by intimating that this is a place where all are in prison, all are under surveillance, and where treachery and betrayal, as in Clarke, are endemic. Keneally's prison is as much a

³⁶ John Hirst, *Convict Society and its Enemies* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1983), p. 192.

place of psychological violence as is Clarke's, a place where, as Caterina Colomba has put it in a recent article, 'the conflicts of conscience are tested to the limits in an alien environment'.³⁷ For Keneally, writing in the 1960s, these conflicts remained all too real, as prevailing social norms were challenged by new thinking and new ideas.

Above all, Halloran deceives himself about what is happening, only slowly realizing that he is 'the dimmest judge of men' (p. 119). His growing awareness of the duplicity of the officers whom he has sworn to obey leads to his alienation from the society around him. Like Rufus Dawes, he seeks to retain his integrity in the face of an amoral world, before eventually agreeing to betray his oath and participate in a plot to steal stores. This issue, that of the clash between the individual conscience and the expectations of society, between the pressure to conform and comply and the demand to bear witness, is one I shall return to when discussing Kate Grenville's work in the next chapter. However, in *Bring Larks and Heroes* the result of this clash is the necessary death of Halloran, for 'the community cannot tolerate someone who sees things differently'.³⁸ That lack of tolerance, Keneally suggests, is a recurrent aspect of Australian society, with its belief in conformity and its hostility to the unconventional, and, as we have seen earlier, it retains its potency into the contemporary period.

Pierce rightly emphasizes the melodramatic nature of *Bring Larks and Heroes*.³⁹ Its form is theatrical, not to say cinematic, with short, jump-cut, chapters that present a series of sensational scenes, from Halloran's discovery of the flogged Eris Mealey who 'seemed to have a heavy shadow on his back and buttocks and upper legs. The smell of him, the mass of the smell and its tart edge of dreadful sweetness, stood out above the routine stench of Daker's infirmary' (p. 50), to the appearance of Mrs Daker 'gibbering through the aviary. Her dress was piping red with blood' (p. 76). This is emphasized by the excess of Keneally's language, where swamp-oaks are described as 'slatternly' (p. 21) and the sky as 'devious and fish-coloured' (p. 229), while the 'rain

³⁷ Caterina Colomba, 'Coming to Terms with Australia's Past: Thomas Keneally's *Bring Larks and Heroes*', *Antipodes*, 27 (2013), 25-29 (p. 27).

³⁸ Monk, p. 299.

³⁹ Pierce, p. 39.

came down like flint-arrows' (p. 92) and an ant on a tree-trunk 'reared up polemically on its abdomen' and then 'galloped off drunkenly across the gullies of bark' (p. 19). In a world that has lost its sense of proportion, the heightened atmosphere and language of the novel reinforce the melodramatic paranoia that affects Halloran, and which stems from 'the anxiety brought by a frightening new world in which the traditional patterns of moral order no longer provide the necessary social glue'.⁴⁰ Halloran finds himself adrift in a world where the moral order seems to have been turned upside-down and injustices go unpunished. However, in this melodrama the execution of Halloran and Ann deprives us of even the apparent 'victory of virtue' that marks the close of *For the Term of His Natural Life*.⁴¹ Their deaths suggest that 'the possibilities of life, and social life' which they represent are 'unattainable in such a denatured society' as early colonial Australia.⁴²

While Keneally consciously places himself in the tradition of convict novels started by Clarke, he also seeks to go beyond him, to challenge the idea that Australia has overcome, and left behind, its convict past, and to trace the continuing effects of the perverted nature of convict society in his contemporary Australia. Writing at what Colomba calls 'a moment of crucial importance in the view of the cultural and historiographical debates over the nation's beginnings', Keneally produces a profoundly pessimistic work.⁴³ His fabular use of convict history, and his concentration on the issue of the (mis)use of authority and power, suggest how the Australian past has created its present and indicate the lines of influence that bind the injustices of the 1780s to those of his time. Halloran, in his tortured questioning of the sanctity of his oath, prefigures the unease with the prevailing order of society that surfaced in the 1960s. As Hergenhan suggests, Halloran's 'doomed effort to separate the personal and the social, to remain uninvolved [...] focuses (by implication) a problem highlighted by Vietnam and other

⁴⁰ Brooks, p. 20.

⁴¹ Brooks, p. 20.

⁴² Brian Kiernan, 'Thomas Keneally and the Australian Novel: A Study of *Bring Larks and Heroes*', *Southerly*, 28 (1968), 189-99 (p. 199).

⁴³ Colomba, p. 28.

divisive issues of the sixties'.⁴⁴ For Keneally, the diseases of contemporary Australian society, with its excessive deference to power and authority and its hostility to those it regards as outsiders, stem from the foundational sins of colonization, with its imposition of British values, its intolerance of those the early colonists saw as beyond the pale of conventional society, whether Irish, Aborigine or convict, and its continuing failure to establish a society that properly respects the land and its peoples.

Colonizing the Domestic: Jessica Anderson's *The Commandant*

Like *For the Term of His Natural Life*, Jessica Anderson's *The Commandant* is set in a remote penal colony, this time Moreton Bay in 1830, a site of secondary punishment that, like Clarke's Van Diemen's Land and Norfolk Island, is depicted as a place of colonial brutality and callousness.⁴⁵ However, her work differs in two important ways from both Clarke and Keneally. First, we see Moreton Bay through the eyes of an outsider, Frances O'Beirne, who is visiting her sister Letty, the wife of the Commandant, Captain Logan, a man 'infamously recorded in history as one of the cruellest of the penal commandants'.⁴⁶ Second, the novel presents a female, domestic world alongside the male world of the prison, and focuses on 'the middle-class women whose lives were defined by their involvement in that system, through their menfolk'.⁴⁷ These perspectives at least partially disrupt the conventional narrative of early settlement, not least by confronting that narrative with what Susan Sheridan calls 'a uniquely feminist and materialist perspective on the convict system and its impact on social and familial relations in colonial Australia'.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Hergenhan, p. 146.

⁴⁵ Jessica Anderson, *The Commandant* (London: Macmillan, 1975). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

⁴⁶ Pam Gilbert, *Coming Out from Under: Contemporary Australian Women Writers* (London: Pandora, 1988), p. 136.

⁴⁷ Susan Sheridan, "'Cranford at Moreton Bay": Jessica Anderson's *The Commandant*', *Southerly*, 72.1 (2012), 121-35 (p. 121).

⁴⁸ Sheridan, p. 134.

The Commandant opens on the ship bringing Frances to Moreton Bay, where she is surrounded by a confusion of voices, names, and comments from the colony's women, who will seek to educate the young Frances in appropriate behaviour. They speak about the health of the colony and the eligibility of its single men, question Frances about her views, and warn her that 'it does not do to be opinionated' (p. 11). One of Frances's key roles is to make sense of the confusion with which she is initially presented, to distinguish the genuine from the false, and to learn to see and hear clearly as she navigates between different opinions. She is a liminal and potentially subversive figure, allied by marriage to the Logans and by temperament to their enemies the Halls, who have accused Logan of killing prisoners, but at the edge of both camps. She plays the role of 'the clear-sighted innocent witness come from afar', who acts, as Anderson has put it, as 'my witness and commentator'.⁴⁹ As we shall see, over the course of the novel her initial black and white view of the world becomes more nuanced.

When Frances arrives, Moreton Bay is for her synonymous with the brutal treatment of prisoners. Like Frere in *For the Term of His Natural Life*, Logan exercises total power over the convicts, saying at one point that 'in this place the law is me' (p. 51). Again the symbol of that power is the brutal floggings that he orders with 'a recklessness, a wild impatience' (p. 99) that shocks Captain Clunie, the newly arrived deputy Commandant. As in both Clarke and Keneally it is one particular flogging, in this case of the convict Martin for embracing Frances, that precipitates revolt. Martin himself is figured, in the tradition of Kirkland and Mealey, as innately vulnerable, a 'dark young man, hardly more than a boy' (p. 42) who by the novel's end has apparently become 'what they called a "leman" or a "lady"' (p. 304), and as such is well-suited to perform the victim role. However Anderson complicates the easy equation of convicts and innocent victims. Her convicts occupy a more ambivalent role as complicit victims. They are 'demeaned by their position, not only physically brutalised but also performing

⁴⁹ Alrene Sykes, 'Jessica Anderson: Arrivals and Places', *Southerly*, 46 (1986), 57-71 (p. 60); Kate Grenville and Sue Woolfe, 'Jessica Anderson – *The Commandant*', in *Making Stories: How Ten Australian Novels Were Written*, ed. by Kate Grenville and Sue Woolfe (St Leonards, New South Wales: Allen & Unwin, 1993), pp. 1-32 (p. 4).

their abjection, limping for sympathy'.⁵⁰ They are frequently recalcitrant but also as willing to collude with the system of repression as to fight it. Their sense of mateship easily lapses in the face of self-interest. This is exemplified towards the novel's end when the convicts who have been searching for Logan's body refuse to carry it back to the township but see their response to the threat of punishment, epitomized by the cry 'punish one – punish all' (p. 264), compromised when one man breaks with the collective and brings the body back so as to 'make sure of remission by earnin' it over again' (p. 265).

Anderson's reworking of settler mythology is reinforced by the creation of a new element of solidarity in oppression between convicts and Aborigines. Where in Keneally the Aborigines were figured essentially as a dying race, killed by the British invaders, here they participate in resistance to the colonists. Both convicts and Aborigines are seen by the colonial rulers as inferior and outsider groups in need of civilization, people who are contemptuous of authority and have no respect for property rights. Both need to be suppressed and controlled, and just as Logan controls the prisoners by exercising power over their bodies, so he also wants to control the Aborigines, in this case by exercising power over their land. He displays the colonial desire to explore and map the territory, potentially leading to its settlement, for 'cartographic skill everywhere informed the first stages of the conquest of Australia'.⁵¹ The impact of this conquest on the Aborigines is foreshadowed in the episode of the imprisoned Aborigine who appears to be dying in gaol but recovers when released and able to return to his tribe. The mapping and settlement of the land, and the subsequent imprisonment of Aborigines on reserves from which there is no escape or release, will lead to their death and near elimination later in the century.

Logan's passion for controlling his environment is not limited to the world of the prison and the Aborigine. He also exerts his authority over the newly depicted domestic sphere, where he sets clear rules of behaviour which in effect imprison the women and

⁵⁰ Sheridan, p. 132.

⁵¹ Alan Atkinson, 'Conquest', in *Australia's Empire*, ed. by Deryck M. Schreuder and Stuart Ward (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 33-53 (p. 36).

children in the house, exemplifying Gillian Whitlock's concept of the Australian house as carceral cell.⁵² Logan seeks to enforce a rigid separation between the male world, which is focused on managing the convicts, and the female world, which is centred on managing the household, the separate spheres so beloved of later nationalists. In this society the role of women is summed up in Letty's lisp comment that 'when a man seeks a wife, he first sees the young woman as part of a background. There is a comfortable house, and good food, and pleasant conversation' (p. 64). Women are seen as fragile and delicate, in need of protection and easily endangered by illness, and Letty's miscarriage is a constant reminder of 'how it is with women – their lives washing out in their blood' (p. 65). They are not expected to interfere in the wider issues of the treatment of prisoners, and when Frances presses her sister to help ensure that Martin is not punished her response is that 'you heard Patwick say it is not your concern. I don't make such matters mine' (p. 173). Even though in private Letty is concerned about Logan's actions she will not express her doubts publicly. The world of the prison colony is one of clearly defined gender roles, of male dominance and female subservience.

Logan's desire to control the domestic world recalls Mary Douglas's argument that 'ideas about separating, purifying, demarcating and punishing transgressions have as their main function to impose system on an inherently untidy experience'.⁵³ In Moreton Bay, contact between women and convicts is rigorously supervised for fear of sullyng the purity of the home and breaking down the natural order of the colony. Logan seeks to set a firm boundary between the two groups, one which he patrols, stating, when Frances uses the outside privy, that 'I will not have the women of my household, [...], exposed to the eyes of the gardeners in their comings and goings for such purposes' (p. 106). Crossing the boundary between the domestic female space and the convict male space – as Martin does when he embraces Frances, and as Frances does

⁵² Gillian Whitlock, "The Carceral Archipelago": Marcus Clarke's *His Natural Life* and John Richardson's *Wacousta*, in *Australian/Canadian Literatures in English: Comparative Perspectives*, ed. by Russell McDougall and Gillian Whitlock (North Ryde, New South Wales: Methuen, 1987), pp. 49-67.

⁵³ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966), p. 4.

when she runs to the convict hospital to fetch a doctor to treat her nephew's cut leg and sees Martin's flogged body – is a serious act of transgression that will pollute the home, bringing danger to the inhabitants. It must be punished, by the expulsion of Martin and by the silencing of Frances who, 'because of her sex, will bear the blame for the assault: she must have incited the young male convict'.⁵⁴ Frances, here, is aligned with the female convicts discussed in the last chapter, seen misogynistically as dissolute and responsible for leading the colony's men astray.

This clear demarcation of male and female space, accompanied by male control of female space, female sexuality and female activity, portray a pattern of male domination that led Anne Summers to say that 'there are some similarities between the position of women in a patriarchal society such as Australia and that of a colonized people. Both are denied self-determination, and both spend their lives working to enhance the wealth and power of a group to which they can never belong'.⁵⁵ However Anderson's novel, published at the same time as Summers's work, and at a time of growing feminist resistance to Australian patriarchy, does open up a space for female agency. This can be seen most clearly when Logan's death leads to a relaxation of his rules and the reversion of domestic power to the women who have ceded it to him, a change symbolized by Letty's agreeing that, contrary to Logan's stipulation, in the hot November weather 'the indoor privy should be shut, and that the women and children should use the privy in the garden' (p. 302). However it is a strictly limited agency, and Sheridan's argument that Anderson 'creates a distinctively female perspective on power and authority', and that her women 'play key roles and bear responsibility for their actions', seems unwarranted, particularly given the refusal of the colony's women to act on their knowledge of the brutality towards convicts.⁵⁶

Like other convict novels, *The Commandant* presents early colonial Australian society as paranoid, built round lies, whispers and concealments. It is a society that seeks to forget and ignore the unpleasant realities of penal colony life. This tendency is

⁵⁴ Pam Gilbert, p. 137.

⁵⁵ Summers, p. 199.

⁵⁶ Sheridan, p. 133.

present from the beginning of the novel and continues throughout it. Amelia Bulwer disingenuously presents Moreton Bay as ‘quite a pretty little place’ (p. 9), while Louisa Harbin decides not to forewarn Frances about the accusations of killing prisoners which was ‘what the father of her boon companions wrote about her sister’s husband’ (p. 24). The women know about ‘the secret sexual life of the prison, binding gaolers and gaoled together’, but suppress their knowledge.⁵⁷ Assurances such as Logan’s promise that Martin ‘will be punished as lightly as is consistent with discipline’ (p. 185) cannot be taken at face value, any more than could the promises of Keneally’s British officers. Furthermore spies are everywhere, both convicts – ‘Madge Noakes listens at doors. I have seen her’ (p. 37) – and gaolers – when Logan attacks Frances for her sympathy for convicts he tells her ‘you are overheard, miss. You are overheard’ (p. 170). It is also a world in which the inconvenient truths of history are suppressed, most noticeably at the novel’s end when Letty is concerned to ensure that Logan’s death is blamed on Aborigines rather than escaped convicts in order to protect his reputation and secure her pension. In an act of willed suppression, the official report will say only that he was killed by natives while engaged in ‘exploration of benefit to his country’ (p. 294), whatever may actually have been the case.

The repression of any but accepted truths is seen most strongly in the refusal of the women of the colony to see what happens to prisoners until their treatment is exposed to the gaze of Frances, ‘who has not had time to learn how to avert her eyes in self-protection from this worst of all penal settlements’.⁵⁸ Having seen the flogged body of Martin she exclaims, about his punishment and the treatment of convicts more generally, that ‘we knew it in words, yet kept it secret. The words we used in speaking of it were the words that kept it secret. And then we kept it secret in the way we behaved, in our manners and our dress and our pastimes’ (p. 211). Frances’s response to the revelation of what has been happening in the prison is physical collapse, accompanied by a near silence as she recognizes that she ‘is trapped in her complicity

⁵⁷ Sheridan, p. 129.

⁵⁸ Alrene Sykes, p. 60.

with the penal system' as are her sister and her female friends.⁵⁹ It is a form of complicity in silence that continues in contemporary Australia, with the unwillingness of many Australians to confront the past and their refusal to acknowledge the extent of both the historic and the continuing mistreatment of Aborigines. Anderson, like Keneally before her, is concerned to show how the contemporary Australian attitudes of her time are indissolubly linked to the attitudes, behaviour, and social structures of early colonialism.

Anderson does, however, suggest that the secrecy that surrounds Moreton Bay is threatened by the challenge of a press campaign alleging that Logan's regime has been responsible for killing prisoners. Because these accusations have been published they cannot be ignored or shrugged off as malicious gossip. Instead they have to be actively responded to and resisted by Logan and Governor Darling, to the extent of taking legal action for libel against the newspaper's editor. As we have seen, Benedict Anderson has stressed the importance of print in shaping national cultures by creating a community of readers who have access to a common text, share a common reading language and are exposed to the same ideas and experiences as mediated through the written word.⁶⁰ Such readers learn quickly about accusations of wrong-doing and also about changing attitudes to crime and punishment. As a result 'public opinion is changing. Punishment accepted as natural a few years ago is called wicked today by a small minority, and harsh by a larger minority. And tomorrow or the next day, the majority will join the chorus' (p. 98). Changing attitudes have already influenced Clunie, who is uneasy about the way Logan has run the colony. In stressing the impossibility of isolating Moreton Bay from the world beyond its gates, Anderson speaks to her own times, making clear that it is not possible to isolate 1960s Australia from wider social changes. The nationalist attempt to preserve Australian values from contact with the corrupting influences of other countries is shown to be unsustainable in an increasingly interconnected world.

⁵⁹ Sheridan, p. 130.

⁶⁰ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, particularly pp. 9-36.

The potential exposure of the brutality of his regime is one of the motivating factors that lead to Logan's death. Increasingly alienated from the attitudes of his superiors and wider society, with his position and authority under question with the arrival of Clunie, and with an unattractive posting to India looming, Logan finds himself trapped in a prison of his own making that is as powerful as that which holds the convicts. He, like Dawes and Halloran before him, has to die because he has no way of surviving in a world where he and his values have been defeated. However his death also changes Frances's perception of him. Following her initial dislike of the man and his actions, and her passionate declaration that his accuser, Smith Hall, 'is in jail in the cause of truth and justice' (p. 18), she has discovered that many of the stories she was told about Moreton Bay are inaccurate, and her final judgement on Logan is equivocal. The image of his coffin 'honourably attended' begins to 'take precedence over the cold-faced soldier [...], and over all those others that had interposed between that, the first, and this, the last' with the result that 'it would not obliterate those others, but would succeed, at last, in gaining a little mercy for them' (p. 320). She holds within herself the tensions between celebrating the colonial will and condemning colonial excess, between her antipathy for her brother-in-law and her recognition of his achievements. Her ambivalence typifies a wider move in Australian fiction that seeks to reconcile admiration and detestation for the actions of early settlers. This is seen most often in relation to the conflict between settlers and Aborigines where, as Sue Kossew says of Kate Grenville's *The Secret River*, the challenge is 'to reconcile [...] her own convict ancestor's implication in acts of Indigenous dispossession and an acknowledgement of the strength and courage of such acts of settlement'.⁶¹ Not for nothing is the ship that takes Logan's coffin to Sydney called the *Glory*.

Sheridan notes that *The Commandant* 'is structured like a play, in three parts'.⁶² Like other convict novels I have discussed, this theatrical form is heavily dominated by melodrama, particularly as the mood darkens in the later part of the novel. Some

⁶¹ Sue Kossew, 'Voicing the "Great Australian Silence": Kate Grenville's Narrative of Settlement in *The Secret River*', *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 42.2 (2007), 7-18 (p. 8).

⁶² Sheridan, p. 125.

elements of the melodramatic are familiar, such as Frances's discovery of the flogged Martin with 'stringy blood-stained legs and the raw bloody shredded mess of the back' (p. 199), a description that reflects the heritage of Clarke and Keneally. However in this novel much of the melodrama occurs on the domestic stage, in the battle between Frances, Letty and Logan over Martin's future. More fundamentally, *The Commandant* demonstrates Brooks's argument that muteness is the primary sensory deprivation of melodrama, as blindness is of tragedy. As he puts it, melodrama 'often, particularly in climactic moments and in extreme situations, has recourse to non-verbal means of expressing its meanings'.⁶³ The convicts rarely speak and resort to gesture to make their meaning known. Madge Noakes fails to adjust her neckerchief properly in order to draw attention to the scars she cannot talk about, while Martin embraces Frances as the only way of expressing his feelings for her. In the same way Frances is reduced to near-muteness after seeing the flogged Martin, traumatized by the horror of what she has seen and unable to reconcile the punishment with the offence.

However this is a melodrama mixed with other genres, in particular that of the *bildungsroman*. We see Frances grow up from the naively romantic girl who dreams of living on an island with a husband who did not 'demand gross definition, but was simply required to exist there in the featureless blaze of romance' (p. 26) to the more mature young woman who feels confident that she can shape her own future. In doing so she learns, often painfully, to sift what she has been told, to 'adjust the distortion of her prejudices to the facts as she experiences them', and to become clear-sighted, about Logan as much as about her attitudes to convicts.⁶⁴ As she leaves the colony she is clear that she will not marry a man who keeps convict servants even if this means working as a governess. Here we again see Frances performing the role of female agency, willing to reject the conventional role assigned to her. However her decision to leave for Sydney also represents a refusal to engage in the process of reform that she acknowledges is needed, a refusal that is only a little less cowardly than her female companions' looking

⁶³ Brooks, p. 56.

⁶⁴ Elaine Barry, *Fabricating the Self: The Fictions of Jessica Anderson* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1992), p. 65.

the other way at the behaviour of the colony's men. In Anderson's story, feminist pressure for change is relatively weak and unthreatening.

Anderson's novel, like Keneally's, draws heavily on the conventions that underpinned *For the Term of His Natural Life*, and in part endorses them. We see this particularly in Frances's final response to Logan and in her collusive decision to protect his son from the knowledge that his father's coffin is accompanied by 'six prisoners who were to be released in Sydney' (p. 319), so protecting another generation of Australians from knowledge of the consequences of their forebears' actions. Like Keneally, however, she reworks Clarke's model, particularly by making 'a space for women in a hitherto male-centred world'.⁶⁵ She also opens up the closed society of the prison to external criticism in ways that speak to the time at which she was writing, when the old settler verities were coming under pressure. More fundamentally, while Clarke sought to place the convict period in the past, she, like Keneally, traces the connections between her contemporary Australia and its convict beginnings, suggesting how these have shaped Anglo-Celtic Australian perceptions of their past and their present. In particular she identifies and condemns the complicity that is central to the operation of the prison colony and that remains integral to the structure of Australian society. She sees the knowing silence of the women, and their willed refusal to expose or speak about what they know, as establishing a pattern of behaviour that resonates in the 1970s and can be seen as continuing into the present century. Her novel, then, both pays homage to the conventions and myths that Clarke established and seeks to use them for different and more challenging purposes.

Encountering the Suppressed: Patrick White's *A Fringe of Leaves*

A year after *The Commandant* was published, Patrick White published *A Fringe of Leaves*.⁶⁶ It was his second novel set in the Australian past, and written some twenty

⁶⁵ Ken Gelder and Paul Salzman, *The New Diversity: Australian Fiction 1970-88* (Melbourne: McPhee Gribble, 1989), p. 157.

⁶⁶ Patrick White, *A Fringe of Leaves* (London: Vintage, 1997). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

years after the earlier *Voss* (1957), which was centrally concerned with the myths and stories of exploration.⁶⁷ In this novel, Peter Wolfe has argued, White is concerned with the questions of ‘what is the Australian? How did he become the way he is? And where is he heading?’.⁶⁸ In this respect it can be seen as continuing the explorations of the other convict novels of the period that I have considered. However it differs from them significantly in being set predominantly outside rather than inside the world of the prison colony. White’s narrative moves away from a close engagement with the world of convicts and gaolers to present a picture of an early colonial Australia steeped in convictism. White uses this vision of the past to explore the roots of contemporary Australian society and particularly the tensions between ‘the continuity of English inheritance and history’ and ‘the moment of radical fracture through which disruption and subversion occur – geography, climate, flora and fauna, class and convictism, and the Aborigines’.⁶⁹ For White, as for Keneally and Anderson, the deformities of the Australia of his time can be traced to the country’s early colonial history.

A Fringe of Leaves touches the ‘two raw nerves in the Australian body politic – the nation’s convict heritage and the abuse of Aborigines by white settlers’.⁷⁰ In doing so it considers particularly the country’s continuing state of denial about these aspects of its past. Like the other novels I have discussed, it is marked by an inability on the part of the colonists to see or comprehend the brutality of their treatment of outsider groups. Only Ellen Roxburgh sees clearly, and her ability to ‘view society from a different perspective’ enables her to ‘question society’s definition of right and wrong’.⁷¹ Like Frances O’Beirne she is an outsider, the daughter of a Cornish farmer who has married into the English middle classes, and her background, as well as her gender, put her in a different relationship to colonial society from that of her husband. In particular, because

⁶⁷ Patrick White, *Voss* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1957).

⁶⁸ Peter Wolfe, *Laden Choirs: The Fiction of Patrick White* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1983), p. 197.

⁶⁹ Diana Brydon and Helen Tiffin, *Decolonising Fictions* (Sydney: Dangaroo Press, 1993), p. 87.

⁷⁰ Peter Wolfe, p. 198.

⁷¹ Helen M. Gilbert, ‘The Prison and the Font: An Essay on Patrick White’s *A Fringe of Leaves*’, *Kunapipi*, 11.2 (1989), 17-22 (p. 17).

she sees herself as ‘a lifer from birth’ (p. 359), she can sympathize with the convicts she encounters, as when, early in the novel, she sees a gang of convicts and ‘felt a pang of commiseration’ with them, while her companions, her husband and brother-in-law, are ‘too engrossed in the past to notice the work-party’ (p. 84). Later in the novel, following the shipwreck of the *Bristol Maid* on which Ellen and her husband have embarked for the return voyage to Britain, she is first captured by Aborigines then freed by the escaped convict Jack Chance, who leads her to the colony of Moreton Bay. Her experience of living with these two outcast groups increases her discomfort with the ordering of early colonial society. It helps to give her ‘a compassionate awareness of others’ and to realize that there are ‘alternative civilisations living in harmony with their place’.⁷² Such an understanding is foreign to the symbols of colonial authority – the Commandant, the surgeon and the chaplain – for whom Australia outside their ordered world is irredeemably alien. Ellen’s positive account of her relationships with the Aborigines and with Jack Chance does not sit comfortably with ‘the normality of official white history’ which wishes to suppress the convict and the Aborigine, and as a result those who control the production of that history ensure that her story is ‘exiled to the fringes of “true history”’.⁷³ Australian society both in the 1830s, when the novel is set, and at the time White was writing, was unsettled by any perspective that challenged either the accepted view of the past or the existing social structure.

By the novel’s conclusion, Ellen’s experiences outside white society have alienated her from the colonial world of Moreton Bay. She despairs of the way in which the convicts are treated and is unable to assent to the chaplain’s statement that ‘punishment must be administered, in certain cases, when it is due’ (p. 387), especially when that punishment involves brutal floggings. She experiences a desire to ‘run back into the bush, choosing the known perils, and nakedness rather than an alternative of shame disguised’ (p. 392). In the event, she leaves the colony for England in order to escape from the shame she feels at the way in which the colonists treat both the convicts

⁷² Dennis Haskell, “‘A Lady Only by Adoption’ – Civilization in *A Fringe of Leaves*”, *Southerly*, 47 (1987), 433-42 (p. 440); Brydon and Tiffin, p. 98.

⁷³ Gelder and Salzman, p. 159.

and the Aborigines, and to distance herself from any sense of complicity in their actions. In doing so, however, she, like Frances O'Beirne, abrogates any responsibility for attempting to tackle the dysfunctional nature of the society she leaves behind her.

Like Keneally and Anderson, White both adopts the codes created by Marcus Clarke and adapts them for his own purposes. He presents the convicts as victims of oppression, subject to the brutal ill-treatment that causes Jack Chance to prefer the bush to the prison, seeing the Aborigines as 'much better hosts than the prison officials whose cruelty drove him into the bush'.⁷⁴ Their victim status is again exemplified by the description of the flogged body, this time Jack's recollection of an occasion when 'I would of said the bones was showin' through me hide, whether or not. Anyways the flies got to work on the cuts. I was turned septic' (p. 309). Similarly White sees settler Australia itself as an all-encompassing prison. At Garnet Roxburgh's home, Dulcet, the precincts have 'a military, if not a penal air' (p. 85), and Ellen goes out for a ride 'to enjoy a freedom I've been denied' (p. 115) since her arrival at the house. Later, when Ellen is recovering at the Commandant's house in Moreton Bay, she feels imprisoned by 'bars of sunlight' and 'gilt grilles' (p. 361), and surrounded by a garden that 'was designed for revelations of evil' (p. 381). Dulcet is a place of sexual secrets and overheard conversations, where at night Ellen hears 'sounds overhead as of heavy footsteps, muffled voices, occasional laughter' (p. 96) that are denied the next morning. It is also, like Anderson's Moreton Bay, a place where there is a complicity of silence, most marked in the collusive refusal to confront Garnet's behaviour, both the forgery that caused him to be exiled from England and the suspicious circumstances of his wife's death, when he claims that 'I took a corner too fast and the unfortunate woman was pitched out' (p. 101). The transplanted English aristocracy remains above the law. More fundamentally, as in Keneally, the English are depicted as a plague on the country: as Garnet says, 'most of us on this island are infected' (p. 137). For White, colonial Australia is a diseased and corrupt place, far from the carefully constructed nationalist image of a pure and innocent nation surrounded by a corrupt and corrupting world.

⁷⁴ Peter Wolfe, p. 213.

White, like Clarke, shows the land in dichotomous terms as both beautiful and harsh. In Van Diemen's Land the country is 'both pretty and wild' (p. 88), while as Ellen leaves Moreton Bay she sees 'the mangrove banks and the brown river, the latter of which had come out in blue for the occasion' (p. 398). When Ellen is travelling with Jack the country is rough but filled with beauty. They cross 'ridges of quartz and granite which tore feet already torn, past obtrusive branches which whipped and slashed' (p. 303) and are rewarded by a morning that 'was so gently perfect, compounded of birdsong, shifting leaves, and speckled light' (p. 315). However for White, as for Keneally, the arrival of the colonists threatens to destroy the land. As Ellen nears the settlement, she realizes that Moreton Bay 'had begun to exist for her in brick and stone, in dust and glare, in iron and torment' (p. 306). Later she perceives that beneath the superficial attractions of the settlement lie 'the dust, the stones, the ruts [...]; the native trees scrubbier and more deformed for their contact with intrusive man; stone and brick houses in sturdy imitation of a tradition' (p. 369). Her vision of the malign impact of white settlement on Australia is reminiscent of Keneally's description of the sham nature of his colonial township in which the attempts to reproduce England result in destroying Australia. This is a subject I shall return to in later chapters.

White also depicts early colonial Australia as an essentially masculine society, one in which women were expected to play a docile and submissive role and 'wives were seen by the bourgeois class as a form of property and as instruments of reproduction'.⁷⁵ As in *The Commandant*, women are presented as frail and in constant danger from poor health. Ellen has been forbidden to ride because she once miscarried and the Commandant sends Mrs Lovell to Sydney because she is 'so fatigued' that she needs 'a change of air' (p. 392). Women are also the carriers of propriety and standards. Mrs Merivale typifies the settler refusal to look at what she does not want to see, being 'adept at closing her mind to awfulness' (p. 11), and saying, after listening to the emancipist Delaney's account of the killing of two shepherds by Aborigines, that 'such a world as this is not fit for a decent person to live in' (p. 24). However Ellen, like Frances O'Beirne, does not easily submit to playing the role expected of her in this masculine

⁷⁵ Summers, p. 296.

world. She is a disruptive presence, with a highly developed sexuality, and her disorderly nature is marked by her affinity for dirt, which Mary Douglas has said ‘offends against order. Eliminating it is not a negative movement, but a positive effort to organise the environment’.⁷⁶ From her early sexual encounter with Garnet Roxburgh, consummated on leaf-mould and tree ferns, through her re-creation as an Aboriginal fetish smeared ‘with a rancid fat [...], followed by an application of charcoal’ (p. 251), to her appearance at the edge of Moreton Bay naked and filthy after her journey with Jack, Ellen is associated with dirt and the disruption of order it carries with it. She refuses to submit to the ordered world of Moreton Bay, even after she has been cleaned and dressed appropriately, and revolts against its masculine society, where women are expected to be essentially decorative and domestic. She remains open to dirt and the disorder it brings, and it is this that enables her to see the ‘falsities, cruelties and restrictions of civilization’ that lie beneath its orderly exterior.⁷⁷ It is unsurprising that, at the novel’s end, she finds herself looking calmly at the semen-like ‘tea-stain, widening, darkening, in the folds of [her] skirt’ (p. 404) caused by the clumsiness of Mr Jevons.

Through his depiction of Ellen’s relationship with Jack, White, like Anderson, seeks to present a more complex picture of the convict than the stereotypical innocent victim. Similar motives seem to underpin his presentation of Ellen’s time with an Aboriginal group. Unlike the other writers discussed so far, White brings the Aborigines into his novel, rather than treating them as mysterious strangers. In doing so he seeks to use them to interrogate received ideas of the civilized and the primitive. However, he depicts them as savage, vicious and degraded both in their relationships with each other and in their treatment of Ellen. Their society is in effect an inverted form of white society and does not present any very attractive alternative to it. Some critics, such as Veronica Brady, have argued that White’s use of Aborigines is intended to show ‘on the one hand the impotence of white culture, and on the other the liberating effect of contact

⁷⁶ Douglas, p. 2.

⁷⁷ Karin Hansson, ‘The Indigenous and the Metropolitan in *A Fringe of Leaves*’, *World Literature Written in English*, 24 (1984), 178-89 (p. 179).

with the “savage” domain which they represent and inhabit’, and to emphasize that, for all its brutality, their way of life enables them to tap into a spiritual dimension lost in white Australia.⁷⁸ Others, like Gibson, suggest that White’s approach is ‘in part, a realist’s call to face up to actualities about Aboriginal society’ rather than romanticizing it.⁷⁹ However I find it hard to disagree with Kay Schaffer’s comment that White’s Aborigines ‘belong to an invented past, an evolutionary time. They refer, in the minds of contemporary, white, middle-class readers, to a primitive people existing at a lower level of life’.⁸⁰ As such they play directly into the stereotypical settler views of Aborigines and help to justify arguments for their elimination. The representation of Aborigines is an issue that will recur in my discussion of other, more recent, convict novels in later chapters.

Of all the novels I have discussed, White’s is the least melodramatic in form and style. While White gestures to Clarke’s passion for the melodramatic and the Gothic, for example in his presentation of Jack’s story of the murder of his mistress and his description of Jack’s flogged body, *A Fringe of Leaves* is overwhelmingly a mix of the fabular and the quest, genres which White uses to present Ellen’s journey as a search both for her own soul and for that of Australia, and also to show that, like Keneally, ‘his concern is with all times and places’.⁸¹ White draws on the tradition of the convict novel to explore how ‘suffering is embedded in Australia’s communal past and also (by implication of the novel’s parable) in the present, and beyond Australia’.⁸² White presents early Australia as an all-enveloping prison marked by ‘malice, death, nightmare, and the violation of taboos’, horrors that are masked only by a thin veil of social etiquette.⁸³ In doing so he establishes an image of Australian society that, he suggests, remains true in the 1970s. At the same time he creates, in Ellen Roxburgh, a

⁷⁸ Veronica Brady, ‘A Properly Appointed Humanism: Australian Culture and the Aborigines in Patrick White’s *A Fringe of Leaves*’, *Westerly*, 28.2 (1983), 61-68 (p. 61).

⁷⁹ Gibson, *The Diminishing Paradise*, p. 232.

⁸⁰ Kay Schaffer, *In the Wake of First Contact: The Eliza Fraser Stories* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 172.

⁸¹ Randolph Stow, ‘Transfigured Histories: Recent Novels of Patrick White and Robert Drewe’, *Australian Literary Studies*, 9 (1979-80), 26-38 (p. 38).

⁸² Hergenhan, p. 165.

⁸³ Peter Wolfe, p. 205.

character who prefigures the dissenting voices of his own time, those who seek to challenge the conservative status quo of Australian society and to give a voice and a place to women, Aborigines and other minority groups who had been historically disregarded.

Challenging Stories

At the start of this Chapter I argued that Marcus Clarke's *For the Term of His Natural Life* should be seen as a foundational text that played a central role in creating the collective memories that have underpinned and shaped Australian nationalism. At the same time it should also be seen as foundational in its creation of the genre of convict fiction. It established the codes and conventions against which subsequent convict fictions need to be read. The three later novels that I have considered all clearly pay homage to Clarke's work, whether it be in their presentation of the convicts as the victims of colonial brutality, engaged in a struggle with their gaolers presented in melodramatic terms as a primal battle between good and evil, in their depiction of early colonial society as a place of suppression and repression, where challenges to the approved version of history are unwelcome and resisted, or in the construction of early colonial Australia as a conformist society that was hostile to the world outside. In doing so they write 'from within the framework of the Australian tradition' that Clarke had established.⁸⁴ However, they also reflect the changing circumstances of their own times, using a form of stereoscopic vision to make their works speak to their contemporary Australia.

These novels were written at a time when, as I suggested earlier, the stories and myths that underpinned Anglo-Australian identity were coming under strain. Growing demands for the recognition of Aboriginal rights were accompanied by the start of a process of reinstating Aborigines into Australian history and the recognition of the endemic violence that marked white colonization (W. E. H. Stanner's 1968 Boyer

⁸⁴ Schaffer, *Women and the Bush*, p. 28.

lectures can be seen as something of a turning point here).⁸⁵ At the same time the fundamental belief in post-colonization Australia as a white, Anglo-Celtic nation was threatened by the ending of the White Australia policy. The loosening of ties with the British mother country, symbolized by Australia's involvement in an Asian war at the behest of the USA, and reinforced by the United Kingdom's decision to join the European Common Market, and so undermine trading links with Commonwealth countries, further unsettled traditional Anglo-Australian identities. Finally the patriarchal basis of Australian society was coming under threat from the feminist movement, and more widely the culture of conformity and deference was being challenged by assertive campaigns for individual and group rights. For those Australians who had grown up in a settled and secure culture, the tectonic plates on which their society was founded all seemed to be shifting.

Unsurprisingly writers both reflected the social changes surrounding them and sought to use them to establish new patterns of myth and story. In returning to the roots of Australia's past, convict novels such as those I have discussed opened up and questioned some of the myths that Clarke created and that were fundamental to settler Australians' sense of identity. There are three areas in particular where these writers rework and refine Clarke's narrative. First, they articulate the conflict between the individual conscience and authority in a way that confronts the historical Australian commitment to conformity and rejection of the new, the different and the foreign. Halloran's transformation from dutiful soldier to rebel, Frances O'Beirne's exposure of the complicity of silence that lies at the heart of Moreton Bay, and Ellen Roxburgh's espousal of the marginalized convicts and Aborigines, all contest the prevailing narrative of settler history that sought to suppress dissent and stifle alternative ways of reading the past. Similarly Anderson's emphasis on the inevitable spread of new ideas shows up the futility of the attempt to preserve Australia in the aspic of the legacy of 1890s nationalism. Second, they increasingly challenge the masculine construction of Australia by establishing space for female action, both through the recognition of the

⁸⁵ W. E. H. Stanner, *After the Dreaming: Black and White Australians – An Anthropologist's View* (Sydney: Australian Broadcasting Commission, 1969).

importance of the domestic in Anderson and through White's use of Ellen's experiences to confront the suppressions of official history. Third, they show how state violence, exemplified by the transgressive floggings that are central to each of the novels, catalyzes the questioning of social values and leads to demands for a more just society. It is particularly the newly aware and active female protagonists who make the demand for justice, whether it be Frances's request that Martin should be warned not flogged for an action that did not harm her or Ellen's request for a pardon for Jack Chance. As such the novels speak to their own times when the state monopoly of power was being contested.

However, in the same way as the conservative pattern of Australian politics was put under pressure by the social changes of the 1960s and 1970s but not fundamentally unsettled by them, so in these novels the challenges to the myths of Australian history, nationhood and identity effect no lasting change. The responses to the violence meted out to the bodies of the flogged convicts do not fundamentally disturb the national narrative and Frances and Ellen sail away from Moreton Bay leaving the power structures they have questioned unchanged, except that they will perhaps operate with a little more humanity in the future. The fundamental myths and stories that I discussed in Chapter 1 retain their hegemonic power. Indeed, as Richard White says, 'the irony was that, although many of the plays, novels and films produced in the 1970s were intensely critical of aspects of Australian life, they were absorbed by the "new nationalism" and applauded for their Australianness'.⁸⁶

In the following chapters I will consider a number of convict novels written over the twenty years between the 1988 Bicentenary celebrations and former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's 2008 *Apology to Australia's Indigenous Peoples*.⁸⁷ This was another period when the dominant narratives of white Australia came under pressure from a variety of sources, including the bicentenary itself, the Mabo and Wik judgments which restored some Aboriginal land rights, the referendum on whether Australia should

⁸⁶ Richard White, p. 170.

⁸⁷ Kevin Rudd, 'Apology to Australia's Indigenous Peoples', Commonwealth of Australia House of Representatives, *Debates*, 13 February 2008, pp. 167-71.

become a republic, and so cut some of its remaining symbolic ties to the United Kingdom, and the publication of the *Bringing Them Home* report with its evidence of persistent mistreatment of Aborigines by the state and other institutions.⁸⁸ In considering these novels, therefore, I shall be centrally concerned to establish whether, and if so to what extent, they have contested the foundational myths of settler Australia, and whether their attempts imaginatively to reconstruct Australia's early colonial history have more fundamentally unsettled the dominant narrative of the nation than did their predecessors.

⁸⁸ Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, *Bringing Them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families* (Sydney: Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997).

CHAPTER 3

**PERFORMING DISPOSSESSION: THOMAS KENEALLY, KATE
GRENVILLE, DEBRA ADELAIDE AND THE THEATRE OF
COLONIZATION**

Bicentennial Blues

On 26 January 1988, Australia Day, eleven ships entered Farm Cove, Sydney. They were vessels of the First Fleet Re-enactment voyage, which had left England ‘farewelled by the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh and a very large crowd, [...] on 13 May 1987, 200 years to the day after the original voyage’.¹ Their theatrical arrival, exactly two hundred years after the arrival of the First Fleet, formed part of the celebration of the Bicentenary of the British settlement, or invasion, of Australia. However, as well as sailing into Sydney they also sailed into a controversy, which they had been partly instrumental in stirring up, over the role of the Bicentenary itself. On the one hand were those who saw the celebrations as essentially commemorating the foundational act of British settlement, an approach that was ‘unlikely to engage those who had come more recently from other countries and certain to offend many Aboriginal Australians’.² On the other were those who saw it as an opportunity for ‘displaying the Australian people to themselves in all their multicultural diversity’, with a consequent downplaying of the British contribution to Australian history and culture.³ As a result the Bicentenary became the stage for a performance of the conflict between those who wanted to perpetuate and refresh the myths of settlement discussed in Chapter 1 and those who wanted to rewrite them in order to establish a more complex and nuanced story of the country's past.

¹ Denis O’Brien, *The Bicentennial Affair: The Inside Story of Australia’s ‘Birthday Bash’* (Crows Nest, New South Wales: Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 1991), p. 163.

² Stuart Macintyre, *A Concise History of Australia*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 285.

³ Tony Bennett, ‘Introduction: National Times’, in *Celebrating the Nation: A Critical Study of Australia’s Bicentenary*, ed. by Tony Bennett and others (St Leonards, New South Wales: Allen & Unwin, 1992), pp. xiii-xviii (pp. xvi-xvii).

The 1988 Bicentenary provided ‘the first officially organised, territory-wide commemorations of the nation’s founding’.⁴ The 1888 centenary, which was largely confined to New South Wales and greeted even there with hostility from the nationalist *Sydney Bulletin*, had been primarily a celebration of British rule in a form that glossed over ‘the embarrassment of convict origins to locate the continent within a British-centred project of discovery, settlement and development’.⁵ The 1938 sesquicentenary, again mainly celebrated in New South Wales, retained the focus on British rule, showing Governor Phillip arriving ‘more as an emissary Englishman than as an incoming Australian’ in order ‘to claim Australia as “the most valuable acquisition Great Britain had ever made”’.⁶ Moreover, in a classic example of the settler suppression of history, he did so almost alone, ‘for at both the re-enactment and the subsequent March to Nationhood through Sydney, the convict portion of the First Fleet was officially deemed to have been absent from the moment of the penal colony’s foundation’.⁷ The Aborigines were present, however, for ‘a group [...] were kidnapped from near Menindee, held captive for a week, and forced to play “their” part in the Sydney proceedings’.⁸ Importantly, however, ‘another group of Indigenous peoples, along with their non-Indigenous supporters, were enacting a different story of the day, one they called the Aboriginal Day of Mourning’, calling on white Australians to ‘rectify the negative impacts this invasion has had on Indigenous peoples’.⁹ The 1988 Bicentenary gave settler Australians across the country the opportunity to commemorate their history and achievements free of quasi-imperial trappings and free of the felt need to repress their convict origins. However such a commemoration, which was marketed under the slogan of ‘Celebration of a Nation’, sharply raised the difficult and bitterly contested questions that had been suppressed for many years. What nation was being

⁴ John Hutchinson, ‘State Festivals, Foundation Myths and Cultural Politics in Immigrant Nations’, in *Celebrating the Nation*, ed. by Bennett and others, pp. 3-25 (p. 3).

⁵ Bennett, pp. xiii & xiv.

⁶ Bennett, p. xvi.

⁷ Bennett, p. xvi.

⁸ Meaghan Morris, ‘Panorama: The Live, the Dead and the Living’, in *Nation, Culture, Text: Australian Cultural and Media Studies*, ed. by Graeme Turner (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 19-58 (p. 54).

⁹ Catriona Elder, *Being Australian: Narratives of National Identity* (Crows Nest, New South Wales: Allen & Unwin, 2007), pp. 241 & 242.

celebrated? What national story was being told? And how could the commemoration of the arrival in Sydney Cove of a British fleet carrying soldiers, sailors and transported convicts be made to engage the nation as a whole?

Tony Bennett has drawn attention to the relevance of the work of Mona Ozouf on state festivals in revolutionary France, published in English in the same year as the Bicentenary, for considering the attempts to make the Bicentenary an inclusive celebration. Ozouf has written that one of the prime purposes of festivals is to be ‘therapeutic, a reconstruction, as in the utopias of the eighteenth century, of a social bond that has come undone’, but that while they were intended ‘to bring together the entire community, [...] they never ceased to exclude some people and to engender pariahs’.¹⁰ Different concepts of national history, and the absence of truly shared memory, mean that at least some elements of the community will be disaffected and remain outside the commemorative circle. In the context of the Australian Bicentenary, the very variety of attitudes to the past made an inclusive and meaningful celebration difficult. As John Hutchinson has put it:

the 1788 settlement symbolised for Liberals the centrality of Britain and the Crown in Australia whereas, for Labor, it meant the founding of a new democratic culture [...]. For Australians of ‘Anglo-Celtic’ stock, it symbolised their priority over the post-war European migrants [...]. For Aborigines, now struggling for land rights, the settlement symbolised their conquest and near ‘genocide’.¹¹

The Australian Bicentennial Authority intended the Bicentenary to be an inclusive celebration both of the span of Australian history, including Aboriginal history, and of its multicultural present. Inevitably, however, it became a site of contention between those who saw that history as ‘a worthy enterprise, leading to the transplantation of European civilisation and peoples and to various forms of political, social, cultural, and

¹⁰ Mona Ozouf, *Festivals and the French Revolution*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), pp. 10 & 11.

¹¹ Hutchinson, p. 16.

especially economic development’, and those for whom it was a ‘profoundly discomfiting story of invasion, colonisation, dispossession, exploitation, institutionalisation, and attempted genocide’.¹² The Bicentenary brought to a head issues and tensions that had been developing for many years as Aboriginal peoples in particular challenged the normative, settler, construction of the country’s history.

This fundamental disagreement about the nature of Australia’s past lay at the heart of the History Wars discussed briefly earlier. However, the struggle over history exemplified a wider opposition between ‘an emerging orthodoxy in Australian public life, [...], which advocates openness and plurality’ and ‘a residual older orthodoxy, [...], which continues to argue for a unitary definition of the nation, for the importance of a single national tradition’.¹³ The arguments over the nation’s history were fundamentally a battle over national identity, over what sort of nation Australia was and what it meant to be Australian, a battle in which the conservative guardians of national honour sought to repel those who, they believed, wanted to rewrite the accepted story of Australian history and in doing so ‘to denigrate the nation, to infiltrate institutions and corrupt impressionable minds’.¹⁴ For these traditionalists the narrative of Australia’s past was indissolubly bound up with its British heritage, symbolized by the landing of the First Fleet and its convicts, and with the enduring Anglo-Celtic core culture discussed in Chapter 1. The arguments over the past, which polarized historical interpretation into the good and the bad, ‘the one deemed impermissible and the other obligatory’, led to a situation in which ‘censorship was as apparent, [...], as memory, and a discussion of uncertain outcome opened up between the advocates of oblivion and the advocates of memory’.¹⁵ In doing so the arguments reopened the long-running Australian debates around historical amnesia and the willed erasure of those past events that did not fit neatly into the story of Australian progress.

¹² Ann Curthoys, ‘Mythologies’, in *The Australian Legend and Its Discontents*, ed. by Richard Nile (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2000), pp. 11-41 (p. 12).

¹³ David Goodman, ‘Postscript 1991 – Explicating Openness’, in *Celebrating the Nation*, ed. by Bennett and others, pp. 191-98 (p. 194).

¹⁴ Stuart Macintyre and Anna Clark, *The History Wars*, new edn (Carlton, Victoria: Melbourne University Press, 2004), p. 9.

¹⁵ Macintyre and Clark, pp. 10 & 11; Ozouf, p. 169.

Central to the arguments that fuelled the History Wars was conflict over the representation of white conquest of the land and Aboriginal dispossession. The rising tide of Aboriginal protest, both at their treatment by the settler population and at the way in which this was presented in traditional histories, became starkly visible at the time of the Bicentenary, with the Aboriginal declaration of a Year of Mourning, their renaming of Australia Day as Invasion Day and the large March for Freedom, Justice and Hope in Sydney at the same time as the official celebrations of British settlement took place. The extent and fervour of the protests confronted Anglo-Celtic settler Australians with the need to ‘rethink the narrative of settlement of an empty space, the mythology of heroic conquest’ and to recognize that ‘Aborigines had moved to the centre in the narratives of origin’.¹⁶ As importantly, these protests ‘challenged and interrogated the current ideas of nation by forcing people to accept that “the very nature” of the nation is ambiguous, contradictory, contested’.¹⁷ They put the Anglo-Celtic narrative of the past, with its story of the creation of a thriving society from an empty land, and its heroization of the convict-settler who had cleared and cultivated the land and peacefully removed the indigenous peoples, under increasing strain.

The Bicentenary also raised the uncomfortable issue of how far Australia had become a multicultural society, and particularly how well it had responded to non-white migration following the ending of the White Australia policy in the 1960s. The Bicentenary sought to affirm a multicultural Australia, not least in the travelling Australian Bicentennial Exhibition. This featured a film, ‘Celebration of a Nation’, that opened with features of successful migrants or descendants of migrants, suggesting that ‘it seems not to matter whence one came, or what preconceptions one had, the outcome of the immigration act is assured’.¹⁸ However this positive, affirmative, approach was undercut by ‘the year’s only major public debate, an ugly affair centring on national immigration policies and the value of multiculturalism which revived old prejudices and

¹⁶ Leigh Dale, ‘Mainstreaming Australia’, in *The Australian Legend*, ed. by Nile, pp. 311-25 (pp. 320-21).

¹⁷ Graeme Turner, *Making it National: Nationalism and Australian Popular Culture* (St Leonards, New South Wales: Allen & Unwin, 1994), p. 87.

¹⁸ Cochrane and Goodman, p. 179.

antagonisms never completely laid to rest with the White Australia policy'.¹⁹ This debate centred on levels of Asian immigration and the desirability, as some, including then Opposition leader John Howard, saw it, of slowing 'the influx of Asian immigrants to preserve social cohesion'.²⁰ It is a debate that, as we have seen, has its roots in the nineteenth century and has brought with it the demonization of those not considered to be authentic Australians or who can be portrayed as not sharing Australian values.²¹ As Leigh Dale has put it:

These self-appointed custodians of Australian identity experience the representation of all differences as new, as threatening, as destabilising. As a motley group of strangers crowd into the cultural space of the nation, the myth of the monocultural past is being used to legitimate rhetorically violent attempts to exclude them.²²

As the clashes between Anglo-Celtic young men and others of Middle Eastern appearance that broke out at Cronulla and other Sydney beaches in 2005 testify, these exclusionary attempts are not just rhetorically violent. Rather the way in which 'patriotism has been merged once again with white nationalism', and the revival of the protean convict myth of settler Australian victimhood, this time under the guise of the country being overrun by illegitimate, Asian, asylum-seekers, brings with it a constant threat of inter-racial violence.²³

The First Fleet Re-enactment project provided a very visible focus for those who believed that the Bicentenary should be a celebration of the history and success of white British Australia. The reluctance of the Bicentennial Authority to support the project was seen as representing a loss of nerve, an unwillingness to engage with the convict

¹⁹ O'Brien, p. 302.

²⁰ Macintyre and Clark, p. 122.

²¹ A recent example of this can be seen in Anglo-Celtic former Olympic champion Dawn Fraser's attack on tennis player Nick Kyrgios, whose parents are Greek and Malaysian, for un-Australian behaviour and her suggestion that he go back to where his parents came from (Esther Addley, 'Australian sports stars clash in racism row', *Guardian*, 8 July 2015, p. 6).

²² Dale, p. 321.

²³ Tim Soutphommasane, *The Virtuous Citizen: Patriotism in a Multicultural Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 3.

past and to celebrate ‘Australia’s achievement in creating a civil society. The convicts were people. England destroyed them; Australia made them citizens’.²⁴ However the project, which had been preceded by an annual publicity stunt in which the organiser, Jonathan King, and his friends ‘dressed up in period costume to come ashore at Sydney Cove on Australia Day and claim possession of Australia’, was less concerned with rehabilitating the convicts than with celebrating the British foundations of Australia.²⁵ As such it cut against the inclusive approach which the Australian Bicentennial Authority was seeking to take. While the Authority eventually overcame its reluctance to endorse the First Fleet project and attempted to integrate it into a wider commemoration of ‘*all* the voyages of arrival to Australia’, so including Aborigines, convicts and more recent arrivals, it is hard to see this as anything other than a post hoc attempt to come to terms with the forces of those who sought to make the Bicentenary an exclusive rather than an inclusive event.²⁶

As the Authority tried to steer between the Scylla of ‘Aboriginal demonstrators, who denounced white Australia’s black history’ and the Charybdis of ‘traditionalists who accused the Authority of denying the British contribution to Australia’s heritage’, it increasingly fell back on spectacle as a way of avoiding controversy, emphasizing the idea of the Bicentenary as a national party, a ‘birthday bash’.²⁷ The focus on spectacle was seen in the final arrangements for the Australia Day celebration in Sydney, which brought together ‘a procession into Sydney Harbour both of Tall Ships (symbolising multiculturalism) and of a re-enactment of the First Fleet (symbolising British origins)’, an uncomfortable attempt to please all parties that probably satisfied none.²⁸ Theatre and spectacle, of course, lay at the heart of the First Fleet Re-enactment project itself. However, while the Bicentennial Authority used spectacle to evacuate the celebrations of political meaning, those involved with the First Fleet project used it to inject politics into the celebrations. Anne McClintock has argued that ‘in our time, national collectivity

²⁴ George Shaw, ‘Bicentennial Writing: Revealing the Ash in the Australian Soul’, in *1988 and All That*, ed. by George Shaw (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1988), pp. 1-15 (p. 3).

²⁵ Macintyre and Clark, p. 103.

²⁶ Cochrane and Goodman, p. 178.

²⁷ Macintyre, p. 286.

²⁸ Hutchinson, p. 20.

is experienced preeminently through spectacle'.²⁹ Those at the heart of the First Fleet project used the spectacle of its theatrical entrance into Sydney to reinforce settler collectivity and in doing so to stage the Bicentenary as a celebration of British settlement.

Writing about the way in which we create and represent the past, Hayden White has said that historians use 'all of the techniques that we would normally expect to find in the emplotment of a novel or a play'.³⁰ In his book *The Road to Botany Bay*, Paul Carter has argued that while historians have claimed that 'Australia was always simply a stage where history occurred, history a theatrical performance', and that 'history is the playwright', the historian 'merely a copyist or amanuensis', in practice it is they who are the playwrights.³¹ Carter illustrates his argument by examining Manning Clark's description of the creation of the first British settlement at Port Jackson which, he says, 'does not simply reproduce the events: it narrates them, clarifies and orders them'.³² In doing so he 'creates the sense of diverse activities converging to the single goal of settlement', so that his 'choice of events itself contributes to the illusion of growing purpose: for what is narrated are precisely those events indispensable to foundation'.³³ This presentation of early colonization as theatre can, of course, be traced back to the First Fleet writers. Watkin Tench explicitly presents the landing of the convicts as a scene performed for an 'indifferent spectator', and it is followed by a series of other theatrical set-pieces, such as the ceremonial taking possession of the country before the assembled convicts, with the marine battalion marching 'with music playing, and colours flying', and the melodramatic wounding of Governor Phillip by an Aborigine filled with 'terror and agitation' at his approach.³⁴ If Australia is a stage on which the

²⁹ Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 374.

³⁰ Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), p. 84 (my emphasis).

³¹ Paul Carter, *The Road to Botany Bay: An Essay in Spatial History* (London: Faber and Faber, 1987), p. xiv.

³² Carter, p. xiv.

³³ Carter, pp. xiv & xv.

³⁴ Capt. Watkin Tench, *Sydney's First Four Years, Being a Reprint of A Narrative of the Expedition to Botany Bay and A Complete Account of the Settlement at Port Jackson by Captain*

historian writes a play, then in 1988 we can see the theatrical presentation of the actual First Fleet in historical writing being reified by the theatrical presence of a replica First Fleet which enacts once again the imperial history of settlement and colonization, only stopping short of dispossession. History as theatre is replaced by theatre as history.

Carter argues that the ‘kind of history, which reduces space to a stage, that pays attention to events unfolding in time alone’, constitutes ‘imperial history’, a form of history whose ‘primary object is not to understand or to interpret: it is to legitimate’.³⁵ If imperial history legitimates, then at the same time it must deligitimate: if it endorses British imperial possession it must endorse Aboriginal dispossession. Moreover it must also attack perceived threats to the imperial narrative, and the culture it produces, from outsiders, those who do not belong to the dominant group and who constitute ‘a set of threatening but invisible others’ only too ready to question and undermine ‘mainstream’ views.³⁶ In this respect, Carter’s imperial history is another construction of settler colonial history, a monocultural narrative that writes the Australian past as the inevitable and desirable triumph of the convict-settlers, and excludes the contribution of other peoples to the creation of contemporary Australia. Writing shortly before the Bicentenary, Carter sought to counter the teleological simplicity of imperial history with a more complex form of ‘spatial history’ which ‘is not about chronological priority: it is about *historical* beginnings’.³⁷ Such a history ‘does not go confidently forward. It does not organize its subject matter into a nationalist enterprise’.³⁸ Rather ‘it advances exploratively, even metaphorically, recognizing that the future is invented’, and questioning ‘the assumption that the past has been settled once and for all’.³⁹ It is a history that listens for, and legitimizes, the voices of those who are not usually heard, particularly Aborigines and convicts, in order to create a richer and more complex narrative of the past. This form of history – plural, multivocal and diverse – might be

Watkin Tench of the Marines, with introduction and annotations by L. F. Fitzhardinge (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1961), pp. 38, 41 & 179.

³⁵ Carter, p. xvi.

³⁶ Dale, p. 316.

³⁷ Carter, p. xxiv.

³⁸ Carter, p. 294.

³⁹ Carter, p. 294.

represented as a form of multicultural history, with its concern for the variety of historical experience and its desire to perform ‘a timely mutiny against imperial history’s methodological assumptions’.⁴⁰

The more open, plural and multicultural history espoused by Carter should have been welcomed by fiction writers seeking to explore Australian history, opening up as it did space for counter-narratives, the opportunity to explore aspects of history which were hidden and repressed, and the scope for interrogating the myths and stories which legitimized historic centres of power. The events surrounding the Bicentenary, with their unsettling of the dominant historical narrative, provided an opening for such a move, for the imaginative reframing of Australia’s relationship to its early colonial and convict history by challenging the settler construction of the past and embracing cultures – both indigenous and immigrant – which had been marginalized by imperial history. However imperial history, history as theatre, dominates perhaps the best known of the literary works commissioned by the Australian Bicentennial Authority, Kate Grenville’s 1988 novel, *Joan Makes History*.⁴¹ This interlaces the story of Joan’s life from her symbolic birth on the eve of Federation in 1901 with a series of scenes from key points in Australian history in which an imagined Joan features as a kind of Everywoman to illuminate them from a female perspective. The use of a central female character, of course, intentionally subverts the traditional marginalization of women in Australian culture and society, but much else about the novel essentially reproduces the pattern of white settler history. In the scene depicting the arrival of the convicts, Joan, who ‘had been sentenced to be transported to the bottom of the earth for the term of my natural life’ (p. 35), swims ashore ahead of anyone else. There she finds herself alone except for ‘the people who lived there, whom I glimpsed from the corner of my eye, but who were never where I was looking’ (p. 38). To the arriving officers and convicts, New South Wales appears effectively as an empty stage waiting for the play of colonization to be performed, ‘a blank new land waiting to have its history written on it’ (p. 39). While

⁴⁰ Carter, p. 295.

⁴¹ Kate Grenville, *Joan Makes History*, intro. by Don Anderson (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1993). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

Joan knows that ‘the silent dark people watching from their secret places knew this to be a lie’ (p. 39), she makes no challenge to this view of her new home. Thereafter Grenville’s presentation of Australian history is a largely uncritical version of ‘a traditional Australian catechism – convicts, squatters, gold, the Land Acts, the Kelly Gang, the Anzacs, the Depression, World War II, etc’, one in which Australian history is synonymous with the history of non-indigenous Australians.⁴² Event follows event in a national pageant, good interspersed with bad, to the pre-ordained act of Federation, another canonical moment in white Australian history. As Graham Huggan puts it, the novel restages white male history, turning it into ‘a series of mock-narratives of re-enactment in which the past is melodramatically replayed as both “high” tragedy and “low” farce’.⁴³ In its reductive, teleological approach to the past it fails to offer any serious challenge to the settler narrative of history, a failure which, I will argue, is repeated in the other historical fictions produced both at the time of the Bicentenary and later.

Acting History: Thomas Keneally’s *The Playmaker*

Like Grenville, Thomas Keneally, in his 1987 convict novel *The Playmaker*, writes a form of imperial history, reproducing and endorsing the act of British colonization and the settler narrative which it engendered.⁴⁴ The book, a Bicentenary novel *avant l’heure*, is suffused with theatre and the theatrical. Centred on the preparations for a production of George Farquhar’s 1706 play *The Recruiting Officer* in Sydney in 1789, with the parts played by convicts, it is presented in the form of a play from the initial cast list through the division into five parts, or acts, to the epilogue in which some of the characters’ subsequent lives are summarized.⁴⁵ It was itself rapidly adapted as a play –

⁴² Alan D. Gilbert, ‘Editing *Australians: A Historical Library*’, in *1988 and All That*, ed. by Shaw, pp. 92-102 (pp. 98-99).

⁴³ Graham Huggan, *Australian Literature: Postcolonialism, Racism, Transnationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 68.

⁴⁴ Thomas Keneally, *The Playmaker* (London: Sceptre, 1988). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

⁴⁵ George Farquhar, *The Recruiting Officer*, ed. by John Ross, 2nd edn (London: A & C Black, 1991).

Timberlake Wertenbaker's *Our Country's Good* (1988) – which later spawned an operatic treatment of transportation in the 2008 drama, *The Convict's Opera*, which draws in its turn on John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* (1728).⁴⁶ This interlocked and multi-layered sequence of texts performs history as theatre and importantly as comic theatre, a form which shows how old institutions give way to new forms under pressure from the young and socially daring. In Keneally's novel, the new society they construct is the foundation of contemporary settler Australia, with all its myths and stories of origin.

At the heart of *The Playmaker* is Lieutenant Ralph Clark, who directs and produces the play but who also has a more significant theatrical role, that of writing, directing and producing the play of the colonization of Australia which is going on around him. Just as he must create a coherent performance of *The Recruiting Officer*, so he must create a coherent performance of colonization. And as he is one of the rulers of the new colony, this performance must necessarily justify the foundational act of settlement by demonstrating that it led to a desired outcome, that colonization was a 'model of order emerging inexorably out of chaos'.⁴⁷ *The Playmaker* is the script he writes, one in which pre-colonization New South Wales represents 'the colonial paradigm of anachronistic space, a land perpetually out of time in modernity' and which is 'inhabited by cannibals, dervishes and witch doctors', a land waiting to be recreated as a modern civilization by the colonists.⁴⁸

In his novel, Keneally draws heavily on the narratives of the First Fleet writers, lightly fictionalizing both convicts and gaolers, but, as we shall see, essentially restaging their story of settlement in what Peter Pierce calls 'an altogether sunnier version of the national history' than that presented in the earlier *Bring Larks and Heroes*.⁴⁹ Keneally

⁴⁶ Timberlake Wertenbaker, *Our Country's Good* (London: Methuen, 2003); Stephen Jeffreys, *The Convict's Opera* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2008); John Gay, *The Beggar's Opera*, ed. by Vivien Jones and David Lindley (London: Methuen, 2010).

⁴⁷ Carter, *The Road to Botany Bay*, p. 305.

⁴⁸ McClintock, p. 41.

⁴⁹ Peter Pierce, *Australian Melodramas: Thomas Keneally's Fiction* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1995), p. 29.

stages his play on the set of Sydney Cove, where the new rulers seek to impose order, physical, social and sexual, on the country, the indigenous peoples and the convicts. Typical of Keneally's change of attitude between the two novels is his presentation of the physical world of Sydney Cove. Where in *Bring Larks and Heroes* British crops failed in alien conditions, here there are 'large vegetable gardens' (p. 31) and Amstead, the convict guarding one of the islands in the harbour, 'had beans growing there, potatoes and three orange-trees from Brazil. Turnips and carrots grew on the flatter south side' (p. 32). While the land contains unknown and hostile plants, 'cabbage-tree palms, native cedars, the strange, obdurate eucalyptus trees of a type which [...], occurred nowhere else in Creation' as well as 'a steely tree too which when struck with the axe either took a gap out of the axe or began to bleed a blood-red sap' (pp. 29-30), it now responds to proper treatment and respect. Moreover the native plants and animals are the subject of study by the intellectually curious among the officers, who find it 'picturesque and curious and worthy of future study' (p. 48). Nature here, while strange and disconcerting, is a more benign presence than in earlier convict fictions.

However, the natural world serves primarily as a backdrop to the creation of the township of Sydney, which represents the triumph of orderly civilization over the disorder of the natural world. In contrast to Keneally's earlier novel, the establishment of Sydney is not seen as the creation of a sham civilization. Rather the emerging town is likened to 'London, Paris, Vienna and any other settlement marked by the European genius' (p. 30). It is in the process of being transformed into a town of brick and stone in deference to the wishes of the Governor (H. E.), who has a 'powerful sense that a brick was a statement of civilisation and social order' (p. 49). At the same time the township is being 'transformed symbolically into a place, that is, a space with a history' by the process of naming.⁵⁰ Naming things, Ralph Clark thinks, 'was to end their innocence' (p. 29), and certainly for the colonists naming and mapping the country is intimately linked to owning and using it, and to seeing it in ways that make it familiar to English eyes. As Simon Ryan puts it, 'the imperial eye thus forms knowledge of the colony

⁵⁰ Carter, *The Road to Botany Bay*, pp. 304 & xxiv.

(both for itself and others) on its own terms'.⁵¹ However even the process of naming is reduced to comedy by Keneally, who says that 'H. E. had named [Sydney] plainly after the distant person of a London political jobber, [...], who had in his care all prisons' (p. 29).

Within the township, social standing is ordered by mapping it onto the physical world. To the West of the stream running through the Cove is Lagtown, with its male and female convict camps and marine guards, while to the East is an area which had been 'rationally cleared', where senior officers live, together with 'those convicts who had trades and a good record', 'many public officials', and 'a number of women convicts who occupied the suburb by right of concubinage' (p. 31). The stream forms a permeable barrier, but while there is scope for movement across it as a reward for good, or a punishment for bad, behaviour, the most common cause of transfer is the trafficking of women to become the possessions of officers, affirming that from the start of the colonial adventure 'women's punishment comprised transportation plus enforced whoredom'.⁵² Australian patriarchy and misogyny, and the low standing and self-esteem of Australian women, can, as Miriam Dixson has argued, be traced back to the way in which convict women were treated.⁵³ Keneally does not seriously challenge this except in relation to the female actors in the play, who are allowed considerable autonomy of action. For the rest of the female convicts, only Goose is given some limited power in order that she can 'manage[s] the women's camp' and so 'work[s] some order upon the disorderly desires of Marines and lags alike' (p. 290), in a parody of the wider process of orderly settlement. The bulk of them are figured as degenerate and dependent, like the 'mad, shitty Meg Long' (p. 23) and the 'berserkly enthusiastic' Liz Barber (p. 24). In a world of male homosociality among both gaolers and convicts, the majority of the convict women have no independent role to play.

⁵¹ Simon Ryan, *The Cartographic Eye: How Explorers Saw Australia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 61.

⁵² Anne Summers, *Damned Whores and God's Police: The Colonization of Women in Australia* (Ringwood, Victoria: Penguin, 1975), p. 270.

⁵³ Miriam Dixson, *The Real Matilda: Woman and Identity in Australia – 1788 to the Present*, 4th edn (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 1999), pp. 115-53.

In *Bring Larks and Heroes* Keneally condemned the colonial mission but in *The Playmaker* he is more indulgent. Only the recalcitrant Ross and Campbell retain the attitudes to convicts and the country that pervaded the earlier novel. While they are affronted to be ‘engaged with felons in such an odd back-pocket of a barely known world’ (p. 49), and devote their time to making threats and writing letters of complaint ‘which no ships ever came to collect’ (p. 29), they are essentially representatives of an old world which has been left behind. The New World belongs to those officers who write the foundation of Australia, recording ‘everything to do with this strange reach of the universe’ (p. 48), and in doing so fulfil the ‘imperial responsibility to organize the scattered appearance of phenomena into a series of logically related cause-and-effect facts’.⁵⁴ Meanwhile Clark, the playmaker, approvingly stages the meta-narrative of their Enlightenment passion for classifying, measuring, recording and so possessing the country through their encounters with nature and natives. For Keneally, taming, ordering and settling the country is now a worthy project.

This Enlightenment project is encouraged by H. E., a cosmopolitan outsider figure, part-German, part-Jewish, possibly homosexual, with service around the world, including in Brazil with the Portuguese navy. He is ‘by temperament an explorer, a namer, a taker of longitudes and latitudes’ (p. 252), an ‘agent of sweet reason’ (p. 344) with a ‘prejudice in favour of science’ (p. 162). Above all he has a mission to civilize, and, unlike other commandants such as Logan, he sees both convicts and Aborigines as suitable material for him to work on. He believes that ‘landing on this shore would alter the lags’, and that ‘the prospect of becoming landholders, of having the labour to their land provided for them out of future shipments of felons’ (p. 104) would convert them into hard-working, disciplined people. At the same time he wants to capture an Aborigine ‘so that he could be cultivated and sent back to his people as an ambassador’ (pp. 159-60). For him, given that ‘these Australians were intelligent beings, capable of reciprocating trust and assessing consequences, they were also capable of being

⁵⁴ Carter, *The Road to Botany Bay*, p. 58.

“civilised” in the fullest (British) sense’.⁵⁵ However Keneally fails to engage with the fact that these civilizing projects are mutually contradictory, that the granting of land to the convicts will destroy the Aborigines.

In his restless travelling, his lack of female companionship and his determination to civilize, H. E. epitomizes the will to ‘cast a single, European, male authority over the whole of the planet’.⁵⁶ His immediate concern is to turn the country round Sydney into a place suitable for European occupation by clearing the land. This involves clearing, rather than civilizing, the natives since, as Patrick Wolfe puts it, settler colonization ‘is at base a winner-take-all project whose dominant feature is not exploitation but replacement’, and whose underlying logic is ‘a sustained institutional tendency to eliminate the Indigenous population’.⁵⁷ The building of Sydney both appropriates and alienates land from the Aborigines. While Keneally says that ‘the Cadigal people [...] shared the south side of the harbour with the new penal society’ (p. 161), sharing ownership is no part of the imperial mission. The Aborigines are driven away by the actions and behaviour of the new arrivals, for ‘merely by staying at home, the native gets in the way of settler colonization’.⁵⁸ The logic of colonization requires their elimination. However Keneally presents the tragic encounters between invaders and indigenous peoples as the result of almost comic misunderstandings. Despite talk of the ‘talent for malice which had arrived so abundantly here on the convict ships’ (p. 262), the British are shown as well-meaning but naive, puzzled and confused by the actions of the Aborigines. However this apparent comedy masks the underlying reality of a policy intended to destroy the Aborigines, either by killing them or by assimilating them, in order to ensure permanent and unchallenged European possession of the land.

The Playmaker stages two major encounters between the British and the Aborigines. First a party of British troops goes to capture some natives for H. E., and

⁵⁵ Inga Clendinnen, *Dancing with Strangers: The True History of the Meeting of the British First Fleet and the Aboriginal Australians, 1788* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2005), p. 35.

⁵⁶ McClintock, p. 34.

⁵⁷ Patrick Wolfe, *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology: The Politics and Poetics of an Ethnographic Event* (London: Cassell, 1999), p. 163.

⁵⁸ Wolfe, *Settler Colonialism*, p. 36.

succeeds in taking one, known as Arabanoo. Later a second party goes to bring a native healer, Ca-bahn, to help Arabanoo when he is dying of smallpox. On the first occasion the British encounter an essentially friendly group of Aborigines who participate in a word game with them as ‘exchange of words had become the protocol for meetings between the two societies’ (p. 166). This exchange of language had ‘both a pacifying and scientific value’ (p. 166), although, as I shall explore in more detail in relation to Kate Grenville’s *The Lieutenant*, it also allowed the British to reinforce their physical power by taking power over language, to possess the minds of the Aborigines as well as their land. On this occasion the British use the word game to mask their planned capture of two men, an action which leads to a furious reaction so that ‘all the beach and the entire hillside seemed to Ralph to give off a cloud of missiles’ (p. 168). One captured man tries to escape and his struggles are condemned by the coxswain as ‘black bastard tried to drown poor Johnny’ (p. 169). In what is to become a familiar trope, the victims of aggression are presented as aggressors and the violent invaders as victims, a trope that not only runs through fictions of early encounter but also, as we saw earlier, underpins a key aspect of the construction of the white settler historical narrative which consistently depicts settlers as victims.

The captured Arabanoo is treated by Keneally as a figure of fun, made to wear a naval uniform, used sexually by female convicts and probably by H. E., and paraded round the settlement by H. E. in an attempt to impress on him the superiority of white civilization and to assimilate him to it. However Arabanoo shows resistance to some aspects of British civilization. When he sees a man being flogged he ‘began to whimper. The whimper augmented to a roar of disgust. [...] Before forty blows had been landed he was on his knees wailing’ (p. 177) and has to be led away. This element of Arabanoo’s education, intended to show ‘the splendid impartiality of British justice’, serves only to demonstrate its limitations, as Arabanoo ‘seemed to think that men should not be subjected to such humiliations’.⁵⁹ Like the actors who perform *The Recruiting Officer*, Arabanoo is expected to play his part in the imperial theatre, that of the native eager to learn from the white man, but it is not a part for which he is well suited. He shows H. E.

⁵⁹ Clendinnen, p. 99.

that ‘Australians were rather less teachable than he had thought’, not least because they have ‘their own ways of managing the world’.⁶⁰ The attempt to civilize Arabanoo, to whiten him and convert him into an ambassador to other Aborigines, ends in failure, and with it the attempt to eliminate the Aborigines by assimilation.

Unsurprisingly in the light of the colonists’ action in capturing Arabanoo, at the second encounter the British are met by a more aggressive response from the Aborigines, who are resolved to avoid another man being captured. They threaten the party with spears before leaving them with what is assumed to be a healing pouch but in fact contains a button and ‘a strange, powdery wad of brown matter’ identified as ‘human shit, [...]. Though of a considerable age’ (p. 266), both of which are claimed to belong to the naturalist Sir Joseph Banks. This contemptuous return of the detritus of an earlier white invader can be read as both a demand that these invaders should leave, as Banks did, and as a sign that the British, who brought the smallpox, should use their own magic, not that of the Aborigines, to cure Arabanoo. The colonists will, of course, not leave, nor will they cure Arabanoo. Rather, in the moral economy of the novel, their failure to assimilate him means that he, like the other Aborigines who have contracted smallpox, must die in order to enable the colonists to take unfettered possession of the land.

These set-piece encounters are surrounded by skirmishes between convicts and Aborigines as the invaders seek to assert their right to possession of the country and its people. When a group of convicts who had been ‘thieves of women and fishing nets and spears’ (p. 176) is attacked by Aborigines, the convicts are flogged for their actions. However, at the same time the Aborigines have to be taught that they are not allowed to attack white men. In another example of the reversal of the roles of victim and aggressor, therefore, H. E. plans to send Arabanoo ‘with an armed column’ to tell the offending Aborigines both that the convicts had been punished and that while H. E. ‘did not propose vengeance’ for the assault on the convicts, he did expect ‘freedom of legitimate passage’ (p. 176). Aboriginal resistance to the British invaders of their

⁶⁰ Clendinnen, pp. 36 & 34.

territory is presented as laughable, ineffective and above all unreasonable for, as Wolfe puts it, ‘the invaders entertained few practical doubts as to their entitlement to settle the land, an entitlement whereby indigenous self-defence was itself seen as invasion’.⁶¹ At the same time their resistance can be used to present the settlers in the guise of victims, the object of unreasonable violence from those whose land and bodies they are stealing.

Keneally dedicates *The Playmaker* to ‘Arabanoo and his brethren, still dispossessed’. However, despite Pierce’s claim that the novel shows a ‘subtle sympathy with the condition of the Australian Aborigines’, it contains no serious critique of white colonization.⁶² Moreover, rather than engaging with Aboriginal dispossession the novel performs an act of dispossession itself. By its end the Aborigines have been effectively eliminated, they have disappeared from the text and the colonizers are left alone on the stage. The Aboriginal tragedy gives way to the performance of Farquhar’s comedy, with its creation of a new social order. The colonial encounter at Sydney is already an event in the past of imperial history and the real struggle over land will take place elsewhere, off-stage, where ‘racial frontiers, pushing irresistibly outwards, would be marked in blood, and many Australians would die; some from British bullets, more from disease and starvation’.⁶³ On the stage of Sydney, Keneally and Clark carry out the colonial function less violently but no less effectively by writing the Aborigines out of the script. In a fictional version of the settler narrative the Aborigines simply disappear and the violence of dispossession is hidden from view. By writing the Aborigines out of history Keneally aligns himself with the British colonists for whom Australia is a country in which the Aborigines have no place and must be eliminated, either dying from disease or settler violence or being assimilated into white society more successfully than Arabanoo.

Just as Keneally writes the Aborigines out of Australian history, so he also writes out the bulk of the transported convicts. Keneally’s convicts are not the innocent victims of imperial oppression which they had been in *Bring Larks and Heroes*. Nor are the

⁶¹ Wolfe, *Settler Colonialism*, p. 26.

⁶² Pierce, p. 50.

⁶³ Clendinnen, p. 286.

British rulers guilty of the deceit and trickery which marked their behaviour in that book as well as in other earlier convict novels. Instead, Keneally converts the violent and brutal relationship between gaolers and convicts into an altogether less troubled one. While there are crimes and punishments, there are none of the descriptions of barbaric punishments which marked the tradition started by Clarke. Rather we have ‘sentences of death which are then transmuted into comedy’ as the condemned are pardoned for the ‘encouragement of virtue’ (p. 127). The desire to reform rather than repress the convicts is, of course, seen in its strongest form in the staging of *The Recruiting Officer*, with its redemptive potential for those convicts chosen to play a part in it.

Although Keneally provides a more positive portrayal of the relationship between convicts and gaolers, the convicts are, for the most part, stereotyped as ‘the mad and the stupid and the relentless villains’ (p. 41). They occupy a place in the hierarchy of Sydney akin to that of the Aborigines, one of ‘a host of “inferior” groups’ when ‘mapped, measured and ranked against the “universal standard” of the white male child’.⁶⁴ While the female convicts are made to conform to the stereotype of unruly whores, the black men, Jack Williams and John Caesar, are figured as ‘the embodiments of prehistoric promiscuity and excess’.⁶⁵ When Williams is one of a party which encounters a group of Aborigines they explore his body to establish what kind of thing he is and, with wearying predictability, when he drops his trousers, he is found to be ‘excellently endowed’ so that ‘the sight of Jack’s manhood brought some yelps of praise from the two older natives and from the young woman’ (p. 108). As a West Indian, Williams can only be defined by his sexual potency, a stereotyping which is reinforced later when he is exiled from the colony and we learn that he is ‘a man of ferocious hungers [...]. What a life it would be for young Lovell out there on the rock when Black Jack grew frantic with hunger or passion’ (p. 126). Caesar flees from the colony after being found guilty of stealing food but hangs around the fringes of the settlement and at one point comes back to steal food and assault, possibly rape, Mary Brenham, one of the actors in the play and Ralph Clark’s lover. He is then described as a ‘Satanic bastard’ (p.

⁶⁴ McClintock, p. 51.

⁶⁵ McClintock, p. 44.

239), ‘a great black cull’ (p. 239) and a ‘man as big and hungry as that and carrying arms’ (p. 240). It is revealing that, at a time when multiculturalism was being officially embraced, Keneally chose to draw on a long-standing trope in which ‘black and white are absolutely differentiated in the figures of the white woman and the black rapist, a trope which functions to justify the extreme exercise of control and retributive justice’.⁶⁶ In doing so he helps both to reinforce the conflation of black men, sexual power and crime, and to project the image of the black man as the nightmare figure, the dark and threatening other which white Australians fear and will in future keep out of the country through a politics of racial discrimination.

The mass of convicts are presented as clinging to a past that has been left behind, retaining their old habits and language. Like the recalcitrant officers Ross and Campbell, they cling to the old world ways of doing things. They provide comic relief from the serious business of colonization, parodying the middle-class gentility of Farquhar’s play through their robust and uninhibited sexual activity, and bringing disorder into the order which their gaolers seek to impose, performing in a fashion reminiscent of Shakespearian comedy. Unlike the convict actors, they are unwilling or unable to take advantage of the opportunities presented by the New World. They are the silent spectators of both Farquhar’s play and the wider play of colonization, rather than active participants in either event. At the end of the novel they vanish from the stage of history leaving the future to the small group of actors who have played in the comedy, for whom Australia ‘could now be seen as a land of opportunity for the ex-convict’ as well as for the free emigrant.⁶⁷ Unable to speak for themselves, the convicts are betrayed by Keneally. Although, as Peter Quartermaine puts it, ‘the claim of the book, [...], is to speak for those about whose fate history is silent or indifferent’, both Aborigines and

⁶⁶ Gillian Whitlock, *The Intimate Empire: Reading Women’s Autobiography* (London: Cassell, 2000), p. 105.

⁶⁷ Richard White, *Inventing Australia: Images and Identity 1688-1980* (St Leonards, New South Wales: Allen & Unwin, 1981), p. 28.

convicts, in practice Keneally remains silent on their behalf.⁶⁸ He airbrushes the convicts out of his Australian future as effectively as he does the Aborigines.

For Keneally, the future of Australia is born out of the comedy of Farquhar's play and rests with the actors for whom, as Mary Brenham puts it, 'the play is the most wonderful thing that has occurred in all my life' (p. 344). Only those who have been redeemed by art can take their place in the new world. However, as Ann Wilson suggests in her persuasive article on *Our Country's Good*, that redemption comes at a cost, because the production is 'an act of colonizing' through 'the imposition of one culture on another'.⁶⁹ To perform in the play, the convicts must be able to read and write – with some allowance for 'those who cannot read but have good memories' (p. 37) – and to convince as gentlemen and gentlewomen: they must adopt the 'cultural values of the dominant community'.⁷⁰ What we learn of their later lives suggests that those who remained in Australia successfully sloughed off their class affiliations and remade themselves in the image of those who had been their victims in England, becoming farmers, theatre managers, merchants, brewers and, ironically, in one case a constable. Ralph Clark would say these convict actors have been transformed by art and Keneally himself suggests elsewhere that they have 'won the lottery'.⁷¹ However it might be truer to say that they have been the final victims of colonization, assimilated to the culture and values of the English ruling class and ready to transmit that culture to future generations and so affirm that 'England's claim on this far shore will be much more secure because the culture of the colony will reinforce, not contradict, the ideology of English imperialism'.⁷² By putting their convict past behind them and looking to the future, they perform the historical amnesia so typical of Anglo-Celtic Australians.

⁶⁸ Peter Quartermaine, *Thomas Keneally* (London: Edward Arnold, 1991), p. 84.

⁶⁹ Ann Wilson, 'Our Country's Good: Theatre, Colony and Nation in Wertebaker's Adaptation of *The Playmaker*', *Modern Drama*, 34 (1991), 23-34 (p. 33).

⁷⁰ Ann Wilson, p. 33.

⁷¹ Thomas Keneally, 'Here Nature is Reversed', in *Australia: Beyond the Dreamtime*, by Thomas Keneally, Patsy Adam-Smith and Robyn Davidson (London: BBC Books, 1987), pp. 11-72 (p. 26).

⁷² Ann Wilson, p. 31.

As in other convict novels I have discussed, there is a strain of melodrama running through *The Playmaker*, but it is figured very differently from those novels. The clash of good and evil here does not occur on the public stage but takes place in the private world of the convicts, in the struggle between Harry Brewer, Provost Marshal and former criminal, who lives ambivalently between the convict and the official cultures, and the criminal Goose for the body of Duckling, who is Harry's mistress, Goose's confidante and one of the actresses in the play. This war between legally-constituted and criminally-enforced authority over a character who lives between the two worlds of Sydney Cove ends spectacularly when Duckling, in a parody of *Hamlet*, poisons Goose during the performance of *The Recruiting Officer*. Melodrama, Peter Brooks suggests, 'cannot figure the birth of a new society – the role of comedy – but only the old society reformed'.⁷³ The melodrama we see here reinforces the image of mass of the convicts as locked into their past ways and unable to create the new society of Sydney, an image confirmed by the story of Duckling, who, we learn in the Epilogue, leaves Sydney and is shipped to Norfolk Island where 'she would disappear from the records' (p. 360). It is the playmakers who will create the new world.

However Keneally suggests, at the close of the novel, that melodrama shadows the futures even of those convicts who acted in the play, whose subsequent lives carry with them 'a flavour of dramatic excess' (p. 360), and that this particularly affects Ralph Clark and Mary Brenham. Their relationship has developed in parallel with the production of the play, in which Mary plays the role of Silvia, daughter of Justice Balance, a representative of the old squirearchy. She falls in love with, and marries, the professional soldier, Captain Plume, a marriage that transgresses class barriers and figures the creation of a new social order. Mary's relationship with Ralph is similarly transgressive, an illicit 'marriage' between a teenage thief with a young child, Small Willy, fathered by a sailor on the voyage to Australia, and an older officer with a wife and young son in England. In justifying his relationship Ralph argues that just as there

⁷³ Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess*, repr. with a new Preface (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), p. 205.

had to be ‘a great southern continent to act as a balance to the land masses of Europe and Asia’ so ‘people here have needed southern marriages, new world associations, to balance the marriages and associations they might have had in the old’ (p. 328). He also points out that such marriages are needed for the benefit of the new society being built in Sydney. When the chaplain, Dick Johnson, opposes Ralph’s ‘marriage’, Ralph points out that Johnson ‘married many lags of whom it could not be said with any certainty whether they had previously been single or married’ because H. E. ‘believed that it was better for them to marry here for the sake of this society than to maintain the mere letter of ruined marriages in another place’ (pp. 327-28). In short transgression is normalized, made constitutive of a new society, in contrast to the destructive nature of transgression in Clarke and the novels of the 1960s and 1970s discussed in the last chapter, where the operation of law and justice is suspended and individual protest suppressed.

At the novel’s end, while Ralph’s transgression is punished by his death, together with the deaths of his wife and son and Small Willy, Mary Brenham, and her and Ralph’s ‘new world child Alicia’ (p. 364), the product of that transgression, survive to help to create the new world. This working through of what Keneally calls, rather extravagantly, ‘the full brunt of melodrama’ (p. 362) that attaches to Ralph and Mary provides ‘an instance in miniature of the extinction of the old, European world, at the same time as it is revitalised in Australia’.⁷⁴ However the survival of Mary Brenham and her daughter symbolizes not only a movement of power and life from England to Australia but also the final triumph of an imperial history in which the actors, the officers, and above all Ralph Clark, write and perform the play of colonization from uncertain beginnings to triumphant conclusion, creating the culture which Keneally celebrates.

In a long interview with Robin Hughes in 2002, Keneally said that ‘I see a clear divide in my work about 1973’ between works that were marked by ‘considerable alienation – [...] – and darkness’ and those that displayed ‘an almost wilful celebratory

⁷⁴ Pierce, p. 50.

character'.⁷⁵ *The Playmaker* exemplifies this change of perspective. In this novel Keneally rescripts aspects of the convict novel, including his own *Bring Larks and Heroes*, and in doing so reinforces rather than rewrites the settler narrative by a process of revising 'his vision of the European peopling of Australia from a tragic, to a fundamentally comic one'.⁷⁶ Eric Bentley has argued that comedy 'deals with the itch to own the material world', it 'is very often about theft', and 'in the comic world, if possession is the ultimate fact, dispossession is the ultimate act'.⁷⁷ Keneally's novel enacts this on the stage of early colonial Sydney. It presents settlement as a comedy of colonization characterized by greed, theft and dispossession. In doing so it skims over the tragic implications for the Aborigines, and for many of the colonists who, having been dispossessed of a life in their own country, are now dispossessed of a future in their new home. Comedy, by its nature, is not a mode of condemnation, it is a mode of forgiveness, and *The Playmaker* essentially forgives the colonial theft of land and dispossession of the indigenous peoples. In doing so it reinscribes the myths of settlement as an essentially benign act at a point in time when those myths were coming under sustained criticism.

In his 2002 interview Keneally maintained that 'the novelist in good historical fiction is trying to talk about the present too'.⁷⁸ If so, then the present to which *The Playmaker* speaks is essentially a white settler present, one where the troubling ghosts of Aborigines and convicts have been silenced and where the reading audience is invited to view the forthcoming Bicentenary as an opportunity 'to write the English back into the script' and so to celebrate the Anglo-Celtic contribution to Australian history.⁷⁹ It is, at heart, a deeply conservative re-telling of the Australian foundation story for a new generation.

⁷⁵ Robin Hughes, 'Australian Biography: Thomas Keneally', Full Interview Transcript, 2-11 September 2002, Tape 7
<<http://www.australianbiography.gov.au/subjects/keneally/internav2.html>> [accessed 3 December 2010].

⁷⁶ Pierce, pp. 29-30.

⁷⁷ Eric Bentley, *The Life of the Drama* (London: Methuen, 1965), pp. 304 & 305.

⁷⁸ Hughes, 'Australian Biography: Thomas Keneally', Tape 11.

⁷⁹ James Jupp, 'Editing an Encyclopedia of the Australian People', in *1988 and All That*, ed. by George Shaw, pp. 75-85 (p.78).

Playing Complicity: Kate Grenville's *The Secret River* and *The Lieutenant*

Some twenty years after the Bicentenary, on 13 February 2008, the then Australian Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, opened the new Parliamentary session by giving an *Apology to Australia's Indigenous Peoples*.⁸⁰ This apology was focused on the Stolen Generations – those Aboriginal children who had been forcibly separated from their families and brought up in homes and missions, and whose experiences had been documented in the 1997 report *Bringing Them Home*.⁸¹ However it implicitly sought to apologize more generally for white mistreatment of Aborigines, with its reference to seeking reconciliation ‘across the entire history of the often bloody encounter between those who emerged from the Dreamtime a thousand generations ago and those who, like me, came across the sea only yesterday’.⁸² The *Apology* followed, and sought to respond to, the growing pressure for Aboriginal rights, particularly land rights, and for proper recognition of the damage and destruction caused to the indigenous peoples by white settlement. This pressure, present as we saw earlier in the response of some Aborigines to the 1938 sesquicentennial celebrations, had increased over the years. The demands for recognition in the 1970s became more powerful after the judgments in the Mabo (1992) and Wik (1996) cases which recognized native title to land, and were further intensified after the *Bringing Them Home* Report which called for ‘apologies from the governments, churches and other agencies that had created the Stolen Generations’.⁸³ Like Mabo and Wik, which I will discuss in more detail in Chapter 5, the *Apology* was a highly contentious issue. The idea of making an Apology had been fiercely resisted by the previous Government, which claimed to be concerned that it would ‘admit liability and open the way to financial claims’ and argued both that ‘no government could be expected to apologise for its predecessor’ and that ‘past actions had been lawful and in

⁸⁰ Kevin Rudd, ‘Apology to Australia’s Indigenous Peoples’, Commonwealth of Australia House of Representatives, *Debates*, 13 February 2008, pp. 167-71.

⁸¹ Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, *Bringing Them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families* (Sydney: Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997).

⁸² Rudd, p. 171.

⁸³ Macintyre and Clark, p. 154.

many cases undertaken with benevolent intentions'.⁸⁴ Underlying these arguments, however, was undoubtedly a concern that an Apology would profoundly upset the settler population and their central narrative of the past, with its construction of white settlement as an essentially benign event which fundamentally benefitted the indigenous population, a narrative in which coercive actions against Aborigines were undertaken for their own good. It would also, of course, reinforce the settler community's claim to victim status, that they were both being persecuted for the actions of their forebears and being oppressed by those who sought redress for past wrongs.

While the Rudd Government recognized the need for the Apology, its response was, in many ways, unsatisfactory. In particular it was a missed opportunity to recognize both the inadequacy of the traditional settler narrative of the past and the implications of that past for the present. The *Apology*, Rudd said, was 'aimed at righting past wrongs' but in doing so it seemed more concerned to seal those wrongs in the tomb of history than to address the historic and continuing causes of conflict between settler and indigenous Australians.⁸⁵ As Rudd put it 'we have come together to deal with the past so that we might fully embrace the future', an approach that neatly omitted the need to address the present, with its continued story of Aboriginal oppression, delaying any action to an uncertain and indefinite future.⁸⁶ To be effective the *Apology* needed not to stand alone but to be:

accompanied by some kind of social change such that non-Indigenous Australians are not tempted to put all the blame on their ancestors, thus exonerating themselves from responsibility for contemporary injustices. To be able to say 'sorry' is the first but by no means the last step.⁸⁷

⁸⁴ Macintyre and Clark, p. 155.

⁸⁵ Rudd, p. 169.

⁸⁶ Rudd, p. 170.

⁸⁷ Dolores Herrero, 'Crossing *The Secret River*: From Victim to Perpetrator, or the Silent/Dark Side of the Australian Settlement', *Atlantis: Journal of the Spanish Association of Anglo-American Studies*, 36.1 (2014), 87-105 (p. 101).

The Rudd Apology, with its focus on the past, ducked this challenge, allowing white Australians to pass the blame to their ancestors (who could be excused by taking the view that times were different then), and to promise to behave better in the future.

Rudd's speech alludes to the need to 'turn this page together' and to 'write this new chapter in our nation's story together'.⁸⁸ This suggests that he sees history as a story in which what has been read, the past, can be agreed on and left behind while the focus moves to the future. However dealing with the past is not the unproblematic process Rudd suggests. There is no single past, no linear narrative of Australian history that can be agreed and left behind. Rather there is a complex mass of stories and memories, written and oral, white and Aboriginal, which constitute the tangled narratives of history. These varied histories and memories cannot be smoothed out and rewritten into a single shared story. Indeed the suggestion that the past can now be regarded as dealt with and as not worthy of further discussion or debate implies a belief that achieving closure for white Australians is the primary function of reconciliation. As Gillian Whitlock has said, 'reconciliation discourses generate a desire for ritual and social closure that will separate the past from the present, and this can allow a new social amnesia about race to surface: a belief that race is no longer the basis of privilege'.⁸⁹ Rather than seeking to gloss over the conflicts between these histories, there needs to be a process of debate and negotiation between different understandings of the past as a pre-requisite to agreeing on a shared basis for moving forward.

As with the Bicentenary, the developing pressure for an apology to the indigenous peoples provided opportunities for novelists to re-imagine the stories of early colonialism and to address the responsibility of the convict past for contemporary conflict. One of the most acclaimed, albeit contested, attempts to rework the settler narrative and to unsettle contemporary Australian attitudes to their history is to be found

⁸⁸ Rudd, p. 171.

⁸⁹ Gillian Whitlock, 'Active Remembrance: Testimony, Memoir and the Work of Reconciliation', in *Rethinking Settler Colonialism: History and Memory in Australia, Canada, Aotearoa New Zealand and South Africa*, ed. by Annie E. Coombes (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), pp. 24-44 (p. 40).

in Kate Grenville's 2005 novel *The Secret River*.⁹⁰ This is the first in a trilogy of novels about early settlement and was followed by *The Lieutenant* (2008), which is discussed further below.⁹¹ More recently the trilogy was completed by *Sarah Thornhill* (2011).⁹²

Grenville has claimed, in *Searching for the Secret River*, her account of the novel's genesis, that in writing the book she was driven by two events. The first was her participation in the 2000 'Sorry Day' Reconciliation Walk across Sydney Harbour Bridge, when an exchange of smiles with an Aboriginal woman led her to wonder about the way in which her ancestor, Solomon Wiseman, settled on the land and about 'who might have been living on that land, and how he had persuaded them to leave it'.⁹³ The second was an encounter that year with Aboriginal writer Melissa Lucashenko, who challenged her repetition of the 'family story: a formula, unquestionable' that her grandfather took up, rather than simply took, land on the Hawkesbury River.⁹⁴ The novel is clearly positioned as a reconciliation novel and Grenville has said that, while the Reconciliation Walk was 'strolling towards reconciliation', she felt the need to 'cross the hard way, through the deep water of our history'.⁹⁵ Her statements suggest that, as she argued in an interview with Ramona Koval, the novel will confront 'all those slightly hidden, slightly secret places in our history' and their consequences.⁹⁶

The Secret River has been praised for confronting the darker aspects of the early colonial past, particularly in its depiction not only of the attitudes of convict-settlers to the Aborigines but also their actions, as shown both in the poisoning of Aborigines at Darkey Creek and particularly in the climactic massacre in which the central character, Will Thornhill, participates. For Sue Kossew the novel represents 'a

⁹⁰ Kate Grenville, *The Secret River* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2006). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

⁹¹ Kate Grenville, *The Lieutenant* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2009). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

⁹² Kate Grenville, *Sarah Thornhill* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2012).

⁹³ Kate Grenville, *Searching for the Secret River* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2007), p. 13.

⁹⁴ Grenville, *Searching*, p. 28.

⁹⁵ Grenville, *Searching*, p. 13.

⁹⁶ Ramona Koval, 'Interview with Kate Grenville', *Radio National Books and Writing*, 8 January 2006 <<http://www.abc.net.au/rn/arts/bwriting/stories/s1527708.htm>> [accessed 16 February 2011].

reworking of the narrative of settlement with a contemporary sensibility' while for Odette Kelada it can be read as 'a most unpalatable and confronting depiction of whiteness as implicated in the massacre of Aboriginal people'.⁹⁷ Marguerite Nolan and Robert Clarke, in a sympathetic reading of the novel, see it as providing 'an ethical response to the demands of the present and the future' but acknowledge that it has been criticized for reproducing 'a conservative white cultural politics that displaces contemporary settler guilt'.⁹⁸ Criticism of the novel has centred on a number of issues – Grenville's attitude to history and historians; her representation of Aborigines; her appropriation of Aboriginal history; and the implied moral equivalence between settler and Aboriginal acts of violence.⁹⁹ Much of this criticism stems from Grenville's approach in which, as she said to Koval:

I've tried to be very even-handed. [...] I have tried to say, look, it happened on both sides, and on both sides it did not happen because these people were just bad people or evil, it happened because when you have a complete lack of understanding and you have two different sets of people needing the same resource (that is; good riverside land), it's almost inevitable that you're going to have violence.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁷ Sue Kossew, 'Voicing the "Great Australian Silence": Kate Grenville's Narrative of Settlement in *The Secret River*', *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 42.2 (2007), 7-18 (p. 9); Odette Kelada, 'The Stolen River: Possession and Race Representation in Grenville's Colonial Narrative', *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature*, 10 (2010), 15 pp. (p. 2) <<http://www.nla.gov.au/openpublish/index.php/jasal/article/view/1698/2223>> [accessed 2 August 2012].

⁹⁸ Marguerite Nolan and Robert Clarke, 'Reading *The Secret River*', *Journal of Commonwealth and Postcolonial Studies*, 17.2 (2011), 9-25 (pp. 21 & 10).

⁹⁹ See for example Adam Gall, 'Taking/Taking Up: Recognition and the Frontier in Grenville's *The Secret River*', *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature, Special Issue: The Colonial Present*, (2008), 94-104; Jodi Gallagher, "'Relaxed and Comfortable": Carey, Grenville and the Politics of the History Novel', in *Remaking Literary History*, ed. by Helen Groth and Paul Sheehan (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2010), pp. 233-44; Carol Merli, 'National Mythologies and Secret Histories: Faultlines in the Bark Hut in Some Recent Australian Fictions', in *Southern Postcolonialisms: The Global South and the 'New' Literary Representations*, ed. by Sumanyu Satpathy (London: Routledge, 2009), pp. 205-18, as well as Kelada and Kossew.

¹⁰⁰ Koval, 'Interview'.

In reading the novel in the context of other convict fictions I will suggest that while Grenville seeks to reframe and unsettle the traditional settler narrative, her work is fundamentally complicit with it, that ‘loyalty to the old aesthetic forms [...] restrains the possibilities of writing a new story’.¹⁰¹ Indeed complicity, I will argue, is a key organizing principle both of Grenville’s novel and of her relationship to the white settler community of early colonial Australia in which her ancestral equivalent of *The Secret River*’s Will Thornhill was a participant.

Grenville’s novel challenges several aspects of the traditional settler narrative. First, her portrayal of Sydney in and around 1806 diverges from the narrative of the victim convict. This is not a place of brutal punishment and harsh treatment but one much more akin to that conjured up by Grace Karskens, in which convicts were workers and consumers and ‘some of the energetic emancipists became wealthy traders, landholders and ship-owners’.¹⁰² In particular it is a place which gave opportunities for women, for ‘couples lived more as partners, albeit in different spheres. It was normal for both men and women to work’.¹⁰³ In the novel, Will returns to his old trade of waterman, spiced with theft from his master, while his wife, Sal, ‘set up a grog-stall’ (p. 88) in part of their hut. In their time in Sydney, Grenville’s convicts are more reminiscent of Humphrey McQueen’s entrepreneurial individualists than brutalized victims joining forces in solidarity against their oppressors.¹⁰⁴ Similarly the rulers of Sydney are not shown as tyrants. Indeed they are largely absent, rarely coming on stage and then only to dispense favours, as when Will ‘shook His Excellency’s white-gloved hand and heard himself pronounced *Absolutely Pardoned*’ (p. 118).

This does not, of course, stop Will constructing himself as a victim, a role he plays throughout the novel, but it exposes his self-construction for what it is. In London,

¹⁰¹ Alison Ravenscroft, ‘The Strangeness of the Dance: Kate Grenville, Rohan Wilson, Inga Clendinnen and Kim Scott’, *Meanjin*, 72.4 (2013), 64-73 (p. 66).

¹⁰² Grace Karskens, *The Colony: A History of Early Sydney* (Crows Nest, New South Wales: Allen & Unwin, 2010), p. 11.

¹⁰³ Karskens, p. 329.

¹⁰⁴ Humphrey McQueen, *A New Britannia: An Argument Concerning the Social Origins of Australian Radicalism and Nationalism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), pp. 126-40.

he believes that the decline of his fortunes is the result of actions and happenings outside his control, and even his arrest for stealing wood can be blamed on others. Visiting Sydney from his new home on the Hawkesbury River he sees himself as the victim of his past, looked down on by men like Suckling who ‘would always be able to hold his head up high, a man who had never worn the stripes’ (p. 179). And on the Hawkesbury he sees himself as a victim of the Aborigines whose land he has taken and whose gestures of friendship he largely spurns. This self-image is reinforced by the surrounding settlers who construct the Aborigines as the threatening other, responsible for all their troubles and with no rights of their own because they do not cultivate the land and ‘*don’t know how to do nothing but thief off honest men!*’ (p. 175).

Second, Grenville criticizes the values of mateship, a settler man’s commitment to ‘stick to his mates through thick and thin, even if he thinks they may be in the wrong’.¹⁰⁵ On the Hawkesbury, Will forms part of an essentially homosocial world of emancipists (even Mrs Herring is endowed with the practical skills and habits of the male settler) who meet at his hut as a group of mates and plot to defend themselves and their families against the Aborigines. While Will may dislike, and even despise, some of his companions, he is bound to them by the bond of mateship and a form of mutual dependence. Unlike the independent and self-sufficient Tom Blackwood, who refuses to acquiesce in the prevailing hostility to Aborigines, Will’s commitment to his mates, as much as his concern for his family and land, leads him to participate in the massacre of Aborigines at Blackwood’s despite knowing it to be wrong. It is, suggests Grenville, the distorted values of mateship that drive him to this decision, and to the consequent need to keep the action secret so that, as Smasher Sullivan puts it, ‘*nobody won’t never know, I swear, [...]. Not our wives even. Not anyone other than us. And we ain’t telling*’ (p. 312).

Will’s complicity in the decision to kill Aborigines is part of the pattern of his life from his time in London as a petty criminal to his later life as a settler. In particular his relationship with his wife, Sal, is marked by the secrets, silences and lies which

¹⁰⁵ Russel Ward, *The Australian Legend*, 2nd edition, repr. with new introduction (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 2.

characterize complicity. When Will steals, Sal ‘never asked too closely where their money had come from [...] he felt in her a turning-away from the truth’ (p. 56), and when the petty criminal Collarbone is hanged and dies painfully he tells her that he died easily and ‘she looked away quickly and did not meet his eye again [...] he did not know whether she believed him or not’ (p. 54). This pattern of knowing silence is repeated in Sydney, where they conspire not to talk about the killing of settlers by Aborigines for fear that it might expose the emerging gap between them, with Sal committed to returning to London while Will feels increasingly settled in New South Wales. When they move to the Hawkesbury, Will continues his habit of concealment while Sal complicitly feigns ignorance of their different aims until they are finally forced to speak, and quarrel, over whether to go or stay. Their complicity, like that of the Moreton Bay women in *The Commandant*, enacts what Fiona Probyn-Rapsey sees as the condition of settler-colonial states where ‘complicity is a structural relationship that cannot be expiated fully because it exists in multiple, networked forms’.¹⁰⁶ As such it continues to the present day as much of Australian settler society colludes in turning a blind eye to the nature of its relationship with the Aborigines.

In their covert but unspoken knowledge, and their silences and refusals to speak, Will and Sal also suppress the past in a determination to look to the future. From early in the novel they recognize that ‘one of the pleasures of those murmured times was telling each other about their future’ (p. 88). However for Will that future is increasingly an expansive vision of a life in Australia whereas Sal’s ‘dreams had stayed small and cautious, being of nothing grander than the London they had left’ (pp. 114-15). Will can envision himself as the gentleman depicted in a portrait at the Governor’s, ‘a man sitting sideways at a little table with a book in his hand’ (p. 118), an image replicated, albeit in debased form, in the picture painted of him at the novel’s end. Will’s progress to assuming the role of gentleman requires him to shed his past and deny his history in the same way as the colony as a whole tries to ‘distinguish between being convict (and

¹⁰⁶ Fiona Probyn-Rapsey, ‘Complicity, Critique, and Methodology’, *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature*, 38.2-3 (2007), 65-82 (p. 68).

British) and being Australian'.¹⁰⁷ By the novel's end, Will has forged his life story. He was 'not born in dirty Bermondsey but in clean Kent', had not been arrested for the theft of timber but 'by the excise men on some pebbly beach with a boatload of French brandy', and had not been hanged because he 'had worked for the King, carrying English spies into France' (p. 335). In the same way, Australia seeks to forge its past, to create a more fitting and heroic history for itself, an issue I discuss further in Chapter 5.

Third, Grenville questions the Anglo-Australian attachment to its British heritage. By the end of the novel the successful Will is playing the part of a gentleman in 'a version of England' (p. 345). He has used his wealth to build a large house modelled on English precedents, has had his portrait painted by 'a gentleman with a tripos from Cambridge' (p. 335), and has tried to establish 'a garden along English lines' (p. 332). However his life, lived within the walls and bare land surrounding the house, does not satisfy him. His house and garden are a poor imitation of the England that he has left behind, for 'the finished place was not quite what Thornhill had pictured. Something was wrong with the way the pieces fitted together' (p. 329). Similarly, despite the reconstruction of his past, Will does not properly fit the part of gentleman, he is a poor imitation. Like the Keneally of *Bring Larks and Heroes*, Grenville suggests that the attempt to recreate England in Australia, blighted as it is by the refusal to recognize and embrace the indigenous, is bound to create an Australian civilization that is sham, inauthentic and alien.

By contrast, Grenville presents Will's desire for land, which is the driving force behind his commitment to remaining in Australia, in almost wholly uncritical terms, and it is in her depiction of the land and its settlement that she is most complicit with the settler narrative. The ambivalent nature of the land, which was a feature of Clarke and other writers, remains, but the novel's focus is on the magnificence and beauty of the country. While the land can be a threat, for 'the everlasting forest could not be got rid of, only pushed back', and beyond Will's cleared settlement 'the river-oaks hissed and the gumtrees rattled and scraped the way they always had' (p. 260), it is largely figured in

¹⁰⁷ Richard White, p. 27.

positive terms. When he first sees the land that he later settles, Will views it, in a reversal of the usual expulsion myth, as a form of Eden with himself as ‘Adam in Paradise, breathing deep of the air of his own new-coined world’ (p. 138). Initially he figures it, in language reminiscent of the First Fleet writers, in typically English terms as ‘a sweet place with scattered trees and grass, as green and tender as a gentleman’s park even in this summer season’ (p. 109). However, as the novel progresses there is increasing emphasis on the scale and beauty of the bush, which is figured in terms of the romantic sublime, a place that evokes awe and overwhelms human habitation. When Will first leaves for Sydney he looks back and sees that ‘the hut was hardly visible in its patch of beaten ground. Around it were the bulges of the forest, shadowed even in the brightest sun, a tangle of light and shade, rock and leaf’ (p. 177). Will comes to love the land on its own terms, in contrast to Sal, who remains locked in a vision of Englishness and finds the country about her alien and hostile.

Will experiences a passion for possession of the land that is fundamentally sexual, he feels ‘a piercing hunger in his guts: to own it. To say *mine*, in a way he had never been able to say *mine* of anything at all. He had not known until this minute that it was something he wanted so much’ (p. 110). He takes possession of it ‘in a frenzy of longing’ (p. 136) that reflects his ‘amorous relationship to the land’ which he is determined to master and tame.¹⁰⁸ Grenville here replicates the traditional discourses of settlement in which exploration ‘is structured in terms of an active male penetrating the inert yet resistant female land’, virgin territory to be fertilized by the male explorer.¹⁰⁹ In *The Secret River*, Will’s passion for his piece of land, which is ‘as sweet as a woman’s body’ (p. 125), replaces his earlier passion for Sal, and he displaces his love for her onto love of the land, so much so that when they quarrel over Sal’s wish to leave ‘she did not recognise him. Some violent man was pulling at her, shouting at her, the stranger within the heart of her husband’ (p. 303). Once on the Hawkesbury, Will’s drive to conquer and tame the land changes his relationship to Sal, whose role, despite Anna Gething’s argument that she ‘is written with authority and assertiveness’, changes from the active

¹⁰⁸ Gall, p. 102.

¹⁰⁹ Simon Ryan, p. 196.

participant in their economic success in Sydney to an increasingly silent, colonized victim of male violence, concerned solely with the domestic sphere.¹¹⁰ The agency with which she is endowed in London and Sydney is stripped from her and she is left a prisoner in their settlement. Will's passion for the land distorts all his other relationships, but it is not the subject of any serious or sustained criticism in the novel. Rather it is seen as a natural process, since 'all a person need do was find a place no one had already taken. Plant a crop, build a hut, call the place Smith's or Flanagan's, and out-stare anyone who said otherwise' (p. 125). Will is quick to name his settlement Thornhill's Point in order both to affirm his ownership and mastery over it, and to declare any previous settlement of the land illegitimate. Just as the declaration of British sovereignty over Australia sought to nullify Aboriginal rights, so too does Will's claim to Thornhill's Point. As Sue Kossew puts it, 'the teleological movement towards naming and possession overwrites and displaces the story of Indigenous dispossession'.¹¹¹ Despite her encounter with Melissa Lucashenko, Grenville finds it hard to contest the idea that land is there to be innocently taken up.

In a manner reminiscent of Australian nationalist writing of the 1890s, Grenville also constructs the land as the site of the true Australia, in contrast to the urban township of Sydney. It is a healthy place, one in which the Thornhill children 'were flourishing on the river as they had not in Sydney' (p. 195) and where hard work and honest labour are rewarded by good crops and an increasingly attractive life. As a result, Will is reassured on his returns from trading voyages in his boat, the aptly-named *Hope*, by the sight of 'the smoke calmly rising up out of his chimney, the fowls pecking away around the yard and the children running down the slope to meet him' (p. 197). The Thornhills are contrasted with both the brutal and violently racist Smasher Sullivan and the idealized figure of Tom Blackwood, who lives in harmony with both the land and the Aborigines, recognizing that they have at least some rights to the land. His

¹¹⁰ Anna Gething, 'In Defence of Fiction: History and Imagination in Kate Grenville's *The Secret River* and *The Lieutenant*', in *The Female Figure in Contemporary Historical Fiction*, ed. by Katherine Cooper and Emma Short (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 189-205 (p. 202).

¹¹¹ Kossew, pp. 11-12.

mantra of ‘ain’t nothing in this world just for the taking, [...]. A man got to pay a fair price for taking, [...]. Matter of give a little, take a little’ (p. 108) stands in stark contrast to the views of his neighbours. As they establish themselves on the land the Thornhills increasingly become the mythologized image of the pioneer family, self-reliant and independent, making the best of their circumstances, and seeking ‘to be respectable, to achieve security and a stake in property’.¹¹² In setting the Thornhills up as exemplars of the heroic pioneer Grenville valorizes them and their behaviour. Will’s participation in the massacre then becomes ‘not a considered attitude to Aboriginal people, just a pragmatic response to a problem’.¹¹³ Although the massacre is clearly depicted as an horrific and shameful act of white violence, Grenville presents Will’s involvement in it as the action of an Australian Everyman, ‘a man who wasn’t altogether bad but did bad things’, a man who sticks by his mates even when it involves him in wicked actions.¹¹⁴ In doing so she refuses to acknowledge that such violence was fundamental to European settlement and intended to achieve the elimination of the Aborigines. By figuring Will’s participation in the massacre as an act in defence of his home and family, Grenville contrives both to normalize his response and to lessen his culpability.

By the novel’s end Will and Sal are living in the mansion Will dreamed of, but despite his material success he is unable to enjoy his prosperity. He and Sal have conspired not to discuss his role in the massacre but the ‘space of silence between husband and wife [...] made a little shadow, the thing not spoken of’ (p. 339) and henceforth ‘his guilt and her complicity now form the grounds of their shared history’.¹¹⁵ He has tried inconsistently to justify his participation in the massacre to himself both as something outside his control, a group decision that ‘their lives, like his, had somehow brought them to’ (p. 313), and as an act of his own volition: ‘he was choosing it, of his own free will’ (p. 314). As Probyn-Rapsey puts it, ‘the simultaneity of this apparently individualised agency within the collective highlights the

¹¹² Carter, *The Road to Botany Bay*, p. 278.

¹¹³ Grenville, *Searching*, p. 189.

¹¹⁴ Grenville, *Searching*, p. 188.

¹¹⁵ Probyn-Rapsey, p. 73.

shifting/shifty nature of complicity'.¹¹⁶ Will's participation in the massacre haunts him, and he lives a melancholy life, constantly using his spy-glass to look out at the world beyond the confines of his imprisoning house, which 'kept out everything except what was invited in' (p. 332), looking in vain for signs of human life but finding only 'a new emptiness' (p. 348). He has sought to bury the past and just as he tried to eliminate the Aborigines physically in the massacre so he has sought to erase them culturally, denying indigeneity by building his house over the Aboriginal rock drawing which he had first seen in his early exploration of the land. However he is disturbed by the continuing presence of Long Jack, a survivor of the massacre, who asserts ownership as he 'slapped his hand on the ground so hard a puff of dust flew up and wafted away. *This me*, he said. *My place*' (p. 344), and who refuses Will's tokenistic attempts at reparation by way of presents of food. While the departure of the remaining Aborigines to 'the reserve that the Governor had set aside at Sackville' (p. 341) enables Will to pretend that they have been peacefully cleared, Long Jack is a perpetual reminder of their violent removal. Despite the fact that he has 'become[s] wealthy through perpetrating acts of violence against those he dispossesses', Will is unable and unwilling to face up to the consequences of his actions or to take responsibility for them.¹¹⁷ Rather he continues to see himself as the victim he believes he has always been, feeling under constant threat because 'they could still be up there, in that intricate landscape that defeated any white man – still there, prepared to wait' (p. 348). The secret river is now not only one that is hidden but one that conspires to hide the truth of white settler behaviour from the eyes of the outside world, preserving the Thornhills' contained world of complicit silence. Furthermore, as John Hirst puts it, Will's realization that 'the land he has possessed gives him no comfort [...] is clearly meant as a parable of the nation', a nation that also refuses to take responsibility for the past, or indeed for the continuation of white

¹¹⁶ Probyn-Rapsey, p. 73.

¹¹⁷ Nolan and Clarke, p. 20.

violence into the present, relying instead on ‘a very deliberate process of denial as well as secrecy’.¹¹⁸

If Will, with his shiftiness and moral ambiguity, is presented as embodying the pioneer myth with its emphasis on taking and holding the land, the Aborigines are predominantly presented, like those in White’s *A Fringe of Leaves*, in terms of negative stereotypes. Given no voice of their own, their actions are seen and interpreted solely through white eyes, with all the scope for prejudicial assumptions which this entails. Most obviously, the Aborigines are presented as a silent and hidden danger to the settlers, as when, at the novel’s melodramatic opening, Will feels threatened by an Aborigine whom he encounters at night:

when he looked again the man was gone. The darkness in front of him whispered and shifted, but there was only the forest. It could hide a hundred black men with spears, a thousand, a whole continent full of men with spears and that grim line to their mouths. (p. 6)

The Aborigines’ attempts to defend their country and their crops are depicted as aggression and hostility against the otherwise peaceful settlers who are their potential victims. When we see the Aborigines in daylight their menace is replaced by crude caricature. They are presented either as urban degenerates, like Scabby Bill in Sydney, a ‘black insect of a man capering before them [the convicts], a person lower in the order of things even than they were’ (p. 95) or, in the case of the Hawkesbury River Aborigines, as a part of the land which they inhabit, visible only when they want to be seen. Grenville’s account of how ‘the Aboriginal people were emerging in a way I hadn’t planned: through descriptions of landscape’ so that ‘in some way that I recognised without really understanding, the country *was* the people’, has rightly been criticized by Kelada as ‘Indigenous bodies appearing objectified and dehumanised in the descriptions of land/bodies’.¹¹⁹ In both cases they are presented as unfitted for modern

¹¹⁸ John Hirst, *Sense and Nonsense in Australian History* (Melbourne: Black, 2006), p. 85; Nolan and Clarke, p. 19.

¹¹⁹ Grenville, *Searching*, p. 199; Kelada, p. 8.

life, so that it seems natural for them to be dispossessed. While Grenville fastidiously refuses to give voice to the Aborigines, arguing that ‘what I didn’t want to do was to step into the heads of any of the Aboriginal characters. I think that kind of appropriation...there’s been too much of that in our writing’, she has little hesitation in presenting them in ways that ‘reproduced stereotyped representations of Indigenous people that in fact mirror colonial violence’.¹²⁰ Like Keneally before her, Grenville dedicates her book to the Aboriginal people, but the promise of that dedication is undermined by her presentation of Aborigines in the novel, which plays all too easily to traditional settler attitudes.

Grenville’s novel, like both Jessica Anderson’s and Thomas Keneally’s before it, can be seen as a form of play, in this case in three acts, set in London, Sydney and the Hawkesbury River, framed by the melodramatic prologue of Will’s initial encounter with an Aborigine and a melancholy coda. As with Keneally’s more overtly theatrical novel, *The Secret River* enacts the story of dispossession, so that at its end the landscape, once full of human activity, ‘seemed an empty stage’ (p. 348) with Will as the sole audience. But this version of the play is more melodramatic, less comic, than Keneally’s, containing as it does more than its share of the sensational, not least in the scenes of Will’s discovery of the poisoned Aborigines and the sequence of events that leads to the massacre of the Aborigines. However in this melodrama we do not have the simplistic conclusion characterized by ‘the rewarding of virtue and the punishment of vice according to a moral scheme of stark simplicity’.¹²¹ While Sullivan is killed in the massacre, and Blackwood survives, albeit blinded, Will is both rewarded and punished for his behaviour, rewarded by wealth and dignity, punished by an inability to enjoy them and by the loss of one of his sons who goes to live and work with Blackwood. It is an ambivalent ending in which Grenville tries, not wholly successfully, to reconcile the ‘ambiguity which arises from this dual sense of admiration for the settlers’ survival

¹²⁰ Koval, ‘Interview’; Gallagher, p. 241.

¹²¹ Robert Dixon, ‘Literature and Melodrama’, in *The Oxford Literary History of Australia*, ed. by Bruce Bennett and Jennifer Strauss (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 66-88 (p. 66).

skills and simultaneous criticism for the relative ease with which even enlightened men like Thornhill were persuaded to join in a massacre of local Aborigines'.¹²²

Grenville, for all that she dismantles aspects of the settler narrative, remains complicit with its central myths, with the valorization of settler heroism in conquering and cultivating the land, and with the recognition of the white right to the land which they have taken and must now defend against the '*outrages and depredations*' (p. 98) of its original inhabitants. As Adam Gall puts it:

The moral economy that is constructed in the book leads to empathy with both Blackwood and Thornhill, and to the repudiation of Smasher, but whether they conduct their activities in brutal or civil ways, they perpetuate the settler-colonial articulation direct to the land at the expense of indigenous possession.¹²³

Furthermore by presenting white settler attitudes in the way she does, Grenville allows, in Carol Merli's words, 'the white reader to separate off the monstrous as an "other", and to associate with the more "benign"'.¹²⁴ This separation is enhanced by Grenville's decision 'to tell her story from the viewpoint of William Thornhill', so allowing the reader to 'feel thoroughly insulated from the horrifying racism of characters like Smasher, while at the same time gaining satisfaction from Thornhill's occasional insights that anticipate modern liberal truisms'.¹²⁵ As a result, *The Secret River* has little to offer by way of reconciliation, or rather it suggests that reconciliation can only be achieved on terms dictated by the white settler community. In particular, by arguing that misunderstanding and muddle lay at the heart of the early colonial encounter, and emphasizing that 'one event came after another, no one understood what the other side was thinking, and at the end there was bad trouble. It was never a simple matter of right and wrong', Grenville reinforces the settler narrative of the past.¹²⁶ Her casual use of the oppositional language of sides, her refusal to attribute blame, and her equation of settler

¹²² Kossew, p. 9.

¹²³ Gall, p. 101.

¹²⁴ Merli, p. 214.

¹²⁵ Ken Gelder and Paul Salzman, *After the Celebration: Australian Fiction 1989-2007* (Carlton, Victoria: Melbourne University Press, 2009), p. 85.

¹²⁶ Grenville, *Searching*, p. 132.

and Aboriginal violence despite their very different causes and effects – the one driven by the desire to take exclusive possession of the land, the other seeking to maintain the right to live on it – all serve to undermine the force of her critique of settler violence. As Jodi Gallagher says, Grenville’s novel gives ‘a comforting view of Australia’s settler past for readers at home – superficially acknowledging the violence that characterized the colonial encounter without suggesting that contemporary society needs to institute major changes in ways of thinking about that encounter’.¹²⁷ Importantly the novel, like the Rudd *Apology*, seeks to present colonial racism and violence as a part of history rather than a continuing process, and so to free white Australians to set the terms for future inter-racial relations. In doing so both book and *Apology* effectively dispossess the Aborigines not only of their legitimate stories of the past but also of the future they wish to see.

Complicity is also central to Grenville’s later novel, *The Lieutenant*. Here she shifts focus to the arrival of the First Fleet and the initial settlement of Sydney. Like *The Playmaker* the novel draws on the accounts of the First Fleet annalists, but, unlike Keneally, Grenville’s convict colony has been almost evacuated of convicts. Instead the focus is on the officers who came with them, and particularly Daniel Rooke, an astronomer sent with the Fleet in order to observe a comet that was expected to reappear in 1788, a figure closely based on the First Fleet’s astronomer William Dawes. At the centre of the book is Rooke’s relationship with an Aboriginal girl, Tagaran, with whom he becomes complicit in order to do ‘his proper work in New South Wales: to acquire the native language’ (p. 153), and by doing so to reinforce British possession of the country.

Like Will Thornhill before him, Rooke has learnt the importance of secrecy and dissembling early in life, coming to understand as a boy that displays of individuality or intellect are not much liked and that ‘true cleverness was to hide such thoughts. They became a kind of shame, a secret thing to be indulged only in private’ (p. 7). He also learns, as a young officer watching the hanging of ‘a lieutenant of marines like himself’

¹²⁷ Gallagher, p. 242.

for talking about mutiny, that ‘words could have the power of life or death’ (p. 27), that speaking out of turn, or remaining inappropriately silent, can have fatal consequences. He sees that ‘under the benign surface of life in His Majesty’s service, under its rituals and its uniforms and pleasantries, was horror’ (p. 29). As with Halloran in Keneally’s *Bring Larks and Heroes*, ‘Rooke’s very status and allegiance to “His Majesty’s grand machine” provide the moral pivot for the text’ when, as I shall discuss later, he is ordered to take part in an expedition to capture or kill six Aborigines, to be complicit in murder.¹²⁸

In contrast to her earlier novel, Grenville here reproduces many of the tropes of the traditional convict novel. Where we see them, the convicts are portrayed as victims. They are brutally flogged in the name of justice: ‘Rooke heard the shocking wet slap of the cat landing on the split flesh twenty times, thirty times, fifty times. [...] The flogger had to stop and comb his fingers through the tails of the whip after each lash to clear the flesh that clogged them’ (p. 197). More generally they are treated with contempt and arrogance by the British officers. At one point, Major Wyatt ‘step[ped] over to a prisoner. He prodded him hard between the shoulderblades so the wretch hefted his axe and squared up to a tree’ (p. 64). The land is hard and thankless, so that ‘what with the grubs, soil that was no better than sand, and theft by prisoners, no turnip or potato had ever grown bigger than a marble’ (p. 84). However, it is redeemed for those, like Rooke, who have the eyes to see it, by a rare beauty and a wealth of unknown flora and fauna. The contrasting faces of the country are seen when Rooke goes on an expedition with the Governor which has to diverge from its planned route ‘to avoid muddy creeks too wide to cross and impenetrable thickets where shrubs had engulfed fallen trees’ (p. 92). He is rewarded by the sight of grass ‘sucking up the horizontal rays of the sun and turning a green so bright it seemed liquid’, and fir trees whose needles ‘were jointed, the knuckles packed together more closely at the tip. What leaf grew like a telescope, pushing itself out segment by segment?’ (p. 96). The Sydney of *The Lieutenant* is a masculine world, one from which the convict women have been all but erased, figured in clichéd terms as ‘all damned whores’ (p. 83), whose pleasures Rooke sometimes

¹²⁸ Gething, p. 198.

takes, visiting Mrs Butcher's hut and finding her 'to be both hospitable and discreet, offering the choice of several pleasant convict girls and the privacy of a canvas curtain' (p. 83). Finally, the Aborigines, whom the Governor initially wishes to befriend, are increasingly seen, in a reprise of a familiar trope, as a threat to the colonists because they retaliate when attacked themselves, stoning the Governor's gamekeeper when he fires at them unprovoked, and later spearing him.

Between the Prologue of Rooke's early days in England and the navy, and the Epilogue of his dying in Antigua, we are again presented with colonization as theatre, with Sydney and the surrounding country forming 'a stage on which a performance was taking place, entitled perhaps *His Majesty's Men Defy the Foe*' (pp. 102-03). It is a performance in which Rooke primarily performs the function of the spectator in his isolated observatory, where he acts as 'a panoramic eye before whose gaze the facts unfold'.¹²⁹ As he watches, the plot works itself out to its predestined end in the dispossession of the Aborigines because 'the new masters of the soil had come upon their demesne' (p. 108). However Rooke himself is not entirely absent from the drama of colonization. He takes a variety of parts in the play, but it is as the chief scientist on the expedition that he acts out his assigned part in taking possession of the land through mapping and naming. Rooke enthusiastically performs the role of the colonizing explorer, saying that 'he could have travelled [...] forever into the heart of this unknown land. It was the going forward that was the point, not the arriving' (p. 51). His 'allegiance to scientific method and objectivity' and his belief in what Paul Carter calls the 'one-way logic of positivist chronology' of exploration, help to create imperial history as he maps, settles and possesses the country.¹³⁰ His approach is that of the Enlightenment scientist, concerned to order and classify the world and the skies around him, to 'connect the new stars he had found and, [...], give the new constellations names of his own devising' (p. 131). On an early expedition, when 'the place flowed past, a blur of namelessness', he feels that 'to be unable to give things their proper names was to be like a child again' (p. 92). While he may be offended by the arbitrary naming of

¹²⁹ Carter, *The Road to Botany Bay*, p. xix.

¹³⁰ Gething, p. 199; Carter, *The Road to Botany Bay*, p. 293.

Rose Hill, an ‘untamed place where no rose had ever grown’ (p. 106), he is committed to the principle of naming and to the concepts of possession and ownership that go with it.

Mapping is central to Rooke’s perception both of the world and of his role in the colony, since ‘maps become an imperial technology used to facilitate and celebrate the further advances of explorers, and display worldwide imperial possessions’.¹³¹ However, Grenville recognizes that exploration, mapping, naming and physical settlement are not the only ways to take possession of a country. Rooke’s fellow officer Talbot Silk, a lightly disguised Watkin Tench, does so by using it as the raw material for his writing, creating his own story of settlement as imperial history by ‘taking the real world as nothing more than raw material’ and using ‘poetic licence’ in order ‘to cut and embellish until a pebble was transformed into a gem’ (p. 47). Like the exploring Rooke, he too looks to the future as he sets out to mark ‘the opening of a new chapter in the affairs of Sydney Cove’ and finds himself able ‘to go forward’ to produce his ‘sparkling narrative’ (p. 139). The narrative he writes will be a story of settlement and colonization that, like Clark’s script of *The Playmaker*, will show the inevitable success of colonization as a result of the ‘creative editing that occurs in any apparently objective travel account’.¹³² Silk’s account of his writing prefigures the work of later writers of both fiction and non-fiction, including Grenville herself, in using their writing to take possession of the country and its indigenous inhabitants.

Rooke, on the other hand takes possession by appropriating the language of the local Aborigines. The language lessons between him and Tagaran start as a form of exchange, ‘a dance between the two of them, or the voices of a fugue’ (pp. 163-64). However, despite the claims of Anna Gething and Lynette Russell that this exchange ‘rewrites the traditional power and gender dynamics of the colonizer/native encounter’, and ‘suggests an engagement that is not easily categorized as simply colonialist’, over time the traffic becomes increasingly one-way as Rooke asserts his power and authority

¹³¹ Simon Ryan, p. 5.

¹³² Ross Gibson, *The Diminishing Paradise: Changing Literary Perceptions of Australia* (Sydney: Sirius, 1984), p. 46.

over the indigenous children.¹³³ Rooke steals the Aboriginal language as effectively as his companions do their land. For all his doubts about the accuracy of his understanding, and his claim that learning a language brings you into a relationship with others who speak that language, Rooke's relationship with his Aboriginal informants is strictly instrumental, for his benefit and that of the wider colonial enterprise. He will capture both 'the language of a race of people hitherto unknown' but more importantly 'the cosmos they inhabited: the ways they organised their society and the gods they worshipped, their thoughts and hopes, their fears and passions' (p. 154). In short, language will give him, and others who learn from him, power over the Aborigines – they will take possession not just of the land but of the people themselves. It is telling that, despite claiming that language learning is more than the purely functional process of mastering 'a list of objects, or the words for things eaten or not eaten, thrown or not thrown', Rooke sees his mastery of Aboriginal language as creating 'the *map* of a relationship' (p. 233 - my emphasis) with Tagaran and other Aborigines.

Furthermore Rooke also exerts possession physically through his relationship with Tagaran. Theirs is a relationship grounded in complicity. They meet only at his isolated observatory. Rooke keeps their meetings secret and records what he has learnt in notebooks which he keeps hidden. Over time, the relationship becomes increasingly transgressive, crossing racial and sexual boundaries, as Rooke touches her naked body. While he claims that 'he regretted that momentary touch on her shoulders' and wonders how he would feel if 'some native man, [...], had come up so close to Anne [his sister], and put his hands on her shoulders' (p. 179), his regret for his action seems short-lived. Soon afterwards he has two Aboriginal girls sleeping in his hut overnight, confident that whatever they may say about their encounter, what he says is what will be believed. While Russell argues that the reference to Anne is intended to show that the relationship between Rooke and Tagaran is 'fraternal and not sexual', I read this passage differently,

¹³³ Gething, p. 201; Lynette Russell, 'Learning from Each Other: Language, Authority and Authenticity in Kate Grenville's *The Lieutenant*', in *Lighting Dark Places: Essays on Kate Grenville*, ed. by Sue Kossew (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2010), pp. 199-210 (p. 201).

as a recognition by Rooke of how sexual his relationship with Tagaran has become.¹³⁴ Grenville carefully fences off the transgressive potential of the relationship between Rooke and Tagaran, and Rooke's sexual, almost paedophile, interest in her ends when his colleague Silk reads his notebook 'through a lens of prurience' (p. 210) and Rooke, for all his protestations of innocence, clearly understands that his secret passion has been discovered. Rooke's relationship with Tagaran writes in miniature a key aspect of settler relations with Aborigines, one which is exploitative, to be kept secret and to be disowned when it threatens embarrassment. When Rooke is ordered to join the expedition to capture or kill Aborigines he 'could not say, *I cannot do this because I am too fond of Tagaran*' (p. 246).

While Rooke is complicit in the dispossession of the Aborigines, however, there are limits to his complicity and to the extent to which he can and will subdue his conscience to his duty. Early in the novel his colleague, Lieutenant Gardiner, has captured two Aborigines on the Governor's orders, an action he regrets, saying that 'I wish to God I had not done it! He should not have given the order, but I wish to God I had not obeyed', causing Rooke to wonder '*what would I have done in the same place?*' (p. 113). He is soon to discover, for while Gardiner's orders only led to the Aborigines being 'kidnapped. Violently. Against their will' (p. 112), Rooke is sent on the expedition, led by Silk, to capture or kill Aborigines in retaliation for their killing of Brugden, the Governor's gamekeeper. It is an expedition intended to provide an example to the Aborigines of what will happen to them if they defy the colonizers, for, in terms reminiscent of Keneally's *H. E.*, 'the governor's argument was that it was necessary to act harshly once, in order not to have to act harshly again' (p. 274). When Rooke discovers that he has been made complicit in a plot to murder Aborigines, albeit a plot that fails because he warns them through Tagaran, he breaks silence and somewhat melodramatically, and at some personal risk given his experience of the way in which words can lead to death, confronts the Governor, saying 'it was a wicked plan, sir, I am sorry to have been persuaded to comply with the order. I would not for any reason ever again obey a similar order' (p. 285). Silk, ever-compliant and ever-complicit, argues

¹³⁴ Russell, p. 208.

casuistically that obeying the order was acceptable because he never intended to carry it out, saying that ‘the thing was never going to happen [...] what is the difficulty here? No natives have been captured and no heads have been...removed. Nor will they be’ (p. 274). However Rooke believes that ‘if an action was wrong, it did not matter whether it succeeded or not, or how many clever steps you took to make sure it failed. If you were part of such an act, you were part of its wrong’ (p. 280). In contrast to Will Thornhill, he recognizes that, as Hannah Arendt argues in her account of the Eichmann trial, complicity is an issue of moral judgement, that the pressure to comply, even in the most extreme circumstances, can and should be resisted. As she puts it, ‘humanly speaking, no more is required, and no more can reasonably be asked, for this planet to remain a place fit for human occupation’ than that ‘under conditions of terror most people will comply *but some people will not*’.¹³⁵ Rooke becomes one of those who, by his refusal to comply with orders that he believes to be morally wrong, recognizes, in words which echo Arendt, that ‘if you were part of that machine, you were part of its evil’ (p. 280). The only way in which Rooke can stand outside the machine that is early colonial Australia is by death or exile since ‘His Majesty’s service could not accommodate an officer who questioned an order’ (p. 122). Rooke here takes his place in the line of men like Dawes, Halloran and Blackwood who see things from a different perspective, though his punishment is exile rather than death or serious injury.

Grenville’s presentation of Rooke’s refusal to comply can be read as a significant move away from her apparent endorsement of the ambivalence of Will Thornhill, a move affirmed by the critical treatment of Silk, Will’s shifty counterpart in *The Lieutenant*, who is presented as disingenuous, silver-tongued and untrustworthy, a man who ‘could be presented with a moment as astonishing as a star moving out of its place, and see only the chance to make a story’ (p. 139). When this is coupled with the Governor’s condemnation of Brugden for attacking Aborigines when ‘the survival of this settlement, and of all its members, depends in large degree on maintaining cordial relations with the natives’ (p. 101), Grenville seems to be unequivocally condemning

¹³⁵ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, intro. by Amos Elon (London: Penguin, 2006), p. 233.

white settler violence. In parallel, through Rooke's relationship with Tagaran and other Aborigines, she seems to suggest a way forward for Anglo-Celtic Australians based on a respect for difference and a desire for understanding. While, as Rooke puts it, 'a man could not travel along two different paths' (p. 218), trying to be both white and Aboriginal, at the same time the learning of a language necessarily leads to an imaginative understanding of people of another race that prevents them being seen as alien others. This suggests a very different relationship between Aborigine and settler than that which eventuated, one based not on dispossession and elimination but on mutual co-existence based on a recognition of 'the existence of conflicting values and interests, though within a framework of peaceful mutual adjustment'.¹³⁶ The potential for such a relationship, and the causes of its failure, are central to Kim Scott's 2010 novel *That Deadman Dance*, which I will discuss briefly in Chapter 5.

However, for all its apparent repudiation of aspects of white settler history, *The Lieutenant* is compromised by its collusion with that history. Rooke may seek to distance himself from Silk and his project of familiarizing and Europeanizing Australia, commenting that 'New South Wales was no gentleman's estate. His Majesty's subjects were perched in a small sour clearing on the edge of the unknown. The land around them seemed without resources either animal or vegetable, and the gamekeeper was a criminal who had been given a gun' (p. 91), but as we have seen he is in practice deeply complicit with it. For all his sympathy with the Aborigines, he aligns himself with the colonists in seeking to interpret and order Aboriginal thought, to make it conform to white expectations and in doing so to achieve 'their appropriation to a white discourse, history'.¹³⁷ Furthermore when Tagaran's friend Tugear is attacked by a sailor he refuses to help, believing that it will be impossible to have the man punished as 'he would have the story ready about how he had gone ashore and the girls had stolen his bread, or his pipe' (p. 215), converting himself from aggressor to victim and so justifying his action in the eyes of his comrades and superiors. Despite Rooke's gesture of dissent he makes

¹³⁶ Richard Mulgan, 'Citizenship and Legitimacy in Post-colonial Australia', in *Citizenship and Indigenous Australians: Changing Conceptions and Possibilities*, ed. by Nicolas Peterson and Will Sanders (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 179-95 (p. 193).

¹³⁷ Carter, *The Road to Botany Bay*, p. 325.

no serious effort to stand up for or protect the Aborigines, even refusing to show Tagaran how his rifle works. His moral stance can best be seen as a self-serving performance, one that will salve his conscience, and that of his Australian readers, but which does nothing to change the relationship between colonizers and colonized.

Rooke claims that the exchange of language between him and Tagaran meant that ‘a boundary was being crossed and erased. Like ink in water, one language was melting into another’ (p. 178), and in doing so implies that a future Australian nation should be founded on a similar dissolution of racial boundaries, or more accurately on a recognition that the nation is defined by “‘transgressive boundaries’ – boundaries that are made and unmade, defined and effaced, by acts or events of transgression’.¹³⁸ However while boundaries can be ‘constitutively, crossed or transgressed’ so that ‘the frontier does not merely close the nation in on itself, but also, immediately, opens it to an outside, to other nations’, this is not the case in *The Lieutenant*.¹³⁹ Here Rooke’s transgressions, both in his relationship with Tagaran and in his words to the Governor, lead to exile and separation, not to the creation of a new nation, and the idea of trans-racial reconciliation is replaced by the sound of voices shouting across a void. After he leaves Australia, Rooke settles in Antigua where he devotes himself to the cause of the abolition of slavery in a way that can best be seen as a form of atonement for his feelings of shame about his past actions as part of the colonizing forces in Australia. However, whatever good he does for the slaves of Antigua – and Rooke claims that it is ‘a little melodramatic’ to claim that he ‘had given his life for them’ (p. 294) – his atonement does not and cannot affect the process of colonization and Aboriginal dispossession in Australia.

In her discussion with Ramona Koval cited earlier, Grenville said that she wanted to present aspects of Australia’s past which have not traditionally been examined ‘in a judgment neutral way, but I hope a clear-eyed way’, standing outside and above the

¹³⁸ Don Randall, *David Malouf* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), p. 190.

¹³⁹ Geoffrey Bennington, ‘Postal Politics and the Institution of the Nation’, in *Nation and Narration*, ed. by Homi K. Bhabha (Abingdon: Routledge, 1990), pp. 121-37 (p. 121).

‘polarised positions’ of the participants in the History Wars.¹⁴⁰ However she seems unable to recognize that her apparent refusal to take sides, her attribution of hostility between settlers and Aborigines to a failure of communications, and particularly her refusal to condemn the systemic and deep-rooted nature of colonial violence, amounts to a taking of sides in which she effectively aligns herself with the position of the settlers. This is reinforced when we recall that while Grenville ‘reveals a contemporary delicacy of mind when she declares she will not attempt to enter the minds of her aboriginal characters’, she is very happy ‘empathising with assorted Britishers from 200 years ago, stepping so confidently into their minds that she is ready to diagnose not only “double-think”, which might be inferred from incompatible statements and incoherent responses, but “paranoia”’.¹⁴¹ For all her worthy sentiments, Grenville’s historical fictions both underpin the white settler narrative of the past and reject alternative tellings of history.

Grenville’s novels, then, are at heart deeply conservative, concerned to reaffirm and refashion the myths of settler colonialism rather than challenge them fundamentally. Eleanor Collins proposes that *The Secret River* should be read as a tragedy, a form in which, she suggests, ‘loss is crucial’.¹⁴² Will’s sense of ‘irretrievable loss’ at the novel’s end outweighs his material success and ‘the novel’s trajectory [...] from hope to hopelessness’ serves to ‘undercut its pioneer plot’ and the optimistic story of nation-building.¹⁴³ Much the same argument can be made for *The Lieutenant*. However, as Collins also says, tragedy is ‘a more comfortable genre for this painful history because it holds out the promise of release from guilt’.¹⁴⁴ It is just such a painless release that Grenville offers to settler Australians, a release that, for the cost of an Apology for the sins of the past, will leave them safely in possession of the land their forebears stole. She is, in the end, unable to move beyond ‘her own positionality as a “white” Australian’ and her concern to avoid accusations of appropriation to imagine her stories from a

¹⁴⁰ Koval, ‘Interview’.

¹⁴¹ Inga Clendinnen, ‘The History Question: Who Owns the Past’, *Quarterly Essay*, 23 (2006), 1-72 (p. 19).

¹⁴² Eleanor Collins, ‘Poison in the Flour’, *Meanjin*, 65.1 (2006), 38-47 (p. 46).

¹⁴³ Collins, p. 46.

¹⁴⁴ Collins, p. 46.

different, indigenous, perspective.¹⁴⁵ As a result she gives ‘an account of regrettable excess, a humanitarian critique of colonialism’ that is clearly affiliated to Keneally’s earlier celebration of colonialism.¹⁴⁶ The popularity of Grenville’s work both within and outside Australia is, perhaps, testimony to the gentleness of its critique of white Australian history and mythology.

Rewriting the Past: Debra Adelaide’s *Serpent Dust*

I have suggested that both Keneally and Grenville, in their very different ways, fundamentally reinscribe the myths and stories of settler Australia in novels that are ultimately comforting to contemporary readers. By contrast, Debra Adelaide’s 1998 novel *Serpent Dust* provides a more fundamental critique of the convict legacy.¹⁴⁷ Her novel examines the events of early colonization, and particularly the spread of smallpox to and through Aboriginal communities, stereoscopically, from the perspective both of the colonists and the Aborigines, as primarily represented by the woman Dyirra. In contrast to Keneally’s sunny vision of early settlement, and Grenville’s ambivalent presentation of the convict-settler, Adelaide’s novel paints a black picture of the settlers, whom she blames for the mass extermination of Aborigines by disease.

Serpent Dust subverts many of the elements of the settler narrative. Adelaide’s convicts, particularly the central figure of Cowper, are not oppressed victims. Instead he is an arch-manipulator, a man who says that ‘right from the start I had my plans’, and that ‘I knew how to make myself useful. And I knew how to consolidate my skills, be adaptable, be a *man of parts*, you might say’ (p. 41). His plans essentially involve establishing relations with the Aborigines and using the resources of the colony to trade with them, winning their confidence as a preliminary to eliminating them by the use of smallpox. To help in this he, like Rooke, ‘take[s] the trouble to learn their language’ (p. 77) and in doing so controls the relationship between Aborigines and colonists. As the

¹⁴⁵ Kossew, p. 17.

¹⁴⁶ Gall, p. 102.

¹⁴⁷ Debra Adelaide, *Serpent Dust* (Milsons Point, New South Wales: Vintage, 1998). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

marines who assist him put it, ‘everyone trusted Cowper. He brought into the settlement fresh game [...]. He made pacts with the natives; he smoothed over conflict; he offered a service to anyone who wanted it, providing they could make the return he wanted’ (p. 107). Similarly the officers are not brutal bullies but rather naive and ineffectual, hampered by an ‘English sense of justice’ (p. 43). To Dyrira they are a peculiar invading army that ‘didn’t rise up as one force and attack us; they didn’t declare a war as we expected; they didn’t steal the women...’ (p. 11). To Cowper they are ‘grubbing, tree-felling, gravel-scraping fools’ who are ‘too stupid to think beyond the scope of their own stores and provisions, too foolish to plan for any future but one that comes from across the seas [...] too scared to more than glance over their shoulder at the vastness beyond’ (p. 171). They are divorced from the land they have taken, ‘we could not even *hear* what was coming from the new land we had entered’ (p. 193). They use the Aborigines physically and sexually but make no real attempt to understand them, despite the Governor’s desire to develop good relations with them. Furthermore their desire for land is presented as a cause of trouble rather than a promise of triumph and success. Property ‘is the devil of it all’ as ‘officers want convicts to labour for them on their land, their solid, green parcel of property. And they requisition tools and equipment from the stores to go with the land and the convicts’ (p. 109). They are as much thieves from the newly established colony as the convicts themselves.

The land itself is presented as a place of promise and great beauty, but one that the settlers are unable to comprehend. The first words in the Surgeon’s Journal are that Port Jackson presented ‘the most magnificent sight I have ever beheld’, it is variously ‘a veritable jewel’, ‘a glorious treasure box’, and a ‘magnificent watery paradise’ (p. 23). However he is soon bemoaning the difficulty of raising crops and finds himself unable to understand how the Aborigines survive given the ‘extreme lack of natural food sources in this country’ (p. 25). He is happy to eat the meat procured from them by Cowper’s trading activities without apparently reflecting on how the Aborigines have caught it and what this might say about their capacity to live off the land. Only Cowper seems to understand that ‘the bush [...] looks after you, if you let it’ (p. 171). While the Surgeon is keen to undertake ‘the necessary scientific examinations’ (p. 27) of

Aboriginal bodies he shows no curiosity about them except as cadavers for experimenting on. Similarly the Governor, like Keneally's H. E., shows an 'insatiable curiosity in everything the new country offered for examination: rivers and their sources, flora, fauna, soil types, weather' (p. 190), but has little interest in its inhabitants or their response to the colonists' arrival. Rather he wants 'little more than to live in peace side by side with the natives, for them to learn what they could of the advantages of the civilisation which we brought' (p. 190), to assimilate and whiten them.

By contrast, Cowper claims to understand the Aborigines, arguing that by settling the land 'we've stolen something they value beyond all treasures' and that 'they can't have their land back, so what will they want instead? Revenge of course, simple bloody revenge, sir!' (p. 77). Like the central protagonists of Keneally's *Bring Larks and Heroes*, Cowper is an Irishman, in this case from the North of the country, and believes he understands the thinking of the Aborigines because his country has been taken from him – 'we've had your stinking Orangemen thrust upon us for years now. And we'd kill them if we could!' (p. 78). His approach is simple, to eliminate the Aborigines before they eliminate the colonists.

While the colonists are presented in negative terms, as either weak and ineffective or brutally murderous, the Aborigines, while regarded by the Surgeon as 'utterly savage, without the slightest spark of Christian humanity' (p. 36), are portrayed sympathetically by Adelaide. In what Gelder and Salzman see as a fictional equivalent of Clendinnen's *Dancing with Strangers*, they are shown as puzzled by the invaders, wondering if they are human or ghosts, and baffled by their behaviour.¹⁴⁸ When they landed they 'stepped about in the manner of a stiff dance, waving a long stick and a blue and red and white skin. Then they seemed a bit undecided what to do' (pp. 4-5). They remain clothed even in the hottest weather and 'we noticed that they brought their own food. They didn't hunt or fish or dig like us' (p. 6). Their punishments are incomprehensible, so that at a flogging 'when blood was drawn, their clever men didn't stop the punishment as ours would have done when a spear-throwing was in progress.

¹⁴⁸ Gelder and Salzman, p. 89.

Maybe there were no clever men. But this was unthinkable' (p. 8). The Aborigines do not initially fear the colonists but are curious to learn more about them. By the time they realize that the strangers intend to stay, it is too late, 'the moment [to drive them away] was utterly gone, swallowed up by ignorance, confusion, indecision', and the Aborigines have 'lost our place' (p. 11).

In Adelaide's novel, it is the colonists, and particularly Cowper, who are responsible for the mass killing of Aborigines. When Dyrira is sent into the encampment to find out more about the habits of the invaders, Cowper gives her a phial containing smallpox which she takes back to display as it was '*our* first sight of what I came to know as glass' (p. 133). Once released, of course, the virus kills indiscriminately, it becomes the serpent dust of the book's title. That this was a deliberate act is clear from a discussion between Cowper and the Surgeon in which Cowper tries to persuade him to 'join with us in forming a plan, a plan that will deal with the Natives in the longer term' (p. 77). It is a conversation in which, melodramatically, Cowper's face 'looked more sinister than I had ever seen it, ever seen anyone look, in all the dark and sinister faces there are in that colony' (p. 78). But while the Surgeon attempts to distance himself from Cowper's plans he is, and knows himself to be, complicit in the spread of the disease because he brought the phial with him and failed to guard it properly, an act which haunts him later when he fears he was '*too much to blame for that calamity amongst the Natives*' (p. 184). For those Aborigines, like Dyrira, who escape death, the only alternative is assimilation as she is taken into the Chaplain's house, where she is first renamed Eveleigh, after the Chaplain's wife's sister, and then impregnated by the Chaplain in the first phase of a process of eliminating the Aborigines by what Wolfe terms "'breeding them white'", a process 'whereby "part-aboriginal" came to mean "non-aboriginal"' until the Aborigines disappeared.¹⁴⁹ Either way they will effectively be eliminated and with them will go 'a differently grounded rival memory which

¹⁴⁹ Wolfe, *Settler Colonialism*, pp. 34 & 32.

contradicted the national narrative upon which a homogeneous citizenship was predicated'.¹⁵⁰

Adelaide, then, confronts fundamental elements of the settler narrative of the past, and particularly dismantles the constructed images of the convict victim and of the heroic pioneer – in *Serpent Dust* it is only the Mephistophelian convict Cowper who leaves the settlement for the bush. However, while she contrasts ‘the wisdom and insight of the white-haired, mysterious Aboriginal woman Dyirra with the anxious white invaders’, her presentation of the Aborigines, and particularly of Dyirra, has a number of problematic aspects.¹⁵¹ Her decision to give ‘each character, indigenous and white, male and female, an equally sophisticated language: offering an Aboriginal perspective, for example, but “translating” the thoughts of the Aboriginal voice into modern English’, appropriates and normalizes Aboriginal experience.¹⁵² This is reinforced by giving Dyirra a westernized female consciousness in which she can complain that ‘the knowledge that, I could now admit, was there that first day as we gazed across the water, that told me we had to act now or it would be never. But who would have listened to me then? Or ever?’ (p. 13). Finally she is stereotypically exoticized by being placed in the magical realist tradition as one who is marked out for being ‘a white-haired baby’ (p. 17) and for having magical powers – she is able to walk at birth and later to levitate.

Even more problematic is the suggestion that, as indigenous writer and critic Dennis Foley puts it in an angry review, ‘the smallpox was spread by the Eora’s [*sic*] own greed for glass’.¹⁵³ Adelaide certainly suggests that Dyirra shares responsibility for the deaths of her people. She is given the task of infiltrating the colonists’ camp in order to find out more about them and their intentions, an act that leads to her being given the phial of smallpox which is itself dismissed by the men who wanted ‘the weapons, the firesticks [...] their magic tools, their sacred stones, their objects of power’ (p. 134). What she brings, all that perhaps can be expected of a woman, is an object that baffles

¹⁵⁰ Wolfe, *Settler Colonialism*, p. 34.

¹⁵¹ Gelder and Salzman, p. 89.

¹⁵² Gelder and Salzman, p. 89.

¹⁵³ Dennis Foley, ‘*Serpent Dust*’, *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 27.1 (1999), 43.

them and which is found to contain negative power. By her action, the Aborigines become complicit in their own destruction, and white guilt is consequently lessened.

That said, Adelaide's book provides a powerful fictional attempt to rewrite the myths of colonial settlement and to challenge the story of the benign attitudes of the early colonists. It is, perhaps, for that reason that, compared to Grenville's novels, it is little read and little commented on. It is, I would suggest, too discomfoting a novel to be easily assimilated into the settler story in the way that Grenville's work has been. While the liberal reader can 'nod in a self-satisfied way' at the end of Grenville's works, reassured that the horrors she depicts are safely sealed in the past and that contemporary Australia has moved on in its attitudes and beliefs, Adelaide's novel allows no such self-satisfaction.¹⁵⁴ As a result, her story of convict guilt and complicity in genocide, together with its refusal to sugar the pill by empathizing with the colonists and seeing them as victims as well as perpetrators, was all too easily dismissed in the era of the History Wars as an extreme view and an unacceptable denigration of the past.

Restaging Settler History?

Gelder and Salzman have argued that at the time of the Bicentenary, 'while the historians were embroiled in ideological conflict, the fiction was not seen as particularly controversial' in the way that it tackled issues of Australian history and identity.¹⁵⁵ Certainly the novels by Keneally and Grenville discussed in this chapter do not fundamentally disturb the central myths of white settler history, and indeed are arguably less challenging than the novels of the 1960s and 1970s discussed earlier. While Grenville in particular gives the impression, through her liberal humanist attitudes and her empathetic approach, of providing a serious critique of settler behaviour, this is not ultimately carried through. In particular early colonial violence is portrayed primarily as the result of muddle and mutual incomprehension, a last resort to deal with an escalating problem. Deliberate violence is the province of morally degenerate men like Smasher

¹⁵⁴ Gelder and Salzman, p. 85.

¹⁵⁵ Gelder and Salzman, p. 65.

Sullivan and the gamekeeper Brugden, while Good Settlers like Thornhill, and Good Colonists like Rooke, are made complicit in violence as a result of external forces. Furthermore settler violence, and the racism that underlies it, are presented as firmly sealed in the past and there is no suggestion that they are a structural feature of Australian society today as much as in the days of early colonialism. As such, the novels work to support the idea that little other than superficial change is needed to bring about a reconciliation between Aborigines and non-indigenous Australians.

Given the increasing emphasis in non-fiction writing on the institutionalization of white violence against Aborigines, its inextricable linkage with the historic settler passion for land, and the recognition that the abuse of the Aboriginal population is a feature of the present as much as the past, the reticence of these novelists in challenging seriously the events of early convict settlement is worth further investigation. In part this fictional conservatism may stem, paradoxically, from Grenville and Keneally's commitment to achieving reconciliation between Aboriginal and settler Australians at a time when 'the refusal of the Federal Government to make formal apology on behalf of the nation and the delayed reparation are policies that appear to have the support of the majority of the population since the release of the *Bringing Them Home* report'.¹⁵⁶ Downplaying the extent and depth of settler violence, balancing accounts of settler atrocity with stories of Aboriginal violence and with the more reassuring myths of white pioneer heroism, setting 'the fraught but insistent story of first contact' against 'the myths of the worthy convict and the toiling pioneer', may have seemed helpful approaches to drawing the wider settler community into a process many found unnecessary and disturbing.¹⁵⁷ In particular Grenville's emphasis on her 'empathising and imaginative understanding of those difficult events' provided a reassurance that recognizing the sins of the past did not require the rejection of the whole of white Australian history.¹⁵⁸ However, in their attempt to create a shared history that is acceptable to white Australia, both Grenville and Keneally deny the very real

¹⁵⁶ Whitlock, 'Active Remembrance', p. 26.

¹⁵⁷ Eleanor Collins, p. 40.

¹⁵⁸ Koval, 'Interview'.

differences in historical understanding between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians and foreclose on the need to give space and voice to other perspectives. They drown out the polyphonic voices of a multicultural nation in favour of the single voice of the non-indigenous settlers who will seek to dictate the terms of any reconciliation process and control the narrative of the past that all are expected to endorse.

These novels can also be seen as a contribution to the growing debates about the role of the Anglo-Celtic core culture in Australia. As discussed in Chapter 1, Miriam Dixson has argued that ‘the Anglo-Celtic core culture must continue to function as a “holding” centre for an emerging and newly diverse Australia’, and that without its stabilizing role there is a danger of social and cultural fragmentation under pressure from migration and multiculturalism.¹⁵⁹ Dixson attempts, not wholly successfully, to detach this core culture from the racism and sexism that disfigured white Australian attitudes in earlier generations. However, beneath the surface she courts many of the same attitudes, with her habitual appeal to the values of ordinary Australians, her contrast between ‘mainstream Australia and the intelligentsia’ who stand accused of devaluing all aspects of the Australian past, and her concern over the alleged loss of a familiar world.¹⁶⁰ In their different ways, Keneally and Grenville not only decline to challenge the revival of Anglo-Celticism but effectively endorse it. Keneally’s benign celebration of British colonialism, timed to celebrate the Bicentenary of British settlement, valorizes the positive aspects of Anglo-Celtic culture while reducing its racism, violence and paranoia to the stuff of comedy. The Britons who found his Australia are untroubled by any culture than their own, seeing themselves as heirs to the Europe of the Enlightenment with its commitment to transplanting its civilization across the globe. Similarly Grenville’s endorsement of the ‘strength and courage of such acts of settlement’ as Will Thornhill’s, undercuts her portrayal of the darker side of settlement

¹⁵⁹ Miriam Dixson, *The Imaginary Australian: Anglo-Celts and Identity – 1788 to the Present* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 1999), p. 7.

¹⁶⁰ Dixson, *The Imaginary Australian*, p. 170.

and reproduces the settler narrative of the heroic conquest of the land.¹⁶¹ As Carol Merli says ‘Grenville is writing from a position of whiteness, and, however much she may be attempting to recover and make explicit the brutality and violence of the behaviour of certain white settlers, there is a sense that she is narrating a story that isn’t hers to tell’.¹⁶² Despite her dedication of *The Secret River* to ‘the Aboriginal people of Australia: past, present and future’, and of *The Lieutenant* to ‘Patyegarang and the Cadigal people and William Dawes’, her attempt to write from above the fray of the History Wars dispossesses the Aborigines almost as effectively as does Keneally and leaves Australia safe in the hands of the Anglo-Celts.

In the face of this fictional reinscription of early colonial history as a more liberal form of white settler history it is hardly surprising that Henry Reynolds, writing in 2006, should see a bleak future for indigenous peoples since ‘Australia is returning to its past and a great many people are comforted by the change of destination’.¹⁶³ He was to see his prophecy fulfilled the following year when the Federal Government ordered an emergency intervention in the country’s Northern Territory, ostensibly to rescue Aboriginal children from sexual abuse by Aboriginal adults, an intervention that very obviously restated and reaffirmed the power relationships between settlers and Aborigines. More recently, reductions in funding for Aboriginal support and development suggest a continuing desire on the part of at least some settler Australians to push back against the growing movement for Aboriginal rights.¹⁶⁴ Taken together they suggest a reassertion of the traditional narrative of the nation’s past and of its Anglo-Celtic identity. In the next chapter I will look at the way contemporary reworkings of the myths of exile and return operate in this context.

¹⁶¹ Kossew, p. 8.

¹⁶² Merli, p. 213.

¹⁶³ Henry Reynolds, ‘Destination Past’, *Meanjin*, 65.1 (2006), 109-13 (p. 113).

¹⁶⁴ Jamie Smyth, ‘Budget cuts stir Aboriginal anger in Australia’, *Financial Times*, 3 June 2014 <<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/5d031d70-eab5-11e3-80fb-00144feabdc0.html>> [accessed 15 March 2015].

CHAPTER 4

RE(-)MEMBERING HOME: PETER CAREY AND THE IMAGINATION OF EXILE

Myths of Exile

In Chapter 1 I briefly discussed the importance of exile as a foundational myth of settler Australians. It is a myth that underlies their self-identification as victims, their relationship with Britain, and their concern at the increasing pressure for Aboriginal land rights. By transporting convicts the British effectively exiled them from their native land in an exercise of power not only over their bodies but also over their minds, changing them from citizens of their nation, albeit citizens with few rights, to outcasts. They became, in their own eyes, the victims of a callous and uncaring country which had evicted them to fend for themselves in a new and alien land. This initial act of exile is the starting point for the lengthy and continuing victimological narrative outlined earlier, one in which Australian settlers framed their identity in opposition to forces, both human and natural, which they considered hostile to them.

Central to exile is loss, loss of the familiar and known, loss both material and psychic, what Delys Bird characterizes as ‘a loss of the sense of self and of history’.¹ The emotional loss of relationships and friendships, the geographical loss of familiar landscapes and townscapes, and the temporal loss of connections with the past, had two, apparently contradictory, consequences for the exiled convicts and for their descendants. For some it led to a passionate attachment to their new country as a place of safety and security after the trauma of expulsion, an issue I shall explore in the next chapter. For others it created a deep attachment to the country that had expelled them. Accompanying the exile’s sense of loss was a longing to return home, to abandon the anti-Eden of the Antipodes for the remembered homeland, which represented a place of

¹ Delys Bird, ‘The “Settling” of English’, in *The Oxford Literary History of Australia*, ed. by Bruce Bennett and Jennifer Strauss (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 21-43 (p. 21).

safety, security and familiarity from which the individual had been unjustly expelled. As Michael Seidel has written, for the exile ‘the memory of home becomes paramount in narratives where home itself is but a memory’ so that ‘the expression of the desire for home becomes a substitute for home, embodies the emotion attendant upon the image’, leading to ‘a decidedly ambiguous relation with both the place of remove and the place of resettlement’.² For the convicts, the new land in which they found themselves was ‘a site of loss, a place where the self is made void, where cultural identity must be reconstructed’.³ However that cultural identity was inevitably haunted by the memories of previous identities that had been formed in Britain and which it was assumed could be readopted when they returned. What Stephen Turner has called the ‘melancholy of dislocation’ is accompanied by a desire for relocation.⁴ The force of this pull to return can be seen in the many attempts of convicts to escape back to Britain, few of which were successful.⁵

Given the centrality of the experience of exile to Australian identity it is inevitable that the concepts of loss and return, and the consequent uneasy relationship to the new homeland, run through Australian writing. They can be seen in classic form at the beginning of Henry Handel Richardson's *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*, published in the first half of the last century but set in the 1850s, where Long Jim:

was seized by a desperate homesickness for the old country. [...] He shut his eyes, and all the well-known sights and sounds of the familiar streets came back to him. [...] He remembered the glowing charcoal in the stoves of the chestnut and potato sellers; the appetising smell of the cooked-fish shops; the fragrant steam of the hot, dark coffee at the twopenny stall; [...]. He would never see

² Michael Seidel, *Exile and the Narrative Imagination* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986), pp. 11 & 12.

³ Stephen Turner, ‘Settlement as Forgetting’, in *Quicksands: Foundational Histories in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand*, ed. by Klaus Neumann, Nicholas Thomas and Hilary Ericksen (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 1999), pp. 20-38 (p. 21).

⁴ Turner, p. 22.

⁵ Perhaps the best-known of such attempts is that of William Bryant and his colleagues who reached Timor before being arrested and returned to England, where they were eventually released.

anything of the kind again. [...] Thus he sat and brooded, all the hatred of the unwilling exile for the land that gives him house-room burning in his breast.⁶

In his reconstruction of an idyllic past frozen in time, Jim creates a selective and seductive image of what he sees as his true home, ignoring the dire economic circumstances of England in the first half of the nineteenth century which made migration to Australia seem an attractive proposition. Similarly Sal Thornhill, in Kate Grenville's *The Secret River*, keeps 'a broken piece of clay roof-tile that she had found in the sand by Pickle Herring Stairs the morning of her last day in London' which allows her to remember, and re-member, the topography of the city, and which acts as a constant reminder of the lost home and the network of associations that it conjures up.⁷ Her dreams are 'all of the place they had left: [...] *I was walking along past Vickery's, around the corner from the old place*', and when she fears she may die she wants to be buried facing North '*where Home is*'.⁸ However, like Jim, her memory suppresses the depressing circumstances in which she lived in London.

The very intensity of the dream of home means that return, even if it can be accomplished, is almost inevitably a disillusioning process. Long Jim returns to London and, finding himself 'out of work and penniless', becomes keen to return to Australia, as does Mahony himself when his return to England fails to work out.⁹ It is, perhaps, fortunate that Sal Thornhill does not return to London where she and her family 'would be outsiders, with their sunburnt skin and their colonial ways', and where the places she remembers 'would be places with a shrunken look about them, places from a story that belonged to someone else'.¹⁰ Sal and Jim's unreliable memories of London speak to the fact that memory reconstructs and deconstructs the past to suit its circumstances. It is, in Pierre Nora's words, 'in permanent evolution, subject to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of the distortions to which it is subject, vulnerable in

⁶ Henry Handel Richardson, *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*, intro. by Michael Ackland (Ringwood, Victoria: Penguin, 1998), p. 9.

⁷ Kate Grenville, *The Secret River* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2006), p. 91.

⁸ Grenville, pp. 157 & 191.

⁹ Richardson, p. 233.

¹⁰ Grenville, p. 331.

various ways to appropriation and manipulation, and capable of lying dormant for long periods only to be suddenly reawakened'.¹¹ It is this reawakening that acts to delude the exile about the attractions of home, making her desire to return to a past where she believes she was happier.

The haunting memory of home and the desire to return necessarily complicate the exile's relationship with the new land. Turner has commented on the settler's need both to 'retain some sense of the old-country self to be able to draw on a strong and authoritative identity' and to forget the former homeland in order to forge a 'new-country identity'.¹² At some point, if the settler is to be reconciled to her new home, she must find a way of subduing the desire to return, allowing the memory of the past to inform but not to dominate the relationship with the new country. The exile needs to find a way of holding in balance the loss of an old home and the establishment of a new home, of unsettlement and settlement.

The ambiguity of the exile's position in a new country is central to David Malouf's novel *An Imaginary Life*.¹³ This fiction is ostensibly about the exile of the Roman poet Ovid in Tomis, a place of banishment described as a desolate country 'at the ends of the earth', where 'we are centuries from the notion of an orchard or a garden made simply to please' (p. 7). However, as Philip Nielsen argues, there is 'a clear connection between the convict myth of exile and imprisonment, and Ovid's banishment from Rome'.¹⁴ We can, as he suggests, read the novel as telling of 'the essence of the convict experience as social outcast in a harsh and primitive land, on the edge of known civilisation'.¹⁵ Like the convicts transported to New South Wales, Ovid feels displaced and desires to return, a return which is as impossible for him as for them. His discontent

¹¹ Pierre Nora, 'General Introduction: Between Memory and History', in *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past / Under the Direction of Pierre Nora*, English language edn, ed. and with a foreword by Laurence D. Kritzman, trans. by Arthur Goldhammer, 3 vols (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996-98), I: *Conflicts and Divisions*, pp. 1-20 (p. 3).

¹² Stephen Turner, p. 21.

¹³ David Malouf, *An Imaginary Life* (London: Vintage, 1999). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

¹⁴ Philip Nielsen, *Imagined Lives: A Study of David Malouf* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1990), p. 41.

¹⁵ Nielsen, p. 41.

and feeling of unsettlement is changed by the sight of a poppy, ‘flower of my far-off childhood and the cornfields round our farm at Sulmo’, which enables him to re-imagine and re(-)member his early life ‘with yellow of the ox-eyed daisy of our weedy olive groves, with blue of cornflower, orange of marigold, purple of foxglove, even the pinks and cyclamens of my mother’s garden that I have forgotten all these years’ (p. 25). By representing both a time and a place where he was happy, the poppy enables Ovid to feel in place in his exile, to believe that ‘I belong to this place now. I have made it mine’ (p. 91). He reinforces his claim to belonging by befriending the mysterious child who is captured by the villagers with whom Ovid lives and who reifies the poet’s memory of ‘the Child who used to be my secret companion at Sulmo’ (p. 42).

Nielsen suggests that, for Ovid, the sight of the poppy is the start of a healing process which leads to ‘a joyful resolution – “reconciliation” rather than resigned acceptance or defeat’.¹⁶ He adds that reconciliation carries the message that white Australians ‘can identify with, and take cultural possession of the country in which they live, rather than being divided between their immediate knowledge and that of the Old World’.¹⁷ However while Ovid may be reconciled with the natural world, there is no reconciliation between him and the villagers with whom he lives, and with whom he has a complex relationship, dependent on them for food and shelter but regarding them as primitive and uncivilized. Furthermore his reconciliation with the land is, as Nielsen indicates, predicated on possession, which transforms the natural world from ‘what earth was in its original blackness’ (p. 21) to a place of sublime beauty in the same way as white settlers ‘transformed the oppressive meanings of biblical expulsion into a sensuous love of the bush’.¹⁸ Ovid’s reconciliation to his new life also depends on his ability to connect his place of exile with his previous home, to re-create the lost home in the new one, to retain the link with the past. Far from being a narrative of reconciliation, then, Malouf’s novel is a story of the transformation of exile into possession, where the

¹⁶ Nielsen, p. 66.

¹⁷ Nielsen, p. 66.

¹⁸ Deborah Bird Rose, ‘New World Poetics of Place: Along the Oregon Trail and in the National Museum of Australia’, in *Rethinking Settler Colonialism: History and Memory in Australia, Canada, Aotearoa New Zealand and South Africa*, ed. by Annie E. Coombes (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), pp. 228-44 (p. 241).

memory of the past assuages the desire to return and instead prompts the desire to settle. Ovid can only belong in his place of exile by possessing it, in the same way as settler Australians believe they can only belong to their country by taking it and dispossessing the indigenous population. And he lays claim to the land of his exile in the same way as the early colonists laid claim to Australia, without regard to the rights of those who were there before him.

Malouf, then, retells a familiar story of possession and dispossession in a way that reinforces the centrality of exile to settler Australian identity. Exile, for the settler, is transformed into feeling at home by the act of taking possession, both physically and culturally, of the new land. In doing so Malouf reinforces, rather than challenges, the settler story of the relationship between exile, possession and settlement. Confronting such stories requires what Graham Huggan calls a ‘creative revisioning’ of the Australian past, a reworking of traditional myths and narratives, including the myths of exile and return, to make them fit for purpose in the twenty-first century.¹⁹ Doing so necessarily brings into sharp focus the relationship between Britain and Australia, between centre and periphery, between the exile’s spiritual and physical homes. This was an issue that was hotly contested at the time Malouf’s novel was published, and one manifestation of this was the debate over the future constitutional status of Australia.

The argument over whether Australia should become a republic, and in doing so turn its back on the country that had exiled its original convict settlers, has its roots in the nineteenth century. However it took on renewed relevance in the 1990s with the establishment of the Australian Republican Movement and the commitment of the Australian Labor party to the republican cause, a commitment pursued vigorously under Prime Minister Paul Keating, whose ‘rejection of the dead British past served his push for an Australian republic’.²⁰ Like the Bicentennial, the debate over the proposed republic played into the battles over Australia’s past and its future, the arguments

¹⁹ Graham Huggan, *Australian Literature: Postcolonialism, Racism, Transnationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 65.

²⁰ Stuart Macintyre and Anna Clark, *The History Wars*, new edn (Carlton, Victoria: Melbourne University Press, 2004), p. 124.

between those who regarded the country's historic ties with Britain, symbolized by the monarchy, as paramount and those who wished to free it from the shackles of the past by removing the last, largely symbolic, connections to the British crown. The proposal to establish a republic was eventually defeated in a referendum in 1999, and in 2001 Australians 'marked the hundredth anniversary of their Commonwealth with its formal status as a constitutional monarchy preserved'.²¹ However the arguments over the republic, and over the centrality of Britain to contemporary Australian self-perceptions of national identity and culture, provided a reprise of the debates that had raged at the time of the Bicentennial about what sort of country Australia was and wanted to be.

Peter Carey might seem an obvious novelist to undertake the revisioning Huggan called for and to address the issues of how a country founded by exiles might relate to the nation that banished them. Carey's early work has been described as being less concerned with reinventing Australia than with 'altering the mythic constructs that underpinned previous inventions'.²² He has used the fantastic 'as a medium of estrangement, as a means by which familiar images of Australia can be defamiliarised, thereby revealing, via a return of the repressed, the nation's ghosts'.²³ Furthermore in the first of his three forays into Australian history – the 1988 *Oscar and Lucinda* – he gave his native country a form of anti-Bicentennial present which, among other things, drew attention to 'the hidden imperial history of white Australia's colonisation of Aboriginal land', and to the 'brutal cultural expropriation with disturbing violence' which lay at the heart of that history.²⁴ Carey's novel sought to expose some of the hidden histories of settler Australia to the light and by doing so to challenge aspects of the settler narrative of the past.

Furthermore Carey was himself involved in the debate over whether Australia should be a republic as a committed partisan of the republican cause. His 1997 novel

²¹ Stuart Macintyre, *A Concise History of Australia*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 289.

²² Graham Huggan, *Peter Carey* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 85.

²³ Huggan, *Peter Carey*, p. 85.

²⁴ Peter Carey, *Oscar and Lucinda* (London: Faber and Faber, 1989); Bruce Woodcock, *Peter Carey*, 2nd edn (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 73.

Jack Maggs, which I discuss below, can therefore be seen both as a novel concerned with the foundational Australian myths of exile and return and as an intervention in this debate. Indeed Carey has said that it:

addresses contemporary life. It was published at a time when Australians were still squabbling among themselves about whether Australia was going to be a republic. The issues of *Jack Maggs* are being played out in this argument about the republic and whether they are going to go and sit by the fire with the Queen of England having cakes and ale or whether they are going to understand their situation. To label it historical fiction is to risk misunderstanding its context.²⁵

He himself chose not to ‘sit with the Queen of England’ by declining to meet her when he won the Commonwealth Writers Prize for *Jack Maggs*, a decision widely attributed to his republicanism – though, as Ken Gelder and Paul Salzman note, Carey ‘muted the issue by citing family reasons, and the meeting was rescheduled at a later date’.²⁶ How then does Carey re-imagine the relationship between Australia and Britain and what sort of Australian republic does he envisage?

The Exile’s Return: Peter Carey’s *Jack Maggs*

It was some ten years after *Oscar and Lucinda* that Carey published his second novel addressed to Australia’s past in the form of *Jack Maggs*, a novel that responds to and writes back to Dickens’s *Great Expectations*.²⁷ Carey has said of *Great Expectations* that it is ‘such an Aussie story that this person who has been brutalized by the British ruling class should then wish to have as his son an English gentleman, and that no matter what pains he has, what torture he has suffered, that would be what he would want’, but also that ‘I hope it’s like the Australia of the past, not the Australia of the

²⁵ Radhika Jones, ‘The Art of Fiction No. 188, Interview with Peter Carey’, *Paris Review*, Summer 2006 <<http://theparisreview.org/interviews/5641/the-art-of-fiction-no-188-peter-carey>> [accessed 14 October 2011].

²⁶ Ken Gelder and Paul Salzman, *After the Celebration: Australian Fiction 1989-2007* (Carlton, Victoria: Melbourne University Press, 2009), p. 11.

²⁷ Peter Carey, *Jack Maggs* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

future'.²⁸ *Great Expectations* is, he suggests, a book that 'encourages you [...] to take the British point of view. And with that view, you love Pip, he's your person, and so suddenly Magwitch is this dark terrible Other'.²⁹ In writing *Jack Maggs* he therefore sought to write the story from the Australian perspective, to 'supply the suppressed point of view of Abel Magwitch'.³⁰

However *Jack Maggs* is an Australian story in another way, for it is also Carey's version of the classic Australian story of exile. While this is a subject that is present in other recent convict novels, such as *The Secret River*, it is central to *Jack Maggs*. Jack, like Richard Mahony, is doubly exiled, first from England, then from Australia, and on his return to England he finds himself as out of place in his native England as in the Australia he leaves behind. In Australia he re(-)members an idealized English home, 'constructing piece by piece the place wherein his eyes had first opened, the home to which he would one day return' (p. 322). However the England to which he returns belies that imaginative construction. It is a place that, like settler Australia, is 'uncanny', at once both '*heimlich*, [...], a familiar or accessible place; and *unheimlich*, [...], unfamiliar, strange, inaccessible, unhomely'.³¹ Just as 'one can imagine being "in place" in Australia only through the realisation that one is also "out of place"', so too Jack feels both in and out of place in England.³² This ambivalence is signalled early in the novel when he finds himself in Haymarket, a place he both knows and does not know since it has changed in ways which mean that 'a man from the last century would not have recognized it; a man from even fifteen years before would have been confused' (p. 2). Jack continues to find himself both at home and not at home in England, playing a series of roles as implausible and impromptu footman, as burglar of his own property, and as a wealthy man with no social position, as he tries to come to terms with and understand

²⁸ Ramona Koval, 'The Unexamined Life: An Interview with Peter Carey', *Meanjin*, 56 (1997), 667-82 (p. 669).

²⁹ Koval, p. 667.

³⁰ Laura E. Savu, 'The "Crooked Business" of Storytelling: Authorship and Cultural Revisionism in Peter Carey's *Jack Maggs*', *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature*, 36.3-4 (2005), 127-63 (p. 127).

³¹ Ken Gelder and Jane M. Jacobs, *Uncanny Australia: Sacredness and Identity in a Postcolonial Nation* (Carlton, Victoria: Melbourne University Press, 1998), p. 23.

³² Gelder and Jacobs, p. 28.

the country to which he has returned. Jack's attempts to become English are rebuffed by the society in which he finds himself until, unsettled by the gap between his imagined and the real England, he is driven to return to Australia. There, in a reversal of Richard Mahony's experience of feeling 'doubly alien', of being 'the stranger he had always been', and in defiance of his own initial hostility to New South Wales, he is shown as settling easily into a country that he finds is more willing to accept him than is England.³³

In telling this story of exile and return Carey very consciously plays on, and reverses, the traditional binary in which England is 'characterised by proud individualism [...], gentility, learning, and good manners' while Australia is rough, uncivilized, brutal and violent, scarred by its convict origins.³⁴ Carey's rewriting of these codes reinforces the picture of Jack as a man both in and out of place. The England he returns to, whatever its superficial attractions, displays attitudes and behaviours that are both familiar to him from his childhood but strange in relation to his expectations of the country. The Australia to which he flees at the novel's end, on the other hand, is figured in terms that match Jack's imagined England, and he is able, like Malouf's Ovid, to feel in place at last after the trauma of trying to marry the real and the ideal, the familiar and the strange, in England.

England is the centre of one of the ordering tropes of the novel, that of betrayal. Jack's initial exile, the result of transportation for theft, resulted from a series of betrayals by those who might have been expected to care for him, starting with his parents, who abandon him to be found 'lying in the mud flats 'neath London Bridge' (p. 75), and continuing with his foster-mother Mary – Ma – Britten, midwife and abortionist, described as 'the Queen of England in that little whitewashed room' (pp. 92-93). It is Ma Britten who, with Silas Smith, betrays Jack's hopes of going to school and instead trains him to be a thief, and who later treacherously aborts his and Sophina's child. Moreover it is her son Tom England, himself a thief with 'an awful terror of

³³ Richardson, p. 585.

³⁴ Sigrun Meinig, *Witnessing the Past: History and Post-Colonialism in Australian Historical Novels* (Tübingen: Gunter Narr, 2004), p. 84.

transportation' (p. 218), who jealously betrays Silas, Sophina and Jack to the police, an act that leads to Jack's transportation. Britain (personified as Ma Britten and Tom England) makes Jack into a criminal then punishes and expels him for his crimes. That expulsion is followed by punishment in his new home, floggings given by 'a soldier of the king' which, as Mercy Larkin says, is as good as to say that 'it were the king who lashed you' (p. 318). Jack, then, is a double victim of British society and its symbolic heads and parents, the King and Queen. He is represented as the classic convict victim, a man more sinned against than sinning, subject to harsh punishment for a petty crime while more serious criminals remain free. Moreover, as in earlier novels, the brutality of the prison regime is exemplified by the descriptions of Jack's floggings. These reach back to Marcus Clarke, with Jack recalling the 'most particular smell hanging like bad meat around that cursed place' (p. 321) and how 'the flies might feast on his spattered back; the double-cat might carry away the third and fourth fingers of his hand' (p. 322), leaving him with a 'sea of pain etched upon [his] back, a brooding sea of scars, of ripped and tortured skin' (p. 86).

Despite his treatment, the exiled Jack 'passionately identifies himself with the country that expelled him', and, like Sal Thornhill, has 'an emigrant's nostalgia for home'.³⁵ While being flogged he would 'imagine the long mellow light of an English summer', and build a fictional construction of an English house of the sort that 'he later knew was meant by authors when they wrote of England, and of Englishmen' (p. 322). Jack stresses his Englishness, saying that 'I am a fucking *Englishman*, and I have English things to settle. I am not to live with all that vermin' (p. 128) and that 'I'd rather be a bad smell here than a frigging rose in New South Wales' (p. 230). By the end of the novel his fierce identification with his concept of England is reified as he becomes 'an Englishman. Dressed in his red waistcoat and his tailored tweed jacket, he stood before what Tobias Oates might have called "a cheerful fire"' (p. 322). However Jack's vision of the Eden to which he wants to return is as illusory and delusory as the idealized

³⁵ Savu, p. 140; Janet C. Myers, "'As these fresh lines fade": Narratives of Containment and Escape in Peter Carey's *Jack Maggs*', *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 46 (2011), 455-73 (p. 463).

homelands of other exiles. There is an unbridgeable gulf between the country to which he believes he is returning and the country in which he finds himself, which is ‘a different place from his imaginings, and indifferent to his emotional attachments’.³⁶ The England to which he comes back does not provide a comfortable home for him. The English house to which he returns, and which he sees as superior to the impermanent wooden houses of Australia which ‘strained and groaned in the long hot nights, crying out against their nails, contracting, expanding, tugging at their bindings as if they would pull themselves apart’ (pp. 40-41), rejects him, his money and his convict past. It is the Australia to which he eventually returns that will prove more forgiving and where, as we shall see, the Anglo-Celtic culture of which he sees himself a member readily accepts him.

Carey’s re-creation of Australia and his reaffirmation of settler values are built on a reversal of many of the traditional tropes which define the relationship between Britain and Australia, and of the values which underpin the two societies. He presents the London to which Jack returns, rather than the Australia he leaves, as a form of anti-Eden, a place which bears more than a passing resemblance to Hell with its ‘uproar, din, the deafening rush, the smell of horse shit, soot, that old yellow smell of London Town’ (p. 2). London, the Heavenly city that Jack has imagined, is, despite the lights and brightness, a dark, malevolent and Satanic place. Jack is ‘stunned by the contrast between his fantasies of the rich and glossy metropolis of the gentleman ideal and the noisy, smelly, over-populated site of poverty and crime he actually encounters’.³⁷ The metropolis to which Jack returns is far more like the one from which he had been exiled than the one he imagined into existence while in Australia.

Furthermore, England continues to be a site of betrayal for Jack, a place where the mateship that typifies Australian convict relationships does not exist. He betrays himself when hypnotized by Oates, revealing his Australian past. His devotion to the

³⁶ A. J. Hassall, ‘A Tale of Two Countries: *Jack Maggs* and Peter Carey’s Fiction’, *Australian Literary Studies*, 18 (1997-98), 128-35 (p. 134).

³⁷ Barbara Schmidt-Haberkamp, ‘The Writing-Back Paradigm Revisited: Peter Carey, *Jack Maggs*, and Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*’, in *Fabulating Beauty: Perspectives on the Fiction of Peter Carey*, ed. by Andreas Gaile (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005), pp. 245-62 (p. 256).

welfare of Henry Phipps is betrayed as Phipps disappears when he learns of Jack's return, sending a message that 'I find the very notion of him vile' (p. 164). Percy Buckle betrays Jack by encouraging Phipps to kill him in order to dispose of his rival for Mercy Larkin's affections. Partridge, the alleged Thief-taker, deceives Jack by pretending to be able to find the lost Phipps for him and then trying to steal the false portrait of Phipps for its silver frame. Finally Tobias Oates, the pseudo-Dickens of the novel, betrays him by stealing his story for money: when Jack realizes that Oates will 'tell my frigging secrets to the world' (p. 233) he calls him 'a thief, [...]. A damned little thief' (p. 279), reversing the usual pattern where it is Australia that is full of thieves. Jack's return condemns him to repeat the nightmare of betrayal and punishment that he remembers from his childhood, and that he records in the book he writes for Phipps.

England, usually presented as a site of freedom set against the penal colony of New South Wales, is here figured as a place of imprisonment, though whereas Jack has previously been a prisoner, both as a child thief confined to Ma Britten's house and as a transported convict, on his return he plays the role of gaoler. In an ironic reversal of the trope of the British holding convicts prisoner in Australia, here we have a returning convict holding English people prisoner. Jack imprisons Mercy in Percy Buckle's snugery; enforces quarantine on Buckle's house by nailing the door shut; and manacles the wrists of Tobias Oates both when he pretends to be the doctor, Sir Spencer Spence, and later to prevent him escaping in Gloucestershire. In doing so, he relishes the opportunity to take his revenge on those who regard themselves as his betters.

Carey's disruption of the traditional polarities between Britain and Australia can also be seen in the way in which he undermines the trope of the colonial explorer mapping and conquering the country. Rather than presenting the explorer as the hero 'furthering the frontier of empire, penetrating and conquering unknown and unowned lands', Carey presents him in the form of Jack Maggs who mimics the role of colonial explorer in London.³⁸ Like his symbiotic twin, Oates, who "'made" the City of London [...] named it, mapped it' (p. 182), he sets out to reconstruct the London he remembers –

³⁸ Simon Ryan, *The Cartographic Eye: How Explorers Saw Australia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 1.

first ‘he was heading up Agar Street, then cutting up to Maiden Lane’, then ‘it was Cecil Street he had come to, a very short street linking Cross Street to St Martin’s Lane’ (p. 3). In re-membering the London of his past he explores, maps and names, foreshadowing the way in which, in the later nineteenth century, ‘colonial discourse was systematically deployed to map urban space into a geography of power and containment’.³⁹ Carey’s Australian revenant uncannily re-enacts the role of the colonist, seeking by naming to familiarize the unfamiliar and to make a space for himself, and in doing so replicating Oates’s work in ‘creating the imaginary geography of imperialism’ in the metropolitan centre.⁴⁰ Jack’s quasi-colonial possession of London brings home the familiar trope of imperial exploration where naming places brings them into existence and into history, where, as Paul Carter puts it, names ‘embody the existential necessity the traveller feels to invent a place he can inhabit’.⁴¹ At the same time Jack is himself colonized by Tobias Oates, who seeks to become the ‘first cartographer’ (p. 90) of the criminal mind. Jack’s mind is, for Oates, a *terra nullius* which he will exploit in whatever way he can through his experiments in animal magnetism, which enable Oates, ‘like a Victorian explorer, [...] to “map” Maggs’s world in much the same way as he maps London’s world of the poor’.⁴² Oates sets out to colonize Jack’s mind and memories, to take what he can for his own benefit without regard for the original owner’s rights in a manner reminiscent of the colonization of Australia itself. However Jack’s refusal to accept his role as colonized other, and his violent irruption into Oates’s insecure world, endangers the stability of Oates’s life and by the novel’s end Oates has ‘lost interest in his subject: the Criminal Mind had become repulsive to his own imagination’ (p. 303).

Carey also reverses Peter Pierce’s argument that ‘Australia is the place where the innocent young are most especially in jeopardy’, an argument which had particular

³⁹ Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 120.

⁴⁰ Sigrun Meinig, ‘An Australian Convict in the Great English City: Peter Carey’s *Jack Maggs*’, *Southerly*, 60.3 (2000), 57-65 (p. 60).

⁴¹ Paul Carter, *The Road to Botany Bay: An Essay in Spatial History* (London: Faber and Faber, 1987), p. 47.

⁴² Kathleen J. Renk, ‘Rewriting the Empire of the Imagination: The Post-Imperial Gothic Fiction of Peter Carey and A. S. Byatt’, *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 39.2 (2004), 61-71 (p. 63).

potency at the time since, as Elizabeth Ho has pointed out, ‘the novel appeared in the same year as the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission officially presented its report on behalf of the “Stolen Generations” to the Government’.⁴³ Lost and abused children are a continuing presence in the convict novels I have been considering, from the boy suicides at Point Puer in *For the Term of His Natural Life*, to the child Ann Rush may be carrying in *Bring Larks and Heroes*; from the miscarriages of Letty O’Beirne in *The Commandant* and Ellen Roxburgh in *A Fringe of Leaves* to the deaths of Small Willy and young Ralph Clark in *The Playmaker*; and culminating in Dick Thornhill in *The Secret River* who is beaten by his father for consorting with Aborigines and at the novel’s end leaves Thornhill’s Point to work with Tom Blackwood. As such they bear witness to Pierce’s concern that Australia is a dangerous land where the future represented by children is continually under threat.⁴⁴

Carey has himself presented Australia as a place where children are abused and at risk, most obviously in his 1991 novel *The Tax Inspector*.⁴⁵ However, in *Jack Maggs* the host of lost, abandoned and abused children is to be found in England, which, ruled over by the abortionist Ma Britten, is a dangerous place for the young and the unborn. Most obvious of the lost and abused children in the novel is Jack himself, abandoned by his natural and adoptive parents and his parent country. However Henry Phipps is also lost, both physically, in that he has left the house in Great Queen Street in which he lives and which Jack owns, and metaphorically. He has no natural parents and has been spoilt by one substitute father, Jack, and corrupted by a second, his tutor Victor Littlehales, whose ‘only comfort’ for his pupil was ‘the mortal cradle of his freckled arms’ (p. 294). Tobias Oates, too, is an abused child: when he was five, his father ‘was charged with killing a man named Judd in a tavern brawl’ and his ‘earliest memories of London were still locked in that fetid little death cell’ (p. 196). However, while he is now ‘fiercely protective of abused children’ (p. 130), and is keen to expose the callousness which has

⁴³ Peter Pierce, *The Country of Lost Children: An Australian Anxiety* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. xi; Elizabeth Ho, ‘Peter Carey’s *Jack Maggs* and the Trauma of Convictism’, *Antipodes*, 17 (2003), 124-32 (p. 130).

⁴⁴ Pierce, pp. xi-xviii.

⁴⁵ Peter Carey, *The Tax Inspector* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992).

led to the deaths of children in Brighton ‘where a cheap-jack builder had laid a gas line to murderous effect’ (p. 130), he is himself an abuser of children in his own family. He impregnates his young sister-in-law Lizzie – ‘she was eighteen years old, he defiled her. [...] He had been at church an hour before he did so’ (p. 38) – and then causes her to abort the child, an act which kills her. Furthermore while he is fond of his son he nevertheless risks damaging him, so that, when the boy’s boil is lanced, ‘he saw the evidence of infection pour forth from his son’s innocent body, he felt the poison to be all his own’ (p. 189). Finally Mercy Larkin, too, is abused and lost, forced into prostitution by her widowed mother while still a child and ‘rescued’ by Percy Buckle, whose maidservant and mistress she becomes. She is trapped in another abusive relationship, only able to say to Buckle, when he begs her to stay with him rather than leave his house ‘where would I go? You’ve ruined me’ (p. 299). It is England, rather than Australia that is careless of its children and whose lack of concern for them symbolizes its lack of interest in the future.

Carey has spoken about the relationship between Britain and Australia as akin to ‘the relationship between the convict and the parent – and that’s essentially an abusive relationship’.⁴⁶ He presents Britain not only as a country unconcerned about its children but also as a land that has cast its exiled children adrift and does not welcome their return. By severing the connection between the mother-country and her colonial children Britain has become ‘the site of a patriarchal system which can no longer sustain itself or protect its literal or colonial children’.⁴⁷ The contrast between the two countries is pointed up through Jack’s relationship to his two families. In Australia he has children who ‘wait for you to come home’ (p. 319) while in England his ‘better class of son’ (p. 318), Phipps, rejects him. Carey’s persistent reversal of the usual tropes which underpin depictions of Australia and England is intended to expose the falsity of those traditional representations and by doing so to ‘improve Australia’s image by implication: once the

⁴⁶ Peter Carey, ‘Author Interview with Powells.com’, 18 June 2009
<<https://www.powells.com/author/carey.html>> [accessed 29 June 2011].

⁴⁷ Máire Ní Fhlathúin, ‘The Location of Childhood: *Great Expectations* in Post-colonial London’, *Kunapipi*, 21.2 (1999), 86-92 (p. 89).

instance terming Australia inferior is dismantled, the continent becomes superior'.⁴⁸ Jack is brought to compare the England in which he finds himself not only with the England he has imagined but with the Australia he has left, which is not the Australia where he was brutally flogged and punished but a country where he has been financially and socially successful.

Bruce Woodcock has argued powerfully that at the heart of *Jack Maggs* is a critique of 'the contradictions of industrial capitalism in nineteenth-century England – the accumulation of wealth through expropriation, the perpetuation of power through what Christopher Caudwell called "phantastic illusion," the relationship with colonialism and the paradoxical retaliation of the colonies'.⁴⁹ Carey's London is a place where extremes of wealth and poverty rub shoulders, a protean city built around the getting of money and the power and influence it brings, but where, unlike colonial New South Wales, the source of that money has to remain hidden and secret. The dark underside of this world is revealed when Phipps, walking to Buckle's house, flounders in a new sewer and looking back up the normally well-ordered Drury Lane sees:

a wild and unexpected landscape [...]. Great beams criss-crossed the street, like intrusions in a nightmare. [...] These beams were joined together like inverted, lopsided *A's* [*sic*], and something in their rude design brought to mind the gallows. A kind of fog now rose from the excavation, and in the penumbra of the gas light Henry Phipps imagined he saw a man's body hanging from a beam, suspended above the pit. (pp. 320-21)

The property inhabited by the successful bourgeoisie is built by the labour of a hidden working class which is all too often rewarded by flogging or hanging, and it sits above unseen sewers which take away its detritus. By contrast, Jack makes his money honestly and openly. Clay, which Henry Phipps disdains for causing 'the mucky ruin of his uniform' (p. 320) in the London streets, was for Jack the source of 'a brick as good as

⁴⁸ Meinig, 'Australian Convict', p. 62.

⁴⁹ Bruce Woodcock, 'Unsettling Illusions: Carey and Capital in *Jack Maggs*', in *Fabulating Beauty*, ed. by Gaile, pp. 263-73 (p. 264).

anything in London. That clay made my fortune, Mr Oates. It gave me a mansion in Sydney. It gave me the dosh to buy the freehold of the house in Great Queen Street' (p. 228). Woodcock's argument that 'while capitalism's own gigantic lootings go generally unpunished, minor thefts of property such as those perpetrated by Maggs and his beloved Sophina are punished by death or colonial transportation' essentially reprises George Wood's view that while petty criminals were the victims of an unjust legal system under which they were transported the true criminals went unpunished.⁵⁰ As importantly, in the moral economy of the novel the image of the 'lopsided A's' conjures up the triangles on which convicts were flogged and brings the horrors of the Australian experience home to England. Jack's return to England has brought with him the central symbol of the Australia he wishes to leave behind, the si(gh)te of the floggings he wishes to forget, and with them the memory of himself as victim. Again we see Carey reversing the familiar Anglo-Australian binary and eliding the positions of centre and periphery, showing Britain the grim consequences of the imperial adventure.

By returning to England, Jack sheds his victim status and attains some agency over his life. He becomes a dangerous and disruptive presence in his home country, undermining the power structures and systems of authority and control which govern early nineteenth-century England and exposing the underlying flimsiness of the imperial centre. His return, like that of other migrants, such as George Talboys in Mary Elizabeth Braddon's 1862 novel, *Lady Audley's Secret*, threatens the established order of society.⁵¹ While the return from exile is disappointing for Jack it is even more disturbing for his host country, which cannot easily contain a returnee and is driven to expel him like a lump of foreign matter. Edward Said has written of *Great Expectations* that:

The prohibition placed on Magwitch's return is not only penal but imperial: subjects can be taken to places like Australia, but they cannot be allowed to 'return' to metropolitan space, which, as all Dickens's fiction testifies, is

⁵⁰ Woodcock, 'Unsettling Illusions', p. 266.

⁵¹ Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, ed. by Lyn Pykett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

meticulously charted, spoken for, inhabited by a hierarchy of metropolitan personages.⁵²

Jack's return from exile threatens to 'expose the fraudulence of that which passes for gentility, destabilising the spurious values ascribed to the bourgeois, capitalist definition of the gentleman', as encapsulated by both Buckle and Phipps.⁵³ For just as Henry Phipps sustains his position on the back of 'dirty money. Thievery. Murder' (p. 256), so Percy Buckle, through chance inheritance, becomes 'the owner of a gentleman's residence' while being 'no more a gentleman' (p. 9) than Jack. The plot to murder Jack, involving Phipps and Buckle, is the only way in which his threat to the social structure can be removed, and its failure brings home to Jack both that he has no place in an England whose reality is far removed from his imagined country and that it is Australia that can provide a sanctuary for him.

Compared with his detailed dissection of the evils of the England to which Jack returns, Carey spends little time on his picture of the Australia to which Jack goes back in an ending which Anthony Hassall naively describes as 'determinedly [...] optimistic'.⁵⁴ The country in which he settles is presented as the Eden that Jack had unsuccessfully sought in England, a place where 'Hell was turned into Paradise' and where Jack can be 'free, socially acceptable and prosperous' in a land which has 'begun to metamorphose from a penal colony into a site of liberation'.⁵⁵ Jack's violent and transgressive power in London is normalized and tamed in Australia, where after his return he 'set up a saw mill and, when that prospered, a hardware store, and when that prospered, a pub' (p. 327). He joins the squirearchy, becoming 'twice president of the shire' (p. 327) while also presiding over the cricket club and 'the grand mansion on Supper Creek Road' (p. 328) where he lives with his family. There is, in this world, no apparent exploitation of workers nor any false gentility of the sort practised by Phipps

⁵² Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1994), p. xvii.

⁵³ Lauren Watson, *Contingencies and Masterly Fictions: Countertextuality in Dickens, Contemporary Fiction and Theory* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2010), p. 103.

⁵⁴ Hassall, p. 129.

⁵⁵ Richard White, *Inventing Australia: Images and Identity 1688-1980* (St Leonards, New South Wales: Allen & Unwin, 1981), p. 29; Hassall, p. 134.

and Buckle. Rather it has a ‘more open, generous and egalitarian [...] culture’.⁵⁶ Australia is also a country where children can thrive and grow, where Mercy, who has persuaded Jack to take her back with him, ‘not only civilized these first two children, but very quickly gave birth to five further members of “That Race”’ (p. 327). In contrast to Britain, which is careless of its children, colonial Australia is presented as a place where children are cared for as the future of the country.

Carey’s idealized image of Australia can, of course, only be sustained by the willed refusal to explore the hidden histories which lie beneath the surface in the way that he had done in *Oscar and Lucinda*. The account of convict success and acceptance in an egalitarian society takes no account of the arguments between ‘those who wished to preserve political authority and social esteem for the wealthy free settlers and those who sought broader, more inclusive arrangements’ which disfigured early nineteenth century Australian discourse.⁵⁷ Nor does it recognize the extent to which the ‘small-town middle and professional class became preoccupied with respectability as a means of separating itself from the “stain” of a convict past, and the masculine culture associated with itinerant workers’, a form of discrimination that would have operated against both Jack and those whose labour underpinned his success.⁵⁸ This Australia is what Bruce Woodcock calls a ‘never-never land of capitalist illusion’.⁵⁹ Indeed it is barely a capitalist society at all, but rather a vision of a golden age of pre-capitalist order and harmony that is as illusory as Jack’s imagined England.

Carey also ignores the patriarchal nature of Australia where Mercy, who in London ‘had always been so impatient of the “rules”’ (p. 327) and had sought to overcome her servant status, assumes a purely domestic, civilizing, role. Exchanging one form of patriarchy for another, she is saved from her enforced whoredom in Percy Buckle’s house to become one of the women who ‘were entrusted with the moral guardianship of society, [...] expected to curb restlessness and rebelliousness in men and

⁵⁶ Hassall, p. 134.

⁵⁷ Macintyre, p. 72.

⁵⁸ Richard Waterhouse, ‘Settling the Land’, in *Australia’s Empire*, ed. by Deryck M. Schreuder and Stuart Ward (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 54-77 (p. 68).

⁵⁹ Woodcock, ‘Unsettling Illusions’, p. 271.

instil virtues of civic submission in children', confined to the domestic sphere while Jack operates in the public sphere of business, politics and sport.⁶⁰ Carey's Australia is envisioned as the England to which Jack had thought he was returning, a country in which the values of the white male are dominant.

The image of Australia as a country for white men is reinforced by the novel's treatment of Aborigines. In his critique of *Jack Maggs*, Bruce Woodcock comments that just as English capitalism is built on violence and repression, so in Carey's Australia 'beneath this new bourgeois order an equally violent expropriation is at work'.⁶¹ This expropriation, though Woodcock does not name it, is the dispossession of the indigenous population whose erasure from the Australian scene is necessary to allow Jack's white settler lifestyle to flourish. In contrast to the earlier *Oscar and Lucinda*, where 'the "ghostly" presence of the Aborigines' marks 'the repressed history of interracial conflict', Carey now writes the Aborigines out of Jack's Australia, so that the novel 'records only the voices of the white settlers in Australia'.⁶² While it is possible to read the absence of Aboriginal voices as Carey's ironic comment on how their very suppression and extermination has rendered them necessarily voiceless, this seems implausible given his emphasis on their continued presence in *Oscar and Lucinda*. Rather, I would argue, the positive conclusion to *Jack Maggs*, which defies Carey's earlier claim that it was 'impossible for him to write a happy ending to any of his novels', is a sign of a move both to celebrating rather than challenging white settler culture and to marginalizing Aboriginal culture and history.⁶³ Carey's exclusively white Australian homeland is achieved by a fictional dispossession and expropriation that reflects the historical one.

At the time Carey's novel was published debates about Australian history and identity were haunted by the marginalized and the forgotten, groups whom Carey had

⁶⁰ Anne Summers, *Damned Whores and God's Police: The Colonization of Women in Australia* (Ringwood, Victoria: Penguin, 1975), p. 21.

⁶¹ Woodcock, 'Unsettling Illusions', pp. 271 & 272.

⁶² Huggan, *Peter Carey*, p. 85; Ní Fhlathúin, p. 91.

⁶³ Annegret Maack, 'Peter Carey's *Jack Maggs*: An Aussie Story?', in *Fabulating Beauty*, ed. by Gaile, pp. 229-43 (p. 240).

recuperated in earlier works. However in this novel they do not feature. Rather ‘no ghosts lie beyond the reach of an “integrating” identity debate’ which will result in ‘a new identity synthesis’ in which the Anglo-Celtic core culture performs a cohesive – and inevitably dominant – role.⁶⁴ Carey’s novel of exile and return ends with Jack’s taking possession of the land of exile which he had previously rejected but where he can now live a life untroubled by guilt, feeling, like Malouf’s Ovid, that ‘I belong to this place now. I have made it mine’.⁶⁵ Far from re-visioning the myths of the nation, Carey reinforces them, creating his early colonial Australia as a nation where the interests of white men are dominant, and where Aborigines have been erased and women safely confined to the domestic world.

Postcolonial Carey?

Because of its engagement with, and ‘writing back’ to, Dickens, *Jack Maggs* is commonly read as a postcolonial novel. When asked whether he is a postcolonial writer, Carey has said that ‘we are a barely postcolonial culture and I think that’s a very interesting state to be in and so, to that degree, I am’ but also that ‘what that means to them [literary critics] and what that means to me are probably two quite different things’.⁶⁶ Despite this I want to explore the postcoloniality of Carey’s novel in a little more detail and in doing so to read it against two other fictions written from settler colonies and which in their different ways ‘write back’ to canonical authors – J. M. Coetzee’s *Foe* (1986) and *Mister Pip*, Lloyd Jones’s 2006 response to *Great Expectations*.

In a 1987 article, Helen Tiffin argued that the project of postcolonial writing is to ‘interrogate European discourses and discursive strategies from a privileged position within (and between) two worlds’.⁶⁷ This involves the formulation of counter-discursive

⁶⁴ Miriam Dixson, *The Imaginary Australian: Anglo-Celts and Identity – 1788 to the Present* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 1999), p. 172.

⁶⁵ Malouf, p. 91.

⁶⁶ Koval, p. 673.

⁶⁷ Helen Tiffin, ‘Post-Colonial Literatures and Counter-Discourse’, *Kunapipi*, 9.3 (1987), 17-34 (pp. 17-18).

strategies which subvert, by rereading and rewriting, not only European history and fiction but ‘the whole of the discursive field within which such a text operated and continues to operate in postcolonial worlds’.⁶⁸ This approach became a key element of the theory of postcolonial writing set out in *The Empire Writes Back*, first published in 1989, which talks of the importance of rewriting canonical English works ‘with a view to restructuring European “realities” in post-colonial terms, not simply by reversing the hierarchical order, but by interrogating the philosophical assumptions on which that order was based’.⁶⁹ Such rewritings question both the relationship between colonizer and colonized and more fundamentally the process of writing and the ways in which the writer speaks for those who traditionally have no voice in the colonial text.

This approach is exemplified in J. M. Coetzee’s *Foe*.⁷⁰ In this novel, Coetzee ‘writes back’ to *Robinson Crusoe* in ‘a radically subversive, albeit oblique way’ which, while ‘not overtly oppositional’, nonetheless ‘undermines the very basis of fictional authority and the Puritan tradition of circumstantial realism that Defoe is credited with having founded’.⁷¹ He uses his counter-discursive form to explore ‘language, text and author/ity and the discursive fields within which they operate’ and to expose the ‘complicity between narrative mode and political oppression’.⁷² At the heart of *Foe* is the issue of who has the authority to write and to speak in a world where power rests with white men. In the book the white female narrator, Susan Barton, has an ‘ambivalent status in between the colonial master and the colonised, ambiguously asserting both her (white) colonial status and her “woman-ness,” which may undermine her power as a colonial’.⁷³ Susan engages in a struggle with Foe, the enemy male writer, over narrative authority, where she argues against his patriarchal desire to shape her story in

⁶⁸ Tiffin, p. 23.

⁶⁹ Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*, 2nd edn (Abingdon: Routledge, 2002), p. 32.

⁷⁰ J. M. Coetzee, *Foe* (New York: Penguin, 1987). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

⁷¹ John Thieme, *Postcolonial Con-texts: Writing Back to the Canon* (London: Continuum, 2001), p. 63.

⁷² Tiffin, p. 28.

⁷³ Fiona Probyn, ‘J. M. Coetzee: Writing With/out Authority’, *Jouvert: A Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, 7.1 (2002) <<http://english.chass.ncsu.edu/jouvert/v7is1/con71.htm>> [accessed 27 January 2012] (para. 4 of 45).

accordance with traditional male expectations that ‘it is thus that we make up a book: loss, then quest, then recovery; beginning, then middle, then end’ (p. 117). But she also seeks to exert authority over the voiceless black man, Friday, whose tongue has been torn out, by trying to recover and tell his story since ‘to tell my story and be silent on Friday’s tongue is no better than offering a book for sale with pages in it quietly left empty’ (p. 67). She sees her role as being ‘to open Friday’s mouth and hear what it holds’ (p. 142). When this achieves nothing, for ‘he utters himself only in music and dancing, which are to speech as cries and shouts are to words’ (p. 142), she appropriates the male power of the pen in an attempt to teach him to write so that he can communicate in a form she recognizes.

While both Susan and Friday are presented as existing outside the dominant white male discourse, they occupy different places in relation to it. Susan can succeed in making her voice heard whereas Friday remains silent and silenced, unspeaking but eternally spoken for. However, in the final section of the novel an unnamed narrator dives down to the wreck from which Susan escaped and reaches Friday ‘in the last corner’, in a space which is ‘not a place of words’ but rather ‘a place where bodies are their own signs’, where Friday’s mouth opens and he speaks from the body in ‘a slow stream, without breath, without interruption’ (p. 157). Sue Kossew, argues, rightly I believe, that this ending:

while admitting the inadequacy of words, simultaneously reminds the reader of their expressive potential and the possibility of a voice that does not seek to interpret or impose authority on Friday’s silence but allows this voice to become the source of its own discursive power: an alter/native voice, yet to be heard.⁷⁴

Friday is finally authorized to speak in his own language, and in doing so overthrows the colonizing, patriarchal voice of the white storyteller who treats him as a slave, gives him a new name, and tries to divine and tell his story.

⁷⁴ Sue Kossew, *Pen and Power: A Post-Colonial Reading of J. M. Coetzee and André Brink*, (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1996), pp. 176-77.

Coetzee's engagement with Defoe's novel radically destabilizes its text and exposes the unvoiced assumptions that lie at the heart both of Defoe's work and of much canonical Western fiction. His rewriting of Defoe provides a fundamental challenge to the way in which language is used as an instrument of power both to create and maintain 'an illusory standard of normative or "correct" usage, and its assumption of a traditional and fixed meaning "inscribed" in the words', and to reinforce traditional views of who may write, and for whom.⁷⁵ Above all it proposes an ethical approach to the problematic issue of representing the voiceless and powerless in a form of writing, the novel, whose writers have historically spoken for them.

However not all works that are described loosely as postcolonial operate in the same way or to the same effect. A different sort of postcoloniality can be seen in Lloyd Jones's *Mister Pip*.⁷⁶ This, like *Jack Maggs*, uses *Great Expectations* as a pre-text and was described in an early review as 'a post-colonial fable about reading that is as open-ended as myth'.⁷⁷ In its multiple readings of Dickens's text, which 'becomes fragmented, rejoined, reassembled, revoiced, extrapolated, hybridised, exported, and ultimately carried by heart' in order to create a 'Pacific version of *Great Expectations*' (p. 149), *Mister Pip* seems to adopt some elements of counter-discursive postcolonial practice.⁷⁸ The novel moves from Mr Watts's reading and interpretation of a simplified version of *Great Expectations* to a class of Bougainvillean children, through their reconstruction of the novel when the book is lost, to its use as a frame for Mr Watts's telling of his life-story to the villagers and the redskin soldiers hunting for rebels, when Watts becomes 'a *bricoleur* who makes a new story out of Dickensian materials', and by interweaving it with island tales 'revives stories and a culture threatened with

⁷⁵ Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, p. 37.

⁷⁶ Lloyd Jones, *Mister Pip* (London: John Murray, 2008). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

⁷⁷ Delia Falconer, 'Mister Pip', *Australian*, 4 November 2006
<<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/archive/news/mister-pip/story-e6frg8no-1111112446923>>
[accessed 24 January 2012].

⁷⁸ Jennifer Lawn, 'What the Dickens: Storytelling and Intertextuality in Lloyd Jones' *Mister Pip*', in *Floating Worlds: Essays on Contemporary New Zealand Fiction*, ed. by Anna Jackson and Jane Stafford (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2009), pp. 142-63 (p. 142).

extinction'.⁷⁹ These successive iterations of Dickens's story can be seen as an appropriation of the text, so that it becomes 'the expression of a society no longer conceived as Other but triumphantly self-defining and self-sustaining, able to reorder the conceptual frame within which power is determined'.⁸⁰ However I will argue that Jones's novel does not take the sort of counter-discursive approach to the original text that we saw in *Foe*.

Mister Pip has attracted a variety of largely affirmative readings. For Monica Latham it 'celebrates the power of literature and the power of stories to shape us', and through its retellings becomes 'a microcosm of postcolonial literature merging narratives of black and white, literary and oral traditions to create a new story which transcends color, time and place'.⁸¹ Zoe Norridge, on the other hand, claims that 'to suggest that the novel's subject is "the transformative power of fiction", the triumph of education and "civilization" over barbaric fighting on a remote island, is to do Lloyd Jones a disservice', and that the narrative 'is far more politically astute than such readings suggest'.⁸² Janet Wilson argues that while the novel is not 'a resistant counter-discourse', its celebration of 'the power of storytelling' revalues *Great Expectations* as 'vital cultural capital for the subaltern subject who suffers in the traumatic present moment', and carries with it both 'engagement with the authority of the precursor text' and 'the wish to appropriate narrative authority'.⁸³

I find it hard to read the novel in such a positive way. Rather I share Jennifer Lawn's more sceptical view. She notes that '*Mister Pip* does take up an urgent postcolonising cause' and 'mounts a clarifying attack on the neo-imperialist corruption

⁷⁹ Monica Latham, 'Bringing Newness to the World: Lloyd Jones's "Pacific version of *Great Expectations*"', *Dickens Quarterly*, 28 (2011), 22-40 (pp. 34 & 35).

⁸⁰ Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, p. 114.

⁸¹ Latham, pp. 39 & 36.

⁸² Zoe Norridge, 'From Wellington to Bougainville: Migrating Meanings and the Joys of Approximation in Lloyd Jones' *Mister Pip*', *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 45 (2010), 57-74 (p. 68).

⁸³ Janet Wilson, 'Antipodean Rewritings of *Great Expectations*: Peter Carey's *Jack Maggs* (1997) and Lloyd Jones's *Mister Pip* (2007)', in *The Shadow of the Precursor*, ed. by Diana Glenn and others (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2012), pp. 220-35 (pp. 221 & 222).

of governments and transnational capital'.⁸⁴ However she argues that 'it does not rely on any comparable textual sally against Dickens to achieve this outcome' and questions its political positioning in which 'postcolonial resistance is empowered by the modest English classic introduced into the third world by an unassuming Kiwi bloke and absorbed by a plucky adolescent black girl'.⁸⁵ I would argue that in Jones's work, *Great Expectations* comes invested with, and retains, the power and authority of Western fictional tradition, an authority captured in Mr Watts's claim that 'you couldn't muck around with Dickens' (p. 196). In practice, of course, he does just that, but the sub-text is clear, that while white authority-figures may rewrite Dickens, the same is not true of black subjects. The authority of Dickens's text is carried into the classroom through a process of indoctrination in which a simplified version of Dickens serves satisfactorily to reinforce the imperial hierarchy. Dickens's novel may be subject to some post-modern fracturing and reconstruction but the underlying story it tells, and the power structures it endorses, are left fundamentally intact. *Mister Pip* reinforces rather than destabilizes the authority of the Victorian text and the voice of the male author.

Furthermore, for all *Mister Pip*'s apparent liberation of the voices of the islanders, and particularly of Matilda, they are spoken for, not speaking, mediated not only by the author (for, as Zoe Norridge recognizes, 'the voices of the Bougainvilleans who are allowed to speak ultimately belong to the antipodean author') but also through the figure of Mr Watts.⁸⁶ He appropriates the villagers' stories and uses them to create his life story, controls the way in which Dickens is presented, and manipulates and controls the villagers by being 'whatever he needed to be, whatever we asked him to be' (p. 210). Where Coetzee scrupulously refuses to speak for the oppressed Friday, Lloyd Jones and Mr Watts do little but speak for the Bougainvilleans. As Selina Tusitala Marsh put it in an early critique of the book, Lloyd Jones presents a 'continuing canonisation of white male voices speaking for/over/through indigenous female

⁸⁴ Lawn, p. 150.

⁸⁵ Lawn, pp. 150 & 151.

⁸⁶ Norridge, p. 62.

voices'.⁸⁷ In *Mister Pip*, agency comes not from the villagers themselves but from outside them, from Mr Watts, who believes that *Great Expectations* 'gave me permission to change my life' (p. 134), and seems to believe that it also gave him permission to change and colonize the lives of those around him.

Wilson and Lawn both argue that *Mister Pip* needs to be read in the context of New Zealand literature where 'examples of canonical rewriting are surprisingly rare'.⁸⁸ However this does not satisfactorily account for the novel's reluctance to challenge, indeed its endorsement of, the primacy of British cultural authority as carried by Dickens and his interpreter Mr Watts. Rather we might read *Mister Pip* as representing a deliberate strategy on Jones's part to subvert the conventions of the postcolonial novel to other ends, to reinscribe rather than challenge the power of white male authority in the colonial space.

The very different approaches that Coetzee and Jones take to the concept of writing back to the canon undermine the easy conflation of postcoloniality, writing back and subversion. Vijay Mishra and Bob Hodge have argued for a distinction between 'oppositional postcolonialism, which is found in its most overt forms in post-independent colonies' and 'a "complicit postcolonialism", [...] an always present "underside" within colonization itself' which they see as typical of white writing in settler colonies such as Australia and New Zealand.⁸⁹ While this binary, with its overtones of good and bad postcolonialism, seems over-simplistic and not to recognize the complexity of the ways in which writers, both white and black, operate, it does raise the question of how white settler writers can find a mode of writing that navigates between colonial complicity and a postcoloniality that appropriates the experience of the marginalized and speaks for them. As such it provides a frame for considering how Carey uses the postcolonial form that he has consciously adopted in *Jack Maggs*.

⁸⁷ Selina Tusitala Marsh, 'A Bogus Bougainville', *Dominion Post Supplement*, 13 October 2007, p. 23.

⁸⁸ Lawn, p. 151.

⁸⁹ Vijay Mishra and Bob Hodge, 'What is Post(-)colonialism?', in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. by Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (Harlow: Longman, 1994), pp. 274-90 (p. 284).

At one level, *Jack Maggs* shows Carey using the technique of writing back to challenge the ways in which canonical novels such as *Great Expectations* represent Australia, and other colonies, as a marginalized periphery subordinate to British metropolitan power. Said has argued that ‘the metropolis gets its authority to a considerable extent from the devaluation as well as the exploitation of the outlying colonial possession’ and Carey is at pains to reverse this by devaluing the metropole in favour of the periphery.⁹⁰ Where Lloyd Jones essentially endorses Dickens’s imperial and canonical authority, Carey confronts it, most obviously through the struggle over the ownership of Jack’s story, in which Carey sets extracts from Oates’s novel ‘The Death of Maggs’, which is intended for public consumption, against Jack’s account of his life, intended for Phipps’s eyes only and written secretly in mirror-writing and in invisible ink, a format which ‘could be interpreted as a metaphor for his own voicelessness and disenfranchisement’.⁹¹ This is ultimately a struggle about power and authenticity: who has the right to write, the authority to author? Behind that is the colonial struggle to overthrow imperial power and authority, to ‘control the processes of writing’ so as to replace the authorized and authoritative text with another in which ‘both language and form have been fully appropriated’.⁹² Jack’s wresting of authorial control of his life from Oates is usually read, as Laura Savu puts it, as Carey enabling ‘the colonized other to take control of his story’, to seize authority and authorship from the colonizer and to usurp the rights of the canonical writer.⁹³ Jack is not willing to allow himself to be spoken for, and in postcolonial fashion turns the story of his life into an Australian rather than an English story. In Bruce Woodcock’s reading, Carey ‘destabilises the power of creator over created, coloniser over colonised, conscious over unconscious’.⁹⁴ In writing back to Dickens he challenges both the ‘notion of the convict as a bearer of sin that Dickens apparently emphasized’ and the concept, embraced by Dickens as by other Victorian novelists, of Australia as a convenient place to send ‘the “failures”

⁹⁰ Said, p. 70.

⁹¹ Myers, p. 458.

⁹² Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, pp. 77 & 114.

⁹³ Savu, p. 127.

⁹⁴ Woodcock, *Peter Carey*, p. 133.

inevitably produced in the struggle to survive while Britain industrialised'.⁹⁵ He also questions the idea that the empire exists solely as a source of British wealth, the place where Pip makes his money at the end of *Great Expectations*, by showing how Maggs grows rich on his own account and then uses that wealth to try to buy his way into British society. Carey's novel can then be read through the postcolonial lens as an exercise in disrupting the stories of imperial authority and history by undermining Dickens's construction of them in *Great Expectations*.

However I would question whether *Jack Maggs* is in practice the sort of oppositional, counter-discursive, novel that these readings suggest, and indeed how far Carey is concerned with the wider issues of 'rewriting or replacing the Eurocentric canon' which lie at the heart of the postcolonial project.⁹⁶ First, at the end of the novel the issue of which version of Jack's life will be authorized remains unresolved. After Jack's return to Australia, and indeed after his death there, Oates publishes his novel, which achieves widespread fame, while Jack's letters to Phipps remain a secret until Mercy gives them, and her seven copies of Oates's novel, to the Mitchell Library. Anthony Hassall suggests that in his attempt to '(re)claim and (re)write those English stories which constituted their first meta-narrative as well as inventing new ones', Carey, like other writers such as David Malouf, seeks to '(re)mythologise Australia in its own terms'.⁹⁷ However by placing both versions of Jack's life in the library (itself an iconic Australian building), Mercy ensures that both become part of the Australian cultural inheritance, both carry weight and both can be used as the basis of the mythologization of Australia's colonial past. As Janet Myers puts it, this 'levelling move' ensures that 'neither version of this story is granted primacy within Carey's novel'.⁹⁸ However, Myers goes on to argue that 'Maggs must gain the upper hand over Oates at the end of the novel' in order to achieve the imaginative reconciliation between gaoler and gaoled, between Britain and Australia, that Carey claims to want.⁹⁹ However

⁹⁵ Savu, p. 142; Richard White, p. 37.

⁹⁶ Kossew, p. 161.

⁹⁷ Hassall, p. 135.

⁹⁸ Myers, p. 470.

⁹⁹ Myers, p. 471.

I read the text differently, and would suggest that at the end of the novel Oates's colonialist text reasserts itself and heals the rupture that the writing back to *Great Expectations* has caused, allowing Jack to resume his life as the archetypal white Australian patriarch, recreating in his new home the patterns of authority that lie at the heart of Dickens's work. The destabilization caused by Jack's return to London has proved a temporary phenomenon and Carey's fiction returns us to the ordered Australian society that embraces and tames the rebellious Jack.

Second, whereas Coetzee uses Susan Barton's narrative written from the marginal position of a colonial woman to subvert the authority of the European male writer, Carey reproduces that authority in his own narrative voice and in the form he uses. A number of critics have commented on the way in which, in *Jack Maggs*, Carey uses the post-modern to undermine fictional authority in ways that align the novel with what Linda Hutcheon defines as 'historiographic metafiction', a form which 'works *within* conventions in order to subvert them' and shows 'a theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs'.¹⁰⁰ John Thieme suggests that Carey is 'staking out different territory for postcolonial fiction', and that *Jack Maggs* is centrally concerned to 'destabilize the very basis of fictional authority – and with it linear, filial lines of influence between metropolis and former colony'.¹⁰¹ John Jordan writes of Carey's production of *Jack Maggs* as a pastiche of the Victorian novel which at the same time demonstrates 'the fictional techniques by which such illusions can be created and sustained'.¹⁰² Annegret Maack reads the book as 'a novel about the genesis of a novel'.¹⁰³ Carey certainly uses a range of post-modern techniques to explore his preoccupation with the way in which, as Derek Attridge says of *Foe*, 'the text, like any text, is *manufactured* from the resources of a particular culture in order to gain

¹⁰⁰ Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1988), p. 5.

¹⁰¹ Thieme, p. 109.

¹⁰² John O. Jordan, 'Dickens Re-visioned: *Jack Maggs* and the "English Book"', in *Dickens: The Craft of Fiction and the Challenge of Reading*, ed. by Rossana Bonadei and others (Milan: Unicopli, 2000), pp. 292-300 (p. 298).

¹⁰³ Maack, p. 236.

acceptance within that culture'.¹⁰⁴ However I would question how far Carey sees his use of such techniques as part of the ethical project that underpins Coetzee's thoughtful and committed approach to re-ordering the fictional world. Indeed I would argue that far from fundamentally destabilizing the traditional structures of male authorial power, Carey's novel reproduces them. *Jack Maggs* is at heart a fast-paced pseudo-Victorian narrative in which 'the atmosphere and nineteenth-century setting of Dickens's novel are re-created in vivid and richly-detailed descriptions of persons and places'.¹⁰⁵ Furthermore, while Carey's plot may be fractured and multiple, his authorial voice remains clear and univocal, the voice of male authority, a twentieth century correlate of Dickens. Finally the novel's ending, far from describing 'the collapse of grand historical narratives' reinscribes them in a new, Australian, setting.¹⁰⁶ Carey's postcolonial and post-modern surface serves to conceal what is in many ways a conventional Australian narrative of the heroic struggle of the convict victim to become successful by settling the land.

Third, and linked to this last point, rather than seeking to establish indigeneity or fundamentally challenging the European heritage, Carey's Jack embraces and reproduces an idealized England in Australia. He plays the role of country squire, pub landlord and gentleman cricketer in an Australia that is indissolubly tied to its British heritage. The Australia Carey depicts is essentially a colonial reproduction of the England that Jack had dreamt of, a country that, unlike the England he actually encountered, is at ease with itself, that is 'comfortable and relaxed', as former Prime Minister John Howard once put it.¹⁰⁷ Part of that comfort comes from the fact that Jack inhabits a country empty of the troubling presence of Aborigines. Indeed at Mercy's instigation Jack moves from 'the bad influence of Sydney', with its convicts and

¹⁰⁴ Derek Attridge, 'Oppressive Silence: J. M. Coetzee's *Foe* and the Politics of Canonisation', in *Critical Perspectives on J. M. Coetzee*, ed. by Graham Huggan and Stephen Watson (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996), pp. 168-90 (p. 172).

¹⁰⁵ Schmidt-Haberkamp, p. 254.

¹⁰⁶ Woodcock, *Peter Carey*, p. 10.

¹⁰⁷ Liz Jackson, 'Transcript of Interview with John Howard', ABC Four Corners, 19 February 1996 <<http://www.abc.net.au/4corners/content/2004/s1212701.htm>> [accessed 18 January 2015].

Aborigines, to ‘the new town of Wingham’ (p. 327), a respectable village in an area of expanding white settlement where Jack can hope to slough off his convict past and from which Aborigines were formally excluded, even if informally they made their presence felt through incursions and trespass.¹⁰⁸ Carey’s exclusion of Aborigines from his novel does not allow them even this degree of transgressive presence. Whereas Lloyd Jones silences his Bougainvillean natives by speaking for them, Carey silences his Australian natives by erasing them in an act of fictional dispossession. In the novel, the struggle between colonizer and colonized is essentially a struggle between two groups of colonizers over their versions of the past, with the real victims of colonial oppression kept off stage. Jack seeks to wrest authorial and physical power from the British for his own benefit while leaving genuinely oppositional voices outside the novel’s ambit.

In short, Carey seems less concerned to engage with postcolonialism as a fundamental challenge to a colonial discourse whose ‘work is to *produce and naturalise* the hierarchical power structures of the imperial enterprise’ than to use the concept of writing back opportunistically as a means to turn *Great Expectations* into an Australian story.¹⁰⁹ In a similar but more combative vein, Erik Martiny argues that ‘Carey’s novel is quite simply unconcerned by what Salman Rushdie called “the Empire writes back with a vengeance,”’ and that he ‘does not so much subvert Dickens’s text as expand a number of its unexplored avenues. [...] One might hesitate between calling the novel counterdiscursive or simply perspectivist’.¹¹⁰ He suggests that both *Jack Maggs* and *Mister Pip* are ‘a clear sign that authors now wish to drift in ways that do not constrain

¹⁰⁸ Denis Byrne writes about Wingham and the wider Manning Valley area in ‘Nervous Landscapes: Race and Space in Australia’, in *Making Settler Colonial Space: Perspectives on Race, Place and Identity*, ed. by Tracey Banivanua Mar and Penelope Edmonds (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 103-28.

¹⁰⁹ Stephen Slemon, ‘Monuments of Empire: Allegory/Counter-Discourse/Post-Colonial Writing’, *Kunapipi*, 9.3 (1987), 1-16 (p. 6).

¹¹⁰ Erik Martiny, ‘*Jack Maggs* and *Mister Pip* – the Empire Strokes Back: Commonwealth Bibliophilia in Australasian Responses to *Great Expectations*’, *Notes on Contemporary Literature*, 41.3 (2011), 2-5 (p. 3).

them to adopt mandatory counter-discursive politics'.¹¹¹ For the ever-protean Carey postcolonialism, like post-modernity, is something to be worn lightly.

How, then, should we read Carey's novel? Huggan has suggested that it is inadequate to call Carey's work either post-modern or postcolonial, that both are limiting categories for his 'versatility as a writer'.¹¹² Building on that I would suggest that it makes more sense to read *Jack Maggs* primarily in the context of Australian literary history than in the context of either postcolonial or post-modern writing. It is in its connections to that history that the novel achieves its ambition of being the Aussie story that Carey sought to write.

Barbara Schmidt-Haberkamp argues that 'it is insufficient to read Carey's novel as merely writing back to the English tradition', and that Carey 'confirms the existence of a native literary canon worth drawing on'.¹¹³ In particular she sees connections with 'the colonial male adventure novel of the nineteenth century' and particularly Rolf Boldrewood's *Robbery Under Arms* where 'the adventure narrative is framed by domesticity' as the central male character leaves his bushranging past and settles into marriage.¹¹⁴ Like Anthony Hassall, she, in my view rightly, sees the novel, among other things, as part of 'that sub-genre of Australian writing which chronicles disillusioning returns to the motherland'.¹¹⁵ However the novel's Australian affiliations can perhaps best be seen by reading *Jack Maggs* in the tradition of Australian convict fiction where, I suggest, it shows a particular affinity with Marcus Clarke's *For the Term of His Natural Life*. Neither Schmidt-Haberkamp nor Hassall make much of the connections with Clarke and the tradition of convict fiction, and while John Thieme notes Clarke's novel as 'interesting to read alongside Dickens and an obvious forerunner for *Jack Maggs*', both he and Bruce Woodcock, who does explore the link with Clarke and later convict novels, seek to differentiate Carey's novel from them.¹¹⁶ However in my view it

¹¹¹ Martiny, p. 5.

¹¹² Huggan, *Peter Carey*, p. 3.

¹¹³ Schmidt-Haberkamp, p. 258.

¹¹⁴ Schmidt-Haberkamp, p. 257.

¹¹⁵ Hassall, p. 134.

¹¹⁶ Thieme, p. 119; Woodcock, *Peter Carey*, p. 121.

is more closely linked to the conventions of the convict novel than these readings allow, and particularly pays clear homage to Clarke's work.

Like Clarke, Carey shows the convicts as the innocent victims of an unjust British legal and political system, suggesting that the true criminals were those who sentenced petty criminals to transportation and then treated them harshly – as Jack says of his time in Moreton Bay 'you would shoot a man you saw treat a dog as we were treated' (p. 317). Both place the source of corruption in Britain and both figure early colonial Australia as a place of violence and brutality. In both their novels Australia is a place from which to escape, to return to England, in order, as Jack puts it, 'not to live my life with all that vermin' (p. 128). And both writers present convictism as 'a violation of the social family' in which the mother country turns against her children.¹¹⁷

The relationship between the novels is reinforced by the way in which both are organized around betrayal, secrets, lies and violence. In *Jack Maggs* the greatest secret, of course, is that of Jack's identity, and when his hidden past is revealed by Oates's mesmerism he says of the pain that Oates has relieved that 'I would have it back ten times over, if my secrets came with it' (p. 46). Jack goes to great lengths to keep the secret of his history hidden and revenges himself violently on Oates when he realizes that he has stolen his past. Jack's Australian experience has taught him the power that knowing another's secret can bring. As he tells his fellow footman, Constable, at Moreton Bay 'a man might be killed on account of knowing another man's secret' (p. 168) so that 'if you and I were lads together in that place, then you must give me a secret of yours, should you chance to stumble over one of mine. That way we were in balance' (p. 169). Similarly on the journey to Gloucestershire Jack presses Oates to reveal 'a very bad secret of your own' in order to 'take you out of danger' (p. 233) and so learns of Oates's affair with his sister-in-law and her pregnancy. Again this speaks to Clarke, where, as I discussed in Chapter 2, learning a man's secret can lead to death.

¹¹⁷ Elizabeth Perkins, 'Literary Culture 1851-1914: Founding a Canon', in *The Oxford Literary History of Australia*, ed. by Bennett and Strauss, pp. 47-65 (p. 62).

Finally, *Jack Maggs* continues the pattern of melodrama that is a feature of convict novels from Clarke onwards. It has rightly been described as a ‘cracking yarn’ and from the opening appearance of the mysterious ‘man with the red waistcoat’ (p. 1) to the point at which Mercy Larkin saves Jack from being killed, the novel is shot through with melodramatic situations and events.¹¹⁸ These reach their height in the depiction of Jack and Oates’s escape from Gloucester after Jack has killed the false Thief-taker, Partridge, where they flee down-river in a punt in the mist, constantly alert to the risk of capture, a scene that contains echoes of John Rex’s escape from prison in *For the Term of His Natural Life*. Similarly Carey reprises the Gothic aspects of Clarke and later writers of convict novels. However because, as discussed in Chapter 3, melodrama cannot envisage the creation of a new society, the return to Australia leaves the melodramatic behind in favour of the conventions of Arcadian comedy which depict Jack, Mercy and their family in an almost Utopian new world. If Carey ‘performs a kind of theft in appropriating elements of Charles Dickens’s *Great Expectations*’, he performs a similar kind of theft from Marcus Clarke, stealing the conventions of the convict novel ‘to encompass the post-colonial concerns of Australia’.¹¹⁹ This is not to ignore the very real differences between Clarke and Carey, but rather to suggest that there are underlying patterns of similarity and affiliation. It is no accident that at one point Jack says that he was ‘transported for the term of my natural life’ (p. 128).

Superficially *Jack Maggs* is a radical postcolonial and post-modernist reworking of the convict novel, an attempt to reclaim Magwitch’s story as ‘an ordinary Australian narrative’ and to reverse the polarities of centre and periphery.¹²⁰ As Bruce Woodcock argues, Carey’s novel ‘examines the impact of the imperial experience on the English national psyche. It allows the transported convict to return “home” and confront the society which created him’ and in doing so it becomes ‘an act of postcolonial retaliation against a parent culture’.¹²¹ However beneath the carefully polished surface it is, I

¹¹⁸ Hassall, p. 129.

¹¹⁹ Woodcock, *Peter Carey*, p. 130; Ní Fhlathúin, p. 86.

¹²⁰ Hassall, p. 128.

¹²¹ Woodcock, *Peter Carey*, pp. 121 & 122.

suggest, in many ways a conventional and conservative convict fiction, retelling the well-worn tale of English perfidy and white Australian victimhood redeemed.

Demythologizing Carey

Graham Huggan, writing before *Jack Maggs* was published, argued that one of Carey's central concerns is to confront contemporary Australia with 'the self-deceiving histories of its would-be founding fathers'.¹²² However this is not true of *Jack Maggs*, which reinforces rather than undermines those histories and the received mythologies of white Australia. Carey may refuse 'to pay respect to the nation's British founding-fathers' but he recreates them by making Jack 'the representative of the new nation of Australia'.¹²³ As such the novel can be seen as marking a turn in Carey's attitudes to white settler history and experience, a turn that is reinforced in his third fictional venture into Australian history, the 2000 novel *True History of the Kelly Gang*.¹²⁴ Here themes such as the erasure of Aborigines and the valorization of the white outlaw reprise ideas that first surface in *Jack Maggs*.

Andreas Gaile has argued that Carey's novels 'constitute a mythistory of Australia', and that in the light of the 'political moorings of Carey, the leftist Republican, the avowed reconciliationist, the postcolonial novelist, it is hardly surprising that there are many myths of the Australian past and present that have engaged his writerly attention'.¹²⁵ He sees Carey as simultaneously trying to demythologize and remythologize Australian history, to debunk traditional images of Australianness and to create new ones for his time. However I would argue that *Jack Maggs* neither demythologizes nor remythologizes the stories of convict history in the way Gaile suggests. Rather it re-affirms the settler myths that I outlined in Chapter 1. At the end of the novel Carey constructs Australia as an Anglo-Celtic paradise, a patriarchal society in which Jack's public role is enabled by Mercy's domestic one, as

¹²² Huggan, *Peter Carey*, p. 85.

¹²³ Huggan, *Peter Carey*, p. 86; Ní Fhlathúin, p. 91.

¹²⁴ Peter Carey, *True History of the Kelly Gang* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002).

¹²⁵ Andreas Gaile, 'Towards an Alphabet of Australian Culture: Peter Carey's Mythistorical Novels', in *Fabulating Beauty*, ed. by Gaile, pp. 33-51 (p. 39).

she transmutes into one of ‘God’s Police’. It is a land where Jack has abandoned his convict victim status to become a man of property, a form of pioneer, where he has shed his past and fixed his eyes firmly on the future, and where he lives securely on his property without any trouble from the vanished Aboriginal population. It is a country where the white settler values of family, mateship and rebelliousness are endorsed. In the depiction of Jack and his family as ‘both clannish and hospitable, at once civic-minded and capable of acts of picturesque irresponsibility’, a tribe ‘who left many stories scattered in their wake’ (p. 327), Carey celebrates the type of national character, that of the ‘cheeky, resourceful larrikin’, that has been central to the construction of Australian identity since the 1890s.¹²⁶ Importantly Carey’s Australia is also constructed as an anti-Britain, a country freed from British corruption and brutality, from its indifference or hostility to the future, and from its refusal to embrace its exiled children. In doing so he suggests the absurdity of Australia remaining even nominally under British sovereignty.

Carey, as we saw earlier, regarded *Jack Maggs* as speaking to the debate on the issue of whether Australia should be a republic. As I discussed in Chapter 1, during the course of the preparations for the referendum on a republic, Prime Minister John Howard drafted, with poet Les Murray, a new preamble to the Constitution that was seen by many as being a piece ‘of startling banality that invoked mateship, refused to recognise Aborigines’ prior occupancy of the land, and took a gratuitous swipe at political correctness’.¹²⁷ However Carey’s own suggested preamble, written in 2003 as part of a project ‘to provide some imaginative foundation for the ongoing debate about an Australian Republic’, was little more radical than was Howard’s.¹²⁸ While stressing the significance of the convict inheritance, saying that ‘we are also a nation forged by prisoners in chains dispossessed of their motherland, rejected, spat out, unloved’, he makes the merest nod to the prior claims of Aborigines to the country, and no reference

¹²⁶ Graeme Turner, *Making it National: Nationalism and Australian Popular Culture* (St Leonards, New South Wales: Allen & Unwin, 1994), p. 5.

¹²⁷ Macintyre, p. 288.

¹²⁸ James Bradley, *Six Preambles to a Republican Constitution of Australia*, Australian Republican Movement, June 11 2003 <<http://tasmaniantimes.com/jurassic/preamble.html>> [accessed 11 December 2011].

at all to their dispossession. Furthermore his statement that the land ‘was, for tens of thousands of years, sacred to the most ancient culture on this earth’ implies that it is no longer so.¹²⁹ The emphasis in his suggested preamble is on the white inheritance and on the importance of a unitary republic in which diverse histories and cultures are ‘melded in the fires of history’, and where ‘the differences in our beliefs are very small indeed’.¹³⁰ Carey’s stress on the need to establish a shared national past is clearly intended as a contribution to the process of reconciliation. However it fails to recognize that trying to homogenize the very different stories of the past told by settlers and indigenous peoples works against reconciliation by imposing a single narrative, one inevitably told from the dominant settler perspective, and suppressing any dissent from it. Carey’s vision of a free republican Australia, then, sees it as essentially a white republic built on the continuing dispossession of the country’s indigenous peoples and the eradication of their history.

The attitudes displayed in Carey’s proposed Constitutional preamble are clear in *Jack Maggs*, which also hymns the convict experience as crucial to the formation of Australian identity, and which eliminates the Aborigines from view. Theirs may be ‘the most ancient culture on earth’, but that culture plays no part in the Australia that Carey presents at the end of the novel. If Carey’s novel is to be seen less as historical fiction than as a contribution to the contemporary debate on Australia’s constitution which was in progress at the time of its publication, then it is a contribution that sadly fails ‘to do justice either to the problems of the colonial legacy of settler culture in Australia, particularly with regard to the indigenous peoples, or to the issues of gender’.¹³¹ In *Jack Maggs*, as in the later suggested preamble, Carey aligns himself with those such as Miriam Dixson who give primacy to the Anglo-Celtic core culture of Australia. Indeed he goes further by denying any real diversity in the new republic of Australia whose citizens, whatever their background, are to be ‘united by our fierce love of this land’.¹³² Central to the story of *Jack Maggs* is Jack’s conversion from an initial hatred of his

¹²⁹ Bradley, ‘Six Preambles’.

¹³⁰ Bradley, ‘Six Preambles’.

¹³¹ Woodcock, *Peter Carey*, p. 136.

¹³² Bradley, ‘Six Preambles’.

country of exile to just such a love, as he takes full possession of it in what can best be seen as an endorsement of the settler narrative of Australian history as a positive and affirmative story.

By bringing together two classic Australian myth-narratives, those of the convict made good and of the successful resettlement in Australia after the disillusioning return to England, Carey above all celebrates the success of the Anglo-Celtic 'experiment in reformation, in using the rejects of one society to create another'.¹³³ His figuring of Australia as a form of Eden, a country from which the unsettling presence of both Aborigines and unsuccessful convicts has been expelled, reassures white Australian society of its inherent virtues. *Jack Maggs*, far from providing the 'imaginative revisioning' Huggan calls for, takes its place with other novels of early colonial Australia which I have discussed in perpetuating rather than challenging the myths and stereotypes of the past, myths which, as we shall see in the next chapter, are intimately bound up with that 'fierce love of the land' that Carey hymns.

¹³³ David Malouf, *A Spirit of Play: The Making of the Australian Consciousness* (Sydney: Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 1998), p. 12.

CHAPTER 5

FORGING THE NATION: RICHARD FLANAGAN, RODNEY HALL AND THE RHETORIC OF BELONGING

Settling the Land

In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon writes of the pervasive colonialist view that ‘the settler makes history; [...]. He is the absolute beginning: “This land was created by us” and if he leaves ‘all is lost and the country will go back to the Middle Ages’.¹ The idea of the heroic role of the settler in establishing and civilizing a new country is as prevalent in Australia as in other settler societies, indeed possibly even more so given that one of the key myths of settler Australians is that:

Australia was founded by the British in 1788 when Governor Phillip declared British sovereignty and took possession of the entire continent. This was in accordance with legal convention because prior to the coming of the white man the continent was inhabited by a relatively small number of nomadic savages whose culture was simple and unevolved and who did not cultivate the land and who therefore forfeited any right to it.²

Anglo-Celtic Australians’ history and identity has been constructed around their relationship to the land, the idea that the land belongs to them and that settlement has given them an inalienable right to possession. This settlement myth is reinforced by two others, that settlement was an overwhelmingly peaceful process and that the settler transformation of the land was a beneficial process that improved the country and benefitted its people.

¹ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. by Constance Farrington (London: Penguin, 2001), pp. 39-40.

² Bain Attwood, ‘Mabo, Australia and the End of History’, in *In the Age of Mabo: History, Aborigines and Australia*, ed. by Bain Attwood (St Leonards, New South Wales: Allen & Unwin, 1996), pp. 100-16 (p. 102).

I have discussed issues around dispossession earlier and intend now to focus on the impact of settlement on the land itself, and on the challenges to the settler construction of their right to the land. However it is important to stress that the conquest of the land was far from the peaceful process that settler amnesia has made it. Moreover, as Henry Reynolds has argued, early conflict between convict settlers and Aborigines set a pattern for continuing violence in the relationship between the two groups. Commenting on Governor Phillip's decision to avenge the spearing of his convict gamekeeper, McEntire, by sending two expeditions both to capture the perpetrator and also to kill other Aborigines in revenge, he says that in these expeditions:

it is possible to see all the features of the punitive expeditions which were to be launched against the Aborigines during the following 140 years. The killing was to be both grossly disproportionate and indiscriminate, [...]. Violence was to be used not only to punish the guilty but to deter 'all of them' from future resistance.³

The frontier war between settlers and Aborigines that flared up and died down in different places over the years following white settlement involved both official actions, the sending of troops to support settlers and kill or disperse Aborigines, and unofficial attacks by both parties but particularly by white settlers. As well as the mass murders of Aborigines at places such as Myall Creek and Cape Grim, the sort of massacre described by Kate Grenville in *The Secret River*, there was a continuing pattern of low level violence and killing of Aborigines, the type of dispersal that leads to the death of Gemmy Fairley in David Malouf's 1993 novel, *Remembering Babylon*:

³ Henry Reynolds, *Frontier: Aborigines, Settlers and Land* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1987), p. 33. Although the extent of frontier violence has been contested, for instance by Keith Windschuttle, his claims for the peaceful settlement of Australia have been refuted by other historians (see in particular *Whitewash: On Keith Windschuttle's Fabrication of Aboriginal History*, ed. by Robert Manne (Melbourne: Black, 2003)).

too slight an affair to be called a massacre, [...]. The blacks had been ridden down and brought to earth by blows from a stirrup iron at the end of a stirrup leather – an effective weapon, when used at a gallop, for smashing skulls.⁴

As discussed earlier, this pattern of violent dispossession has largely been erased from the settler narrative of history, reduced to blemishes or black marks in a story that former Prime Minister John Howard described as ‘one of heroic achievement’, rather than seen as a systematic process aimed at eliminating the Aborigines.⁵ Similarly settler interventions on the landscape and ecology of Australia have traditionally been seen as the taming of a hostile natural world to create a profitable and successful rural economy, rather than as contributing to the assault on the Aboriginal population by damaging, destroying and reshaping the land to which they belong.

The clash between indigenous and settler Australians over the way in which the land is used and how it is cared for stems from fundamentally different philosophies about the relationship between the human and natural worlds. Catriona Elder has written of how, for Aboriginal Australians, ‘stories of belonging are often framed in terms of the Dreaming. These stories provide a complex and comprehensive map of country; one that explains the law, spirituality, geography, economics and familial relations pertaining to particular areas’.⁶ The Aboriginal relationship with the land is based in a sense of rootedness to a place, and carries with it a presumption against travelling to other places where the stories of the land would not be understood. As Aboriginal writer and activist Jackie Huggins has put it, ‘there are no stories of migration in our Dreamtime stories. Our creation stories link intrinsically to the earth. This is why place and land are so

⁴ David Malouf, *Remembering Babylon* (London: Vintage, 1994), p. 196. Geoff Rodoreda’s article, ‘The Swinging Stirrup Iron: Murder Most Pastoral in Queensland Fiction’, *Journal of the European Association for Studies of Australia*, 5.1 (2014), 60-75, looks both at the use of this trope in recent fictions and at its historical background.

⁵ John Howard, *The Liberal Tradition: The Beliefs and Values Which Guide the Federal Government*, The 1996 Sir Robert Menzies Lecture, 18 November 1996.

⁶ Catriona Elder, *Being Australian: Narratives of National Identity* (Crows Nest, New South Wales: Allen & Unwin, 2007), p. 237.

important to us'.⁷ Aboriginal Australians have a 'spiritual and religious belief that we come from this land, hence the term "my land my mother"'.⁸ For them 'country was not property. If anything it owned'.⁹ Belonging to and in the land involves a sensitivity to the ecology of place and a recognition of the importance of caring for it and tending it.

By contrast, for non-indigenous Australians, land is property. Their sense of belonging in a particular place stems from legal ownership. Furthermore while Aboriginal Australians are rooted to a place spiritually as well as historically, settler Australians' connection to the land is essentially contingent, depending on their ancestors having settled it. While their claim to belong mimics that of Aboriginal Australians in being expressed in terms of long residence and a history of caring for the land, it rests fundamentally on the concepts of land rights and property ownership which the early settlers imported from Britain and imposed on their new home. These legal rights of ownership gave them sole power over the land, to do with it as they wished, and to exclude those they did not want to be there. They enforced such rights strictly against those whom Malouf, in a caricature of settler attitudes, describes as 'tribes of wandering mayalls who, in their traipsing this way and that all over the map, were forever there encroaching on boundaries', and who did not seem to care that 'six hundred miles away, in the lands office in Brisbane, this bit of country had a name set against it on a numbered document, and a line drawn that was empowered with all the authority of the Law'.¹⁰ The clash between legal and natural rights over the land lies at the heart of the disputes over the way in which the land is used. It also underlies the arguments over land rights, where issues that the colonizers believed were settled by violence in nineteenth century Australia have, to their dismay, returned by way of legal challenge in the twentieth century, an issue to which I shall return shortly.

⁷ Jackie Huggins, *Sister Girl: The Writings of Aboriginal Activist and Historian Jackie Huggins* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1998), p. 106.

⁸ Huggins, p. 106.

⁹ Bill Gammage, *The Biggest Estate on Earth: How Aborigines Made Australia* (Crows Nest, New South Wales: Allen & Unwin, 2012), p. 142.

¹⁰ Malouf, p. 9.

In whatever ways they may have obtained the land, settler Australians undoubtedly feel a strong sense of belonging there, however much it may be sentimentalized. For the settler, the land is where they had ‘sought new homes, fashioned new places of belonging out of the land they appropriated, and purposefully set about recreating its physical and ecological conditions through domestic plantings or larger scale acclimatisation programmes’.¹¹ As a result, ‘the non-indigenous remain profoundly bonded to the land [...] there can be no doubt how passionately many of them love the bush, or a hill or a farm’, displaying a ‘depth of attachment’ which reaches back to early settlement.¹² For many rural settlers, that sense of attachment to place is entwined with a history of working the land, reclaiming it from its primal state and developing it. Their sense of loss at leaving the land would be profound. However, of course, that sense of loss is one already felt by Aboriginal Australians who have been driven off their historic lands and seen the country developed in ways that are profoundly inimical to their attitudes to it. For central to the settler attachment to the land is less a desire to care for and protect it than a desire ‘to legitimate, secure, and render profitable their claim to the land’.¹³ Behind the desire for possession lies the Enlightenment project of ‘economic advancement through improvement’, of developing a country whose previous occupiers had left it uncultivated.¹⁴ It was a project that destroyed both the way of life of the Aborigines and also the land itself, for settler possession of the land required not only the dispossession of the previous owners but also the re-creation of the land itself in order to make it a fit place for Europeans to

¹¹ Tracey Banivanua Mar and Penelope Edmonds, ‘Introduction: Making Space in Settler Colonies’, in *Making Settler Colonial Space: Perspectives on Race, Place and Identity*, ed. by Tracey Banivanua Mar and Penelope Edmonds (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 1-24 (p. 4).

¹² Peter Read, ‘Whose Citizens? Whose Country?’, in *Citizenship and Indigenous Australians: Changing Conceptions and Possibilities*, ed. by Nicolas Peterson and Will Sanders (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 169-78 (p. 174).

¹³ Caroline Elkins and Susan Pedersen, ‘Introduction – Settler Colonialism: A Concept and its Uses’, in *Settler Colonialism in the Twentieth Century: Projects, Practices, Legacies*, ed. by Caroline Elkins and Susan Pedersen (New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 1-20 (p. 8).

¹⁴ John Gascoigne, *The Enlightenment and the Origins of European Australia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 86.

inhabit and cultivate, to enable them to reproduce their previous home in their new country.

The relationship between the human and the natural world lies at the heart of much recent ecocritical work, which has, among other things, concerned itself with the way in which texts represent and comment on this relationship. In their 2010 work *Postcolonial Ecocriticism*, Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin characterize the, admittedly utopian, function of such work as being ‘to make exploitation and discrimination of all kinds, both human and non-human, visible in the world; and in doing so to help make them obsolete’.¹⁵ The harnessing of the postcolonial and the ecological recognizes that colonialism has played a major role in the exploitation and destruction both of the resources of the natural world and of the indigenous cultures which depended on those resources. As Richard Grove has put it:

the environmental experiences of Europeans and indigenous peoples living at the colonial periphery played a steadily more dominant and dynamic part in the construction of new European evaluations of nature and in the growing awareness of the destructive impact of European economic activity on the peoples and environments of the ‘newly discovered’ and colonised lands.¹⁶

While recognising the role of indigenous peoples in precipitating ecological change through, for example, hunting and agriculture, Alfred Crosby in his *Ecological Imperialism* (1986), saw the arrival of European colonists, with what he calls their ‘portmanteau biota’ of imported life-forms (animals, plants and pathogens), as being responsible for supplanting local flora and fauna and indigenous lifestyles.¹⁷

Tim Flannery, in *The Future Eaters*, his 1994 study of the impact of human settlers on the Australasian land, details the impact of white settlement on the native

¹⁵ Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin, *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), p. 16.

¹⁶ Richard H. Grove, *Green Imperialism: Colonial Expansion, Tropical Island Edens and the Origins of Environmentalism, 1600-1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 3.

¹⁷ Alfred W. Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900-1900*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 89.

ecology. Europeans in nineteenth-century Australia, he says, ‘knew nothing of Australia’s past, could not see her natural riches, and were only acting in accordance with the principles that their European environments had inculcated in their ancestors’.¹⁸ As a result, instead of trying to adapt to Australian conditions, ‘throughout the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, Australians thought [...] of ways to make Australia adapt to them. In its most extreme form, this view saw people attempting to create a second Britain in Australia’.¹⁹ In his view:

The story of what was done to achieve this almost inconceivably arrogant goal is one of the saddest chapters in the history of our continent. For Australia’s ecology floundered in the attempt. People found that a second Britain could not be established, but that old Australia could be all too easily destroyed.²⁰

The attempt to forge Australia as a new Britain, to recreate the old country in the new, was to have disastrous consequences both for the land and its peoples.

The attempt to turn Australia into another England, and the environmental destruction this involved, started with the arrival of the First Fleet. In David Collins’s *Account of the English Colony in New South Wales* we read that as soon as the convicts were landed, work was set in hand to cut down the woods on the shore and that ‘as the woods were opened and the grounds cleared, the various encampments were extended, and all wore the appearance of regularity’.²¹ The disorder of the natural world was tamed to provide shelter and storage for the invaders as they started the relentless effort to enclose and improve the land, to make it fit for European use. At the same time he records that horses and cattle, brought to Australia for the first time, ‘were landed on the E. point of the cove, where they remained until they had cropped the little pasturage it afforded; and were then removed to the head of the adjoining cove, that was cleared for

¹⁸ Tim Flannery, *The Future Eaters: An Ecological History of the Australasian Lands and People*, new edn (Sydney: Reed New Holland, 2005), p. 355.

¹⁹ Flannery, p. 355.

²⁰ Flannery, p. 355.

²¹ David Collins, *An Account of the English Colony in New South Wales*, ed. by Brian H. Fletcher, 2 vols (Sydney: A. H. & A. W. Reed, 1975), I, 5.

a small farm'.²² Meanwhile some cleared ground was used for planting, so that 'we soon had the satisfaction of seeing the grape, the fig, the orange, the pear, and the apple, the delicious fruits of the Old, taking root and establishing themselves in our New World'.²³

At the same time John White records the use of the seine net for fishing, a method that takes far more fish than the Aboriginal method of spearing individual fish and so reduces rather than conserves stocks. He also mentions the first sowing of seed in 'a piece of ground [...] inclosed, for the purpose of raising vegetables', the beginning of the policy of clearing, enclosing and improving the land.²⁴ Similarly, Philip Gidley King writes that on Norfolk Island early activities included clearing the land, sawing down pines, sowing seeds and killing native birds 'which afforded us many fresh meals'.²⁵ From the outset, the invading colonists sought to impose themselves on the land, to subdue, tame and regularize it, regarding it as a possession to be used to their advantage and to be turned into a form of the country they had left behind.

While, as Tim Bonyhady suggests, at least some early colonists were 'alive to the importance of environmental protection and planning', they were concerned less to protect the land for its own sake and more to ensure that 'the natural environment provided an enduring source of food', and the measures they introduced to sustain the local ecology were hard if not impossible to enforce.²⁶ The process of environmental destruction continued apace, driven by the needs of the here and now with little concern for the future. This led the perceptive Collins to comment at one point on the stupidity of the Norfolk Island convicts, who so reduced the number of birds on the island that 'they were no longer to be depended upon as a resource' because they 'not only

²² Collins, I, 5.

²³ Collins, I, 6.

²⁴ John White, *Journal of a Voyage to New South Wales*, ed. by Alec H. Chisholm (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1962), p. 113.

²⁵ Capt. John Hunter, *An Historical Journal of Events at Sydney and at Sea 1787-1792, with Further Accounts by Governor Arthur Phillip, Lieutenant P. G. King and Lieutenant H. L. Ball*, ed. by John Bach (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1968), pp. 207 & 214.

²⁶ Tim Bonyhady, *The Colonial Earth* (Carlton, Victoria: Melbourne University Press, 2000), p. 5.

destroyed the bird, its young, and its egg, but the hole in which it burrowed'.²⁷ There was interest in, and admiration of, native wildlife – not only does White provide drawings and detailed descriptions of many birds, animals, fish and plants but George Harris, surveyor and magistrate in Van Diemen's Land, wrote rapturously about the animals and birds he found around Hobart.²⁸ However they are largely seen as curiosities rather than as useful to the colonists. Their exotic nature stands in contrast to European imports which 'were regarded [...] as necessary and "natural" impositions on, or substitutes for, the local bush or wilderness'.²⁹ While the Aborigines were able to live from the land, the colonists could only survive by importing, and then breeding from, animals and plants with which they were familiar and which could be acclimatized to Australian conditions. Such an approach was of course seen as essential if the land was to support the increasing population both of convicts and free settlers who arrived in the wake of the First Fleet.

At the same time as they transformed the land to support British forms of agriculture and horticulture, the colonists took possession of the country imaginatively by describing it in terms referring back to the English landscape, and particularly, as Simon Ryan points out, to the gentleman's park, which provides the standard against which the colonial landscape was to be measured.³⁰ Watkin Tench writes in picturesque terms of 'gently swelling hills, connected by vales which possess every beauty that verdure of trees, and form, simply considered in itself, can produce' though it lacks 'those murmuring rills and refreshing springs, which fructify and embellish more happy lands'; John Hunter says of some woods that 'they resemble a deer park'; and King speaks of how 'a very fine rivulet runs through this vale, sufficiently large to turn any number of mills'.³¹ However for all its apparent resemblance to Britain, the land is often

²⁷ Collins, I, 196

²⁸ See G. P. Harris, *Letters and Papers of G. P. Harris 1803-1812*, ed. by Barbara Hamilton-Arnold (Sorrento, Victoria: Arden Press, 1994).

²⁹ Huggan and Tiffin, p. 7.

³⁰ Simon Ryan, *The Cartographic Eye: How Explorers Saw Australia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 74-76.

³¹ Capt. Watkin Tench, *Sydney's First Four Years, Being a Reprint of A Narrative of the Expedition to Botany Bay and A Complete Account of the Settlement at Port Jackson by Captain*

seen as inferior to the real thing. Harris, writing from Port Phillip in 1803, says that the country ‘is the most deceitful I ever saw’, for while superficially attractive, resembling ‘the finest parts of Mount Edgecumbe’, near Plymouth, ‘there is no soil whatever’.³² The land is as fraudulent as the colonists’ attempts to reproduce their home on it.

The physical act of taking possession of the land and re-creating it in British terms was reinforced by a strategy of mapping and naming which constructed the land in familiar terms while also reproducing the social and national hierarchies of Britain, as when White writes that:

we saw a chain of hills or mountains, [...]. The northernmost being conspicuously higher than any of the rest, the governor called it Richmond Hill; the next, or those in the centre, Lansdown Hills; and those to the northward, which are by much the lowest, Carmarthen Hills.³³

As Paul Carter puts it, names ‘embody the existential necessity the traveller feels to invent a place he can inhabit’.³⁴ They help explorers to ‘locate objects of cultural significance: rivers, mountains, meadows, plains of promise’ and to ‘make the most of what they saw, to dignify even hints of the habitable with significant class names’.³⁵ The British approach to naming the country in terms that celebrate places, people and events in their history enabled them to own it mentally as well as physically, and in doing so disturbed and destabilized the Aborigines’ sense of place and belonging. It is central to their attempt to create the new nation in the image of the old.

Finally the act of possession was reaffirmed by the creation of settlements and townships that reflected British and European models. Grace Karskens has commented that newly arrived convicts ‘were astonished to find Sydney such a flourishing, English-

Watkin Tench of the Marines, with introduction and annotations by L. F. Fitzhardinge (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1961), p. 260; Hunter, pp. 53 & 215.

³² Harris, p. 46.

³³ John White, p. 130.

³⁴ Paul Carter, *The Road to Botany Bay: An Essay in Spatial History* (London: Faber and Faber, 1987), p. 47.

³⁵ Carter, p. 56.

looking place'.³⁶ Rather than the settlement of 'crude huts' that is 'deeply engraved in the historical imagination', it was a town increasingly made of stone and brick.³⁷ It was initially laid out in ways which reflected 'older, preindustrial patterns of urban evolution' with a physical layout that 'had more in common with crooked, organic medieval towns than with polite Georgian planning'.³⁸ Later, under the Macquaries, the town was remade, reordered and rebuilt with public buildings which 'echoed the sensible, straightforward architecture of the major provincial cities of England' and elegant private houses for the moneyed classes.³⁹ The aim of such buildings was both to make the country familiar and comfortable to new arrivals, particularly free settlers, to reaffirm the superiority of Britain, and British architecture, and to confirm to the Aborigines that the colonists were intending to settle permanently in the country. However, as I have previously discussed in relation to White, Keneally and Grenville, the attempt to create Australian towns and buildings as imitations of Britain is a sort of forgery, the creation of a false form of civilization which is ill-adapted to its new home. The settler homage to Britain and all things British, and the denial of the native and indigenous, lies at the heart of contemporary Anglo-Celtic Australia's difficulty in achieving a satisfactory way of living alongside the Aboriginal peoples, an issue I shall return to later in this chapter.

European attitudes to the land and wildlife, which were based on destruction, exploitation and replacement, inevitably led to increasingly serious clashes with the indigenous population as 'the genuinely natural ways of indigenous ecosystems were irretrievably undone as "wild" lands were cleared for farming or opened up to pastoralism'.⁴⁰ In *That Deadman Dance*, his 2010 novel about early encounter in Western Australia, Kim Scott traces the changing pattern of Aboriginal/settler relations and the way in which these are shaped by different attitudes to land and the natural

³⁶ Grace Karskens, *The Colony: A History of Early Sydney* (Crows Nest, New South Wales: Allen & Unwin, 2010), p. 177.

³⁷ Karskens, p. 177.

³⁸ Karskens, p. 182.

³⁹ Karskens, p. 203.

⁴⁰ Huggan and Tiffin, p. 8.

world.⁴¹ In the novel the Noongar people are presented as identifying with the land and its non-human inhabitants, as being spiritually and physically attuned to the natural world that surrounds them and sensitive to changes in it. Bobby Wabalanginy, the central character in the book, is aware of:

the fine and delicate paths of blood and nerves and the many fine sinews connecting him to this place, this perpetual moment. [...] Fingertips tingled, and his body hummed with the voices all around him, of bees, cicadas and crickets; of whispering wind and rustling leaves; of bird song and wingbeat; the creak and hiss of reptiles; the breath and various footfalls of animals; the murmur of waves upon the sand; the exhalation of porpoise and whale; of water welling and spilling playful paths across rock, through and beneath the sand.... (p. 334)

The Noongar live in harmony with the land, taking what they need and sharing with others. When a whale carcass comes ashore, Menak, a Noongar elder, ‘knew Noongars would be arriving over the next few days’ (p. 254) to participate in eating the whalemeat and melting its blubber down. They are also protective of the local ecology, creating natural fish traps and using fire to regenerate the bush.

While the early settlers, such as Dr Cross and convict William Skelly, ‘had created the friendship of black and white here’ (p. 94) and established a pattern of mutual co-existence, later arrivals impose themselves on the country they occupy with disastrous consequences for the Noongars and the local environment. The introduction of sheep, which William Beinart and Lotte Hughes accuse of being ‘deeply implicated in the displacement of indigenous people as well as in bringing about environmental change’, leads to the fencing and enclosure of the country, to the pollution of watercourses, and to the extermination of other wildlife.⁴² The creation of a whaling station, working with American whalers, destroys the local whale population. The arrival of Geordie Chaine, who is described simply as ‘on the make’ (p. 16), brings

⁴¹ Kim Scott, *That Deadman Dance* (Sydney: Picador, 2012). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

⁴² William Beinart and Lotte Hughes, *Environment and Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 95.

capitalist requirements to use the land for profit and without heed for the future, while the increasing emphasis on the sanctity of private property means that the sharing culture that had prevailed in the early days of the colony declines, to the detriment of the Noongar. In Menak's words, 'we share the whales, you camp on our land and kill our kangaroos and tear up our trees and dirty our water and we forgive, but now you will not share your sheep and my people are hungry and wait here because of you...' (pp. 342-43). The rift between Aborigines and settlers, driven by differing attitudes to land and nature and different concepts of living together, becomes unbridgeable. As the settlers seek to reproduce their previous ways of life they inevitably alienate the indigenous peoples whose laws, customs and practices are very different, and the novel ends ominously with the sound of gunshots as violence breaks out between the two communities.

In his novel Scott seeks to recuperate the Aboriginal voice, to give it equal weight to that of the white settlers, to use it to 'speak back to the monological "truths" of colonial discourse'.⁴³ He uses that voice to present an alternative to the settler attitude to the land and to reinstate the primacy of the Aboriginal relationship with the land, a relationship that is more in tune with contemporary ecological concerns for 'the protection of the environment and the sustainable management of natural resources'.⁴⁴ By returning the Aborigines both to history and to the land, Scott questions settler claims to exclusive land ownership and suggests an alternative path for the relationship between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians. At the same time his description of the destructive nature of settler land management challenges their claim to be uniquely attached to the land.

Scott's presentation of settler Australians' inability to recognize the ways in which the Aborigines cared for the land reflects a wider cultural blindness. As Paul

⁴³ Amanda Johnson, 'Archival Salvage: History's Reef and the Wreck of the Historical Novel', *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature, Special Issue: Archive Madness*, (2012), 21 pp. (p. 16)
<<http://www.nla.gov.au/openpublish/index.php/jasal/article/view/1829/2633>> [accessed 20 August 2012].

⁴⁴ Huggan and Tiffin, p. 88.

Carter points out, ‘in 1788, Australia was already a highly cultivated space’.⁴⁵ The indigenous population supported their way of life through such purposeful but low-intensity activities as the planting of edible plants or the firing of the land to destroy old grass and support new growth which ‘encouraged the return of herbivores used as a food source by the Aborigines’.⁴⁶ However the early settlers were unable or unwilling to recognize that the Aborigines had managed the land in ways which benefitted both them and it. In his lengthy Appendix on the Aborigines, Collins makes no mention of their cultivating plants, remarking only that the woods ‘afford them but little sustenance; a few berries, the yam and fern-root; the flowers of the different banksia, and at times some honey’.⁴⁷ White sees the firing of grass by Aborigines as ‘a custom in which they seem always happy to indulge themselves’ without questioning why they did so.⁴⁸ Even had they seen what the Aborigines were doing, of course, it would have been unwise to say so, as any suggestion that Aborigines might in practice be caring for the land, even in ways that did not conform to European notions of agriculture, would have undermined the doctrine of *terra nullius*, the idea that the land was effectively empty and untended and so available for settlement and cultivation.

By contesting this idea, the Aboriginal challenge to the 1988 Bicentenary celebrations brought to the fore the charged issue of land rights and land ownership. In the years that followed, these issues took on an increasing importance, particularly following the High Court judgments in the Mabo (1992) and Wik (1996) cases. These judgments ‘recognised the existence in common law of Aboriginal property rights that preceded the European settlement and continued past it’ and, as a result, ‘the colonisers are confronted with the fact that they share the land with the colonised’.⁴⁹ By demonstrating the concept of *terra nullius* to be a legal fiction, re-opening the issue of British dispossession of Aborigines, and undermining the legitimacy of white ownership

⁴⁵ Carter, *The Road to Botany Bay*, p. 337.

⁴⁶ Simon Ryan, p. 146.

⁴⁷ David Collins, I, 462.

⁴⁸ John White, p. 158.

⁴⁹ Stuart Macintyre, *A Concise History of Australia*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 293.

of the land, the court rulings disturbed the white settler narrative that was built on sole ownership and the denial of all Aboriginal land rights.

The first of these judgments, in the Mabo case, was attacked by conservative politicians, commentators and business interests for a number of reasons. It was (mis)represented as an existential threat to white property ownership while some commentators even argued that the decision could lead to ‘the possibility of an end to the country’s territorial integrity’ if Aborigines were allowed to expropriate the white owners of the land.⁵⁰ Underpinning these attacks was the spectre that Aboriginal land rights would lead to settler Australians being re-exiled, expelled from their homes and forced to find a new place to live. It was this fear over their continuing place in the country, and the wider issue of the right of non-indigenous Australians to live in Australia, a question which for many had previously been unproblematic, that drove much of the anger over the judgment and with it the rhetorical denunciations that Andrew Markus cites, and which, as discussed earlier, were forcefully expressed by Pauline Hanson in her Parliamentary maiden speech.⁵¹ More thoughtful Australians recognized that the judgments had not ruled that Aboriginal land rights overturned settler rights but rather that they could co-exist, and that what was needed was a new way of relating to the land that regarded it as shared rather than exclusively owned. This required an ability to look beyond the binary founded in European law that land was either ours or theirs to embrace the idea that in Australia ‘one’s place is always another’s place and the issue of possession is never complete, never entirely settled’.⁵² In practice, the Government response to the judgment was to circumscribe and limit the application of native title so as to calm the fears of those who believed they stood to lose

⁵⁰ Andrew Markus, ‘Between Mabo and a Hard Place: Place, Race and the Contradictions of Conservatism’, in *In the Age of Mabo: History, Aborigines and Australia*, ed. by Bain Attwood (St Leonards, New South Wales: Allen & Unwin, 1996), pp. 88-99 (p. 89).

⁵¹ Markus, pp. 89-93; Pauline Hanson, ‘Maiden Speech in the House of Representatives’, 10 September 1996 <<http://australianpolitics.com/1996/09/10/pauline-hanson-maiden-speech.html>> [accessed 7 November 2013].

⁵² Ken Gelder and Jane M. Jacobs, *Uncanny Australia: Sacredness and Identity in a Postcolonial Nation* (Carlton, Victoria: Melbourne University Press, 1998), p. 138.

their property, but in doing so it lost the opportunity to use the judgments to advance the process of reconciliation to which it was committed.

The Mabo judgment was also attacked because it ‘not only dislodges the traditional origins of Australia, but also seems to weaken if not destroy the connection with the British past, which is *the* traditional Australian past’.⁵³ Mabo, and later Wik, were seen as continuing what Australian conservatives saw as an unremitting attack on their construction of national history and identity, a construction that saw contemporary Australia as the outcome of a largely benign British settlement of a hostile land which redeemed the country from its convict beginnings. As early as 1968, W. E. H Stanner had drawn attention to the effect of this mode of thinking in what he called the ‘cult of disremembering’ of the Aboriginal contribution to Australian history in which ‘the several hundred thousand aborigines who lived and died between 1788 and 1938 were but negative facts of history and, having been negative, were in no way consequential for the modern period’.⁵⁴ In place of a single white narrative of Australian history, Mabo provided a counter-narrative that re-inserted the Aborigines into a history from which they had largely been expelled. In doing so it ended ‘the historical silence about the Aboriginal pre-colonial and colonial past upon which the conservative invention of Australia and Australianness was founded’ and challenged ‘a narrative of the nation which has measured its progress relative to an Aboriginal absence or dispossession’.⁵⁵ Now that negative history had to be addressed, and addressed in the most fundamental way, in relation to the right to own land. It was no longer possible to pretend that history started in 1788, though recent statements by Prime Minister Tony Abbott about the emptiness of Australia before British settlement suggest that at least some Australians still try to do so.⁵⁶

⁵³ Attwood, p. 105.

⁵⁴ W. E. H. Stanner, *After the Dreaming: Black and White Australians – An Anthropologist’s View* (Sydney: Australian Broadcasting Commission, 1969), p. 25.

⁵⁵ Attwood, p. 116.

⁵⁶ Helen Davidson, ‘Australia was “unsettled” until British came, says Abbott’, *Guardian*, 5 July 2014, p. 20; Amy McQuire, ‘Tony Abbott Says “Nothing But Bush in Australia Before White Settlement”’, *New Matilda*, 14 November 2014 <<https://newmatilda.com/2014/11/14/tony-abbott-says-nothing-bush-australia-white-settlement>> [accessed 17 November 2014].

Given the centrality of the land, home and belonging to white Australian concepts of identity, and the growing pressure of the Aboriginal land rights movement which challenges that self-declared marker of identity, it is unsurprising that the period since the Bicentenary has seen a surge of fictions which address these issues both in a contemporary and an historical context. As Ken Gelder and Paul Salzman put it, in a chapter entitled ‘Belonging’, ‘the investment in “a concept of home”, [...], remained a key feature of much of the contemporary Australian fiction from the period under discussion [1989-2007]’ with a series of novels that ‘dealt with themes of home and property and tied these things to an implied sense of nationhood’.⁵⁷ In the rest of this chapter I will consider two novels – Richard Flanagan’s *Gould’s Book of Fish* (2001) and Rodney Hall’s *The Second Bridegroom* (1991) – which are both, albeit in very different ways, concerned with these issues. In particular they address the impact of convict settlement on the land and the indigenous population, the attempts of the British colonizers to forge a new Britain in Australia, and the distorting effects this has had on relations between settlers and the indigenous population.

Tasmanian Gothic: Richard Flanagan’s *Gould’s Book of Fish*

Reviewing *Gould’s Book of Fish*, Christopher Tayler wrote that it was a ‘magical-realist colonial-protest novel, Borgesian found-manuscript tale, anti-Enlightenment Foucauldian fable’ and more besides.⁵⁸ However this story of William Buelow (Billy) Gould’s life and imprisonment in the penal colony of Sarah Island also addresses the issue of the ravaging impact of colonialism on the Tasmanian ecology. At the same time it broadens its range of concern to the absurdity of trying to recreate Britain in the new colony, and the ways in which these issues have deformed contemporary Australian society.

⁵⁷ Ken Gelder and Paul Salzman, *After the Celebration: Australian Fiction 1989-2007* (Carlton, Victoria: Melbourne University Press, 2009), pp. 19 & 20.

⁵⁸ Richard Flanagan, *Gould’s Book of Fish: A Novel in Twelve Fish* (London: Atlantic Books, 2003). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text; Christopher Tayler, ‘Putting on the Plum’, *London Review of Books*, 31 October 2002, pp. 26-27 (p. 27).

In her book *Land Settlement in Early Tasmania*, Sharon Morgan details how the white settlement of the island then known as Van Diemen's Land, and notorious as a penal colony, fundamentally changed its environment, arguing that 'with the implementation of European farming practices and the planting of imported trees and shrubs, the colonial landscape gradually came to look more like that of England than did any other part of Australia', and that 'ecological destruction was inevitable with the introduction of pastoralism and agriculture'.⁵⁹ At the heart of the reshaping of the Tasmanian landscape into a fake version of Britain were the 'regulations concerning the way in which the new land was to be taken under control and tamed. This process entailed the settlement of individuals on farms'.⁶⁰ Over the first thirty years of settlement the changing land use which resulted from this policy not only refashioned and Europeanized the land but led to growing conflict between settlers and the indigenous population.

As in other parts of Australia early settlers, both free settlers and former convicts, waged war on the land, clearing it for farming and for pastoralism. They also sought to recreate an English landscape in Tasmania since England provided the yardstick against which the new settlement was judged both environmentally and socially. While they were struck by 'the similarity they perceived between parts of the island and their beloved England', the settlers were also driven to improve the country to make it more productive and profitable, just as England itself had been improved over the years.⁶¹ Forests were felled, fauna and flora were destroyed and alien species were introduced as part of a conscious effort to change the face of the country, to forge it in the image of Britain. The general settler tendency towards 'exploiting the environment so as to maximise their profits' was exacerbated by the impact of sheep, which were 'the most influential element in the devastation of the natural environment'.⁶² Inevitably settler pressure to acquire and develop the land led to conflict with the indigenous

⁵⁹ Sharon Morgan, *Land Settlement in Early Tasmania: Creating an Antipodean England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 2 & 3.

⁶⁰ Morgan, p. 6.

⁶¹ Morgan, p. 109.

⁶² Morgan, pp. 111 & 112.

population because ‘there was a very limited amount of arable land’ which both settlers and indigenes wanted, and while ‘Aborigines may well have been prepared to share the best land, [...] the Europeans wanted no compromise’.⁶³ The result was an increasingly bitter conflict that led, as elsewhere in Australia, to the dispossession and destruction of the indigenous population.

In the same way as the British wanted to recreate their patterns of agriculture and land ownership in Tasmania, so they also sought to reproduce their patterns of urban and suburban life. Peter Conrad, himself a Tasmanian by birth, writes of how ‘enclaves of Englishness were cultivated in the colony’, drawing attention to the way in which Hobart’s Botanical Gardens ‘evoke England: the park is laid out to admonish the informal bush around it, and even possesses its own juvenile ruin’, and to the nearby presence of ‘England’s official citadel, the turreted folly of Government House’.⁶⁴ In their creation of Hobart as a pretend English city the colonists performed another act of forgery, creating a counterfeit town mimicking the generic concept of an English cathedral city. The fakery was reinforced by the naming of settlements and features across the island in honour of British originals – for example Launceston, Glenorchy, Derwent and Skiddaw – so that ‘Tasmania transforms itself into a garbled, compressed synopsis of the British Isles’.⁶⁵

The impact of settlement on the Tasmanian ecology underpins Flanagan’s first novel, *Death of a River Guide* (1994).⁶⁶ In this fiction Aljaz Cosini, the river guide who is drowning in the Franklin River after a rafting accident, is ‘granted visions – grand, great, wild, sweeping visions’ (p. 10) of the past that enable him to understand his family’s hidden history, which encompasses both the much-denied convict stain and the mixed blood stemming from the rape of an Aboriginal woman by a white sealer. He also comes to understand the history of the land that has been despoiled by the colonists for

⁶³ Morgan, p. 154.

⁶⁴ Peter Conrad, *Down Home: Revisiting Tasmania* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1988), pp. 151 & 152.

⁶⁵ Conrad, p. 127.

⁶⁶ Richard Flanagan, *Death of a River Guide* (Sydney: Picador, 2004). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

commercial gain. As in Kim Scott's work, the arrival of white settlers is presented as disruptive of the natural world and of the relationship between Aborigines and their environment. In one of his visions Aljaz 'saw white man arrive and saw the world turned upside down. [...] I saw pods of slaughtered whales, [...], saw swirling through their ranks colonies of slaughtered seals, similarly airborne. Saw an Aboriginal village of beehive huts whose women had been stolen' (pp. 323-24). More fundamentally the arrival of settlers turned Tasmania into a place where:

each succeeding generation found something new they could quarry to survive. First the emu disappeared, then the tigers, then the many different fishes and seals and whales [...], then the rivers were stilled under dams, then the trees, and then the scallops and the abalone and the crayfish became few and were in consequence no longer the food of the poor but the waste of the rich. (p. 258)

This attitude to the land is contrasted with that of the Aborigines 'who had originally peopled this land' and opposed the settlers who saw it 'not as a source of knowledge but as a source of wealth' (p. 258).

In his passionate condemnation of the colonial adventure in Tasmania, Flanagan figures the colonizing Europeans as, to use Crosby's term, ecological imperialists, who regard the natural world solely as a resource for their use, so that they exterminate species, create waste from over-exploitation, and establish and abandon settlements such as Strahan, where the end of the logging boom leads to 'the strange flotsam of deflated dreams and broken hopes' (p. 188). He sees this cycle of exploitation and destruction as a continuing process that can only occasionally be stopped and even then at a cost. While the conservationists win their battle to save the Franklin from being dammed, 'part of their winning had been to name all the river's features, to render them citable and documentable by those who would never know them, and in that process [...] something of the river's soul had been stolen away' (p. 252). We see here a modern reprise of the early colonial strategy of naming as an integral part of the process of exploring and possessing the land and in doing so making it part of the modern capitalist

world. Naming the features of the Franklin not only steals its soul, it opens it up for commercial gain, including running rafting trips from place to place down the river.

Flanagan returns to the impact of early settlement on Tasmania in *Gould's Book of Fish*, but this time sets his fiction in the early colonial period itself. At the heart of the novel is the fictionalized autobiography of Billy Gould, artist, forger and transported convict. Gould's role in 'the great invasion of Van Diemen's Land' starts with claiming 'the *soil* of the vast nation that spread out before me in the name of the glorious union that the ensign above me signified' (p. 41 – my emphasis). From the first it is the physical nature of the land that is stressed, though as we shall see the invaders show little respect for the native environment. Gould's part in the novel ends with his escape from the destruction of the prison colony of Sarah Island by turning himself into one of the fish he has so painstakingly painted during much of his time on the island.

At the centre of the novel is Gould's time on Sarah Island, which is characterized, in terms familiar from Marcus Clarke, as a place of Gothic horror, for 'nothing is more abominable, more without precedent in the annals of degradation, than this island' (p. 97). The Commandant, who sits at the centre of this experiment in destruction and brutality, is a monstrous figure who, like earlier commandants such as Frere and Logan, exercises untrammelled power over both the prisoners on the island and its physical development. In addition to the floggings which are the hallmark of their power over the prisoners, he has invented a range of other instruments of torture, 'the Scavenger's Daughter, the Witch's Broom, the Mistress's Scald' (p. 107) – names which also tell of the misogynistic nature of his rule – to control the island's convict population. Like other convict novels I have discussed the prisoners are figured as innocent victims of a capricious tyrant whose punishments and rewards are handed out 'not according to your behaviour, your reformatory zeal or your recurrent villainy, but only because of luck, good or bad' (p. 107).

However, unlike earlier prison governors, the Commandant's megalomaniac ambition is not restricted to controlling and punishing convicts. Rather he intends to make the island into 'a truly great power (p. 183), and to do so he turns the entire island

into ‘a type of Enlightenment laboratory’, though one where ‘instead of civic pride, liberty, justice, and order, there is individual ambition, materialism, greed and also, escapism and despair’.⁶⁷ He has the ‘stated ambition to outdo Europe by rebuilding it’ (p. 184) and seeks to do this by frantic capitalist entrepreneurialism. This becomes ever more manic as he exchanges the useful for the rare and strange – ‘a score of barrels of whale oil for the decadent scent of a single overripe guava, shipwrights’ tools for iguana eggs, a whale boat for a large cargo of green bananas, much prized redcoat uniforms for silk turbans’ (p. 152). His mania for trading and exchange culminates when he sells ‘the continent of Australia, over which he had recently claimed sovereignty by having Musha Pug row over to the mainland & there plant the new flag of the Principality of Sarah Island upon an abandoned beach’ (p. 153). In exchange he receives ‘a fleet of Siamese girls’ (p. 153) who ply their trade of prostitution alongside the prison. Flanagan here, rather unsubtly, ties the settlement of Australia to the capitalism, colonialism, racism and sexism of the British colonists.

For Flanagan the island, and by extension both Tasmania and the Australian continent, has suffered from the colonial attempt at ‘the remaking of Europe as a stunted island of misconceptions beneath the southern heavens’ (p. 107). He sees colonization as an exercise in the Enlightenment gone mad, in which ‘the evolution of Sarah Island is compressed into a single burst of explosive growth that blasts the colony away from its sordid point of origin and on towards a glorious, if putatively imagined, future’.⁶⁸ But that future does not eventuate. Rather ‘the Commandant was to suck the sea dry, then explode with an oceanic excess of pride & maroon the island and its few survivors once more in their desolate isolation’ (p. 103).

Flanagan focuses sharply on the disastrous impact of the Commandant’s capitalist modernization programme on the environment and the people of Sarah Island. The Commandant regards the land in purely instrumental terms, selling ‘the Gordon

⁶⁷ Jo Jones, “‘Dancing the Old Enlightenment’: *Gould’s Book of Fish*, the Historical Novel and the Postmodern Sublime’, *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature, Special Issue: The Colonial Present*, (2008), 114-29 (pp. 118 & 117).

⁶⁸ Jesse Shipway, ‘Wishing for Modernity: Temporality and Desire in *Gould’s Book of Fish*’, *Australian Literary Studies*, 21 (2003-04), 43-53 (p. 48).

River and the Great Barrier Reef' for gold (p. 166) and 'the entire Transylvanian wilderness' (p. 170) to a Japanese trader in return for rolling stock for his train. The felling of the trees which follows 'turned the surrounding blue & green wild lands into an unruly chequerboard of stubbly brown squares' until, after the rains, 'first the soil, then several mountains washed away, so that when the Japanese sawyers returned the following summer they were confronted with an immense & entirely disorientating boulder desert to the north' (p. 182). The result of his manic squandering of the island's natural resources is a barren waste:

It was as if a giant octopus had spread itself over the island & eaten up every last vestige of vegetation, every last tree & plant & fern, leaving only its upturned tentacle of log fences, fifty feet or more in height, running up & down the settlement. (p. 98)

The land is dominated by 'the island's great buildings' (p. 98), which include 'shoreside streets of looming warehouses that would shame Liverpool' (p. 99). These developments, which reflect, in a grotesque fashion, the settler desire to turn Australia into another England, are represented as the *reductio ad absurdum* of colonial settlement in which the native environment has been eliminated and replaced by an ersatz European civilization. For the Commandant, the land has no value in and of itself but solely as a form of commodity. The vision of the island as an unfettered site of capitalist activity reaches its apotheosis at the novel's end when, after the death of the Commandant, Musha Pug takes charge of the colony and sees that 'the Commandant's folly was to think you could turn a penal colony into a nation, whereas [...] it would be far more successful as a company' (p. 379). The parallels with what Flanagan sees as the destruction of Tasmania's, and Australia's, ecology and natural resources for the benefit of corporate interests are all too obvious.

Alongside the Commandant is the surgeon, Lempriere, who lives surrounded by 'racks of marsupial skulls, rib cages, thigh bones & entire skeletons of various animals – as well as assortments of feathers, shells, dried flowers, rocks; framed collections of butterflies, moths & beetles; & trays of bird eggs' (p. 120). Lempriere is a walking

caricature of the scientific method, a man who sees the natural environment as providing the raw material for his research and who, as Gould puts it, seeks ‘to recreate the natural world as a penal colony’ (p. 129) in which all species are subject to human domination. He shows no appreciation of the variety and novelty of the ecology of Sarah Island other than as it contributes to his work of ‘breaking the world into a million classifiable elements’ (p. 124) and thereby assisting in his personal advancement, helping him to attain membership of the Royal Society. Billy Gould’s part in ‘this gargantuan act of vandalism’ (p. 126) is to paint ‘all the fish to be found in the inland sea of Macquarie Harbour, all the sea creatures that floated dead along the poisoned waters of the King & Gordon rivers’ (p. 130), not because Lempriere has any particular interest in fish but because he has been assured by his English correspondent that exploiting this gap in the market will advance his cause. It is the more knowing Gould who understands that ‘this English natural historian [...] was building a fair old career out of the various bits & pieces the Surgeon and his other colonial collectors were shipping back to him’ (p. 125), that he is in essence forging his career. Unlike those early colonists who could appreciate the beauty of the country and the strangeness of the new forms of life in Australia, Lempriere takes no interest in them except insofar as they may be of benefit to him.

Richard Grove has argued that European colonists were not solely destructive of the environment in newly colonized territories. Rather he suggests that colonial states were aware of ‘the limited nature of the earth’s natural resources’ and had ‘a concomitant awareness of a need for conservation’, imposing ‘controls on the unhindered operations of capital for short-term gain that, it might be argued, brought about a contradiction to what is normally supposed to have made up the common currency of imperial expansion’.⁶⁹ However the Commandant and Lempriere show no such awareness. The Commandant sells anything on the island in pursuit of his short-term goals of exchanging ‘our tyranny of isolation for the liberty of commerce’ (p. 166) while Lempriere is more concerned to kill and classify the local wildlife than to preserve it. His passion for classification and ordering extends to the local Aboriginal population,

⁶⁹ Grove, pp. 6 & 7.

whose pickled heads are catalogued and transported to England to demonstrate, in Lempriere's emphatic words, the 'EXACT REASONS FOR HIERARCHY IN RACES OF MAN' (p. 232). For him, the Aborigines form part of the natural rather than the human world, for 'OUR SABLE BRETHREN LIKE DOGS – FLEAS – ARE NOT DESCENDED FROM ADAM – GOD CREATED THEM SEPARATE BUT INFERIOR SPECIES, AS HE CREATED MULLET OR SPARROWS' (p. 232), and so can be treated as another source of material for his project. White settlement, then, is seen as wholly destructive of the natural and the Aboriginal world as it attempts to forge the new world in the form of the old.

However, if the colonists are careless of the land and its people, Flanagan does not here posit an Aboriginal alternative way of living on the land as he had in *Death of a River Guide*, or as Scott does in *That Deadman Dance*. As Ben Holgate has recently suggested, 'the novel pushes into the background of the text the early Aboriginal Tasmanians and their society'.⁷⁰ Where we do see indigenous people they are either degraded, like Twopenny Sal who has been corrupted by the Commandant, or figured as representatives of a dying race, like Tracker Marks, who is 'no longer the elegant, strong man I had met on Sarah Island several months before' but has become 'not so much emaciated as shrivelled' with a face bearing 'the telltale pustules of the pox' (p. 324). His death near the novel's end stands for the Aborigines' final extinction. Where Aljaz's visions end with him conjuring up his family, with his Aboriginal ancestress, Black Pearl, at its centre, Billy Gould sees no such vision of reconciliation or harmony, however superficial. Instead the idea of 'building a white man, black woman home, the whole something other than either of them in the merge' (p. 350) is dismissed as a dream of the mythical outlaw Brady.

The concept of Australia as a forged nation permeates the novel as Flanagan creates in Sarah Island 'a world that demanded reality imitate fiction' (p. 103). Gould, as

⁷⁰ Ben Holgate, "'The Impossibility of Knowing': Developing Magical Realism's Irony in *Gould's Book of Fish*", *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature*, 14.5 (2015), 11 pp. (p. 5)
<<http://www.nla.gov.au/openpublish/index.php/jasal/article/view/3164/4243>> [accessed 10 December 2014].

a forger himself, is complicit in what is presented as an Antipodean recreation of England. From the start of his time in Tasmania he is involved in creating a false England there. He ‘painted shiny family crests on coaches, inventing coats of arms for the bastard issue of the New World that wished to dress up in the absurd livery of the Old’ (pp. 67-68), and in doing so came to understand that ‘colonial art is the comic knack of rendering the new as the old, the unknown as the known, the antipodean as the European, the contemptible as the respectable’ (p. 68). Later he paints pseudo-English portraits and pub signs while towards the end of his captivity he is painting ‘Constable-like scenes of bucolick bliss’ (p. 46) for his gaoler. When it becomes clear that the Sarah Island railway is not going anywhere the Commandant wants him to ‘paint a series of theatrical drop screens [...] depicting different views & sublime scenes that would form an outer walled circle lining the circular railway track at the roundhouse’ (p. 180) along which he would travel. These scenes would give the traveller the idea that ‘they were rushing past Tintern Abbey or Windermere or, as a poetic touch, the new rookeries of Salford’ (p. 180). In short they would obliterate the sight of the actual country in which the colonists were living and replace it by the lost country of Home. Just as the Commandant is reshaping the physical face of the island, so the pseudo-artist Gould, who has ‘forg[ed] myself anew as an artist’ because it ‘offered the prospect of a better billet than labouring in a chain gang & made me look like something other than the common criminal I was’ (p. 65), is reshaping its aesthetic face, dressing the island up to look like England. Flanagan’s representation of the attempt to make Sarah Island a new England recalls the ways in which Thomas Keneally, in *Bring Larks and Heroes*, and Kate Grenville, in *The Secret River*, presented the flawed and failed attempts of the colonists to reproduce English architecture and culture in Australia, and as in those novels the end-product is out of scale and out of place.

However, for Flanagan forgery extends further than the attempt to reproduce European culture and capitalist values in Australia. It also reinvents and reshapes Australian history. Within the novel ‘the colonial past and history in general is

something that shifts, [...], unable to be pinned down in any singular sense'.⁷¹ History here is what we choose to make it, and the forger is the man who can create a new and different past for individuals and countries. The Commandant has forged his own past and created a sanitized image of himself for public consumption. His history is unknown but he is alleged to be a former convict who survived a shipwreck, took on the name of Lieutenant Horace and, on arriving on Sarah Island, joined the military guard of the settlement where he 'welcomed the opportunity to augment his own invention with some actual record of service' (p. 145). After the death of the commandant, Major de Groot, 'rumoured to have been the consequences of poison' (p. 148), he 'made himself the new Commandant' (p. 146). In that guise he appears in 'the many full-length portraits I had painted of him as a Noble Sage, National Hero, Ancient Philosopher, Modern Saviour, Roman Emperor, & Napoleonic Liberator' (p. 370). With the complicity of the registry clerk, Jorgen Jorgensen, the Commandant has also forged the history of Sarah Island itself. When Gould breaks into the prison's registry he:

scoured the commissariat records for accounts, invoices, receipts, that might prove the Commandant's purchase of South American locomotives; tried to find paper trails that would definitively establish his sale of the Transylvanian wilderness, or, for that matter, his even more audacious bartering of the mainland of Australia & the purchase of Moluccan jewellery, Chinese medicines, sea cucumber, Javanese furniture & boatloads of Siamese girls.

There were none. (p. 283)

Similarly the brutal treatment of the convicts has been whitewashed, 'all that barbarity & horror of our settlement' reinvented as 'order & progress, material, moral & spiritual' (p. 285).

In short, Flanagan suggests, the whole of Australian history is essentially a forgery. As Billy Gould says later, 'they've all been making the place up, ever since the Commandant tried to reinvent Sarah Island as a New Venice, as the island of forgetting,

⁷¹ Jones, "Dancing the Old Enlightenment", p. 116.

because anything is easier than remembering' (p. 401). Rather than face the reality of the wilful colonial destruction of the land and its peoples, Anglo-Celtic settler Australians have sought to forget the past and write the historical record in such a way as to propound the myth of settlement as one of heroic conquest. As Jo Jones suggests, 'part of Flanagan's motivation in *Gould's Book of Fish* for dismantling Enlightenment notions of a stable, unified history was the desire to construct a polemical response to the conservative side of the debate over the national past'.⁷² The only escape from the settler (mis)writing of the past is by confronting the events of Australian history and disclosing the past truthfully 'in order for a process of working it through to be historically informed and to have some chance of being effective ritually and politically in creating both a livable society and a national collectivity'.⁷³ Flanagan here, as in the earlier *Death of a River Guide*, seeks to challenge the complacent view of the past held by many of his contemporaries and so to open space for debate.

The Commandant's dream of modernizing and Europeanizing Sarah Island, and metonymically Tasmania and Australia, is doomed to failure. First the Sarah Island railway fails, followed by the Great Mah Jong Hall, and as the speculative bubble bursts the Commandant's dream of recreating a capitalist Europe in the Antipodes crumbles. The Hall reverts to nature, becoming a haven for birdlife, and under the pressure of their droppings it becomes 'covered in more & more stinking, encrusting lice & maggot-crawling crap' until in the end, in a last burst of entrepreneurialism, 'the Commandant sold the whole sorry mess of shit-encrusted Europe as guano to the Peruvians' (p. 194). Jesse Shipway suggests that Flanagan's novel demonstrates a 'desire for an alternative modernity for Tasmania', one that takes a different path from the 'basically failed modernity' of the island's past development.⁷⁴ However, just as the Commandant's train is reduced to going round in circles, so too are both Tasmanian and Australian modernization as they continue to repeat the mistakes of the past, destroying in the name of progress the very environment that attracts people to the island.

⁷² Jones, "Dancing the Old Enlightenment", p. 127.

⁷³ Dominick LaCapra, 'Trauma, Absence, Loss', *Critical Inquiry*, 25 (1999), 696-727 (p. 697).

⁷⁴ Shipway, pp. 52 & 45.

The convicts and their masters form a toxic presence on the island, which has to be purged if it is ever to recover and renew itself. To bring this about, Flanagan conjures up an ecocidal apocalypse in which the flames from an Aboriginal bonfire, fanned by a helpful wind, spread across the island, creating the revenge of the natural and the native on the invading colonists who have been responsible for the degradation of the island and its inhabitants. The fire is indiscriminate in its destruction, burning up ‘the great uncharted forests of myrtle & pine that the Commandant had not sold’ (p. 363) and turning the island into ‘an eternity of suffering in which nothing existed except to fuel the fire’ (p. 367), while also destroying the fake culture of the Commandant and his men. We can read this destruction as a purifying fire, following which a new and better world should emerge. But while this may be the case in many apocalyptic fictions which speak, as Frank Kermode puts it, of ‘the last days and the renovation, the destruction of the earthly city as a chastisement of human presumption, but also of empire’, it is less obviously so here.⁷⁵ Rather than leading to renewal, Flanagan suggests that in Australia the destruction will be followed by the remaking of the same failed system, for ‘others would rebuild the island, rewrite its histories, & condemn us all once more’ (p. 382). History is circular rather than linear, and the forgery and fakery that are characteristic of Sarah Island are, Flanagan suggests, being repeated in contemporary Australia.

In contrast to the utopian vision of Australia conjured up by Peter Carey at the end of *Jack Maggs*, Flanagan’s vision of the country is deeply dystopian. As Frances Devlin-Glass says, ‘there is a grim-faced refusal to glorify any aspect of the colonial system’.⁷⁶ Sarah Island is destroyed by capitalist rapacity and scientific extremism, both of which see the natural world as something to be exploited rather than cared for. It is a land ruled by the megalomaniac, where the indigenous peoples are murdered and mistreated, the convicts treated with brutality and violence, and the concept of mateship has lost its meaning in a world where each person is out for themselves. Flanagan’s novel, as Devlin-Glass suggests, ‘spares no gothic detail in its anatomy of the cultural

⁷⁵ Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction with a New Epilogue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 112.

⁷⁶ Frances Devlin-Glass, ‘Linnaeus Downunder’, *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature*, 2 (2003), 179-84 (p. 183).

pathologies of Tasmania'.⁷⁷ In doing so it plays into a history of reading Tasmania in Gothic terms, as a land of extremes haunted by 'absences, not yet fully expiated – the slaughtered Aborigines, the downtrodden convicts, and hunted species like the diminutive Tasmanian Emu and the gothically named Tasmanian Tiger'.⁷⁸ This reading of the island, which has prevailed since Marcus Clarke, sees it as 'a dualistic society, in which you can step out of the humdrum reality into an ulterior dimension of strangeness. Behind Tasmania, in the shadows, is the "other island" it had once been – feared, hated Van Diemen's Land'.⁷⁹ At the same time, Flanagan uses magical realist and postmodern techniques to tell his story, echoing Carey's approach in *Jack Maggs*. However, like Carey, underneath the surface much about the novel places it squarely in the tradition of the conservative convict novel, with the common tropes of convict innocence, colonial brutality, casual misogyny (the depiction of the pastor's wife, Mrs Gottliebsen, as a depraved seducer of Gould harks back to the First Fleet depictions of female convicts), and such melodramatic episodes as Gould's discovery of the island's registry after nearly being drowned under its collapsing floor, with its echoes of John Rex's fall into the blowhole in *For the Term of His Natural Life*.

Unlike Carey, Flanagan convincingly undermines the myths and stories of Australian settlement, and suggests how Australia's past has served to shape its present. He eviscerates both settler and Aboriginal myths of the past, when Gould says at the novel's end that:

it wasn't the English who did this to us but ourselves, that convicts flogged convicts & pissed on blackfellas & spied on each other, that blackfellas sold black women for dogs & speared escaping convicts, that white sealers killed & raped black women, & black women killed the children that resulted. (p. 401)

However his exploration of the destructive legacy of the convict past, and his emphasis on the cyclical nature of history in Australia, leave him with no space for an alternative,

⁷⁷ Devlin-Glass, p. 182.

⁷⁸ Jim Davidson, 'Tasmanian Gothic', *Meanjin*, 48 (1989), 307-24 (p. 310).

⁷⁹ Conrad, p. 206.

more positive vision of a future, either for Sarah Island or for Australia more generally. The decaying state of the settlement before the fire shows up the fact that ‘all that vanity of activity, that glorious carnival of commerce, had been an illusion, a theatre of mercantile triumph to hide the despair of the island from its sorry inhabitants’ (p. 375), and that the destructive nature of colonial settlement is irreversible. Australia here is seen as a broken dream where the creation of a functioning society is fatally compromised by the violence of white settlement. Unlike the ending of Alexis Wright’s *Carpentaria*, where Norm Phantom sets to rebuilding his house after the destructive cyclone, the ending of *Gould’s Book of Fish* offers us no explicit vision of the future other than an endless repetition of the past.⁸⁰ To the extent that there is any hope for the future, however, it seems to lie in the hands of the settler population. The book’s ending, with Gould’s transformation into a fish to escape from the island and his death, leaves him to ‘watch & think the ridiculous, the improbable: the world is good’ (p. 402). It is in this goodness of the redeemed convict, the transformation of the destructive settler, that Flanagan seems to see a scintilla of hope for the future.

Imagining the Alternative: Rodney Hall’s *The Second Bridegroom*

Rodney Hall’s 1991 novel *The Second Bridegroom*, chronologically the first of his loosely-linked *Yandilli Trilogy*, shares some characteristics with *Gould’s Book of Fish*.⁸¹ The central character is a forger; the relationship between man and the environment is central to the work; and Australian civilization is presented as fraudulent, a counterfeit England. However in tone and style, Hall’s work is a complete contrast to the Rabelaisian nature of *Gould’s Book of Fish*, at once more poetic and allusive. Where the Gothic and the melodramatic are the dominant mode of Flanagan’s novel, Hall’s work is more meditative and its melodramatic episodes, which serve as reminders of the violence of early colonial history, contrast with his central focus on the interactions between the land and the human. As he has said in an interview ‘it’s the big part of the

⁸⁰ Alexis Wright, *Carpentaria* (London: Constable & Robinson, 2009), p. 499.

⁸¹ Rodney Hall, *The Second Bridegroom* (London: Faber and Faber, 1991). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

environment that interests me, how that shapes us'.⁸² However, Hall's attacks on the colonizing British for their attitude to the land and their attempts to reproduce, to forge, British civilization in Australia are no less uncompromising.

The novel tells the story of Felim John, a Manxman transported for forgery and sold into the employ of Mr Atholl. Felim, who is initially presented as a victim both of his master and of his supposed mates, the other convicts, becomes the butt of verbal and physical abuse by his fellow prisoners, particularly Gabriel Dean, as they voyage to Atholl's newly-possessed land aboard the ironically named *Fraternity*. Felim manages to kill Dean and escape into the bush, where he joins a group of Aborigines and subsequently takes part with them in an assault on Atholl's farm, during which Atholl is killed. He is recaptured and confined to the farm's store room from which he again escapes, leaving behind him his autobiography in the form of a confession and a series of love-letters to Atholl's widow. The story of Felim's life since his escape from Atholl's ship is interleaved with the history of his arrest as a forger in England and with his memories of his life as a native of the Isle of Man, where he first saw himself living as a colonized subject. As he puts it 'just as I will end my life here in the newest British colony, I was born in the oldest, the Isle of Man' (p. 24).

In *The Second Bridegroom*, as in others of his novels, Hall is 'engaged in a re-examination of Australian history through an interrogation of alternative experiences of the process of discovery and settlement'.⁸³ His perspective here is that of the short-sighted Felim, who is unable to engage in the traditional colonial mode of exploration in which 'almost all the discoveries made are constructed as totally visual events' and the European gaze 'is construed as an imposition of power'.⁸⁴ Rather he explores the land in close-up, 'seeking to understand the unseen meanings which lie behind the initially puzzling surfaces'.⁸⁵ Escaping into the bush, he finds himself both literally and

⁸² Susanne Braun-Bau, 'Rodney Hall in Conversation with Susanne Braun-Bau', *Westerly*, 41.3 (1996), 98-109 (pp. 101-02).

⁸³ Paul Genoni, 'The Post-colonial Explorer: Rodney Hall's *The Second Bridegroom*', *Westerly*, 44.1 (1999), 14-26 (p. 14).

⁸⁴ Simon Ryan, p. 24.

⁸⁵ Genoni, p. 17.

metaphorically in the dark and settles to sleep in a bed of leaves where he ‘found my panic began to give place to calm. I could neither see anything nor do anything. I must accept what the world sent me’ (p. 25). Unlike the heroic explorers who try to remake and rename the world in their own image, Felim allows the country and its inhabitants to reveal themselves to him, and familiarizes himself with a land which, while initially alien, slowly comes to make sense to him. While other travellers seek to read the country in terms familiar from their British past, Felim’s myopia, and the heightened sensitivity of his other senses, enable him to read it on its own terms. He becomes ‘a forest creature, faulty sight no longer a hindrance, having learned to feel the ground with my feet’ (p. 43). As a result he does not seek to impose himself on the land but rather to integrate himself with it.

Throughout *The Second Bridegroom* the characters are defined by their approach to, and relationship with, the land, for as Felim says, ‘it all comes down to the soil in the end. And we know our own, which will someday be ours entire’ (p. 25). At the same time the land is the site of a contest between different ways of living, different ideas of what it means to belong in a place, a contest played out in the liminal figure of Felim. He has ‘lived a life of knowing about marked limits and being kept in or kept out’ (p. 194) but now finds himself on the border between settler and native attitudes to the land, and increasingly under pressure to transgress both physical and psychological borders, to enter the places from which he is barred.

For the Aborigines with whom Felim travels, the land is a well-mapped world. They ‘pointed to every feature of the landscape as if I might recognize it. They behaved like a family welcoming a cousin who has been many years away from home, reminding him of childhood games, making a tour of certain caves and standing rocks’ (p. 48). Unlike the settlers who have to map and name the land in terms of geographical features to enable travel and the replication of journeys, for ‘how, without place names, without agreed points of reference, could directions be given, information exchanged, “here” and “there” defined?’, the Aborigines ‘ascribed different meanings to a country already there: the country itself was the product of their journeying, coming into being like a

familiar text read aloud'.⁸⁶ While the settlers need names, geographical markers, to bring the country under their control, the Aborigines use different codes for identifying places, so that Felim talks of how 'we left the place of the little water-badgers with duck bills and webbed feet to set out for the place of winged squirrels' (p. 69). The land for them is a place where they belong, with which they are deeply familiar from having walked it and learned it over the generations. They know their land intimately and they perceive no need or occasion to move away from it, to find new country, to expand their territory. Hall recognizes that 'the aborigine did not travel for the sake of seeing new countries, but in order to continue to inhabit his own'.⁸⁷ While Felim initially sees his life with the Men, as he terms the Aborigines, as one of boredom he quickly learns to appreciate that 'the days were never the same. We walked unknown ways, the water had a different taste each time we drank, we fed on such food as could be found. We slept amid undreamed dreams' (p. 42). Over the course of the novel, Felim grows so accustomed to living off the land that he cannot happily eat other food. When he eats a biscuit in his second captivity, he finds himself 'hungry for the sharp taste of a beetle I know and the numbing juice of a green leaf' (p. 68). In short the land, if attended to closely, provides what is required to sustain the human without the need to travel further or to bring food from elsewhere.

Hall can, of course, be accused of romanticizing and appropriating Aboriginal culture, and particularly their relationship to the land. However I would argue that he is more respectful of the Aborigines than other writers I have discussed such as White and Grenville. While Felim initially mistakes the Aborigines he encounters for trees this is a sign of both his physical and cultural blindness. Once he has adjusted his sight, Felim recognizes the Aborigines as fellow humans with their own social structures and cultural norms. They are different from, and in some ways superior to, the Europeans among whom Felim has hitherto spent his life, and they remain at a distance, physically and culturally, from him, willing to accept him as a companion but not to embrace him as a fellow. There is no exchange of language or knowledge between them, and while Felim

⁸⁶ Carter, *The Road to Botany Bay*, pp. 46 & 337.

⁸⁷ Carter, *The Road to Botany Bay*, p. 336.

admires much about the Aborigines he is unable to understand or accept aspects of their culture. For example, when a girl is killed because she transgressed their law by coming into contact with men, he is shocked and risks his life by going to find out if she is still alive. As he does so he recognizes that while 'until that moment I could be proud of having fitted myself into their world' (p. 104) he cannot in fact inhabit their universe. Later, when the Aborigines leave Felim, it is on their own terms and at a time of their own choosing. Their disappearance is a result of their own decision not the will of others. They live their own lives, exercising their own agency in the world, with no reference to settler expectations. Hall refuses to play to stereotyped settler images of Aborigines as either untamed savages, exotics or a dying race, nor does he present them as either teachers or pupils of the settlers. Rather he shows the Aborigines as inhabiting their own moral and spiritual universe, separate from, but no less valid than, that of the non-indigenous peoples.

By contrast with the Aborigines, the settlers, led by Atholl, are not content to live on the land as they find it. They are restless, constantly driven by a need to move on, to find, possess and master virgin territory. This desire to explore, to find new lands to exploit, has led to 'the last foreign shore, the last unknown land' (p. 17) where Atholl, in terms reminiscent of Will Thornhill in *The Secret River*, can 'stop in paradise and say: As I read the map, this bay is mine' (p. 18). The journey from Sydney has taken him and his men to what they see as 'an untouched place' (p. 3) waiting, like Thornhill's Point, to be conquered and subdued. It is not of course untouched and the men on the ship 'floated, raiders, with no idea we were being watched' (p. 8) as Atholl claims the land for himself, just as the British claimed the entire territory of Australia, ignoring both the presence and the prior rights of the Aborigines.

Like Kim Scott's Geordie Chaine and Richard Flanagan's Commandant, Atholl sees the land as a resource to be used and exploited for his sole benefit. At the heart of his mission, like that of the settler community more generally, is the exploitation of the land which is to be achieved by transforming it in order to create an ordered country in which wilderness has been destroyed, tamed and made fit for British habitation. Atholl

and his convicts impose themselves on the land so as to turn it into something different, to make it a British farm. They build a road which for Felim constituted ‘an assault on the earth itself beyond anything I might have been ready for. The natural aspect of the place was wiped out’ (p. 43). They establish sheep and cattle on the land and set to work to cultivate it, but in doing so they ‘had taken a place, complete in itself, full of the food I had been living on, smashed it to fragments, then slaved at the work of carving out something in its stead, something different’ (p. 45). It is an approach that Felim characterizes as ‘cross-grained if not downright contrary’ (p. 45).

The improvement of the land and the development of agriculture require the destruction of the environment, the chopping down of trees, the ravaging of the bay where the ship landed and where now ‘a spidery trestle stood out from the cliff, a landing-stage with a boat moored at the end’ (p. 46), and the construction of buildings whose ‘walls were slabs and in all probability thick enough to last out the century’ (p. 44). Felim’s response to ‘the marauders’ (p. 36), as he describes Atholl and his men, shows how quickly and easily he has adapted to the Aboriginal world in which he now lives, and left behind his European self. While he understands that the road and farm represent civilization, he ‘saw, with the sight of Men, the horror of it, the plunder, the final emptiness’ (p. 44). Above all the environment is damaged to satisfy the capitalist need for profit. Just as the Noongar land is destroyed for profit in *That Deadman Dance*, so too is the land on which the Aborigines live in this novel. When Felim looks down on the place where the ship landed he sees that ‘a kind of loose raft jostled slow and heavy in the shallows. [...] It was a jam of floating logs’ (p. 46). The felled trees have been turned into a commodity to be traded, like the Sarah Island forests in *Gould’s Book of Fish*.

The land has also been fenced, ostensibly to keep livestock in but also to keep Aborigines and other strangers out. The fences erected by Atholl and his men impose order on the land, replacing natural disorder and wildness with regularity and neatness. When Felim first encounters a fence it ‘baffled me as if I had never seen one before’ (p. 85). For him fences are associated with the order that dominated his past and led to his

imprisonment, for ‘order is a way of trapping anything wild, tricking us into the game of thinking we understand’ (pp. 41-42). It is an artefact of the Enlightenment mentality in which a sense of wonder at the natural world has been replaced by a scientific desire to classify and arrange it. Felim imagines that Atholl ‘saw himself looking up along this wild coast to where an orderly town might be built, [...]. Or did he dream the town as a planned place right where his gutted house is now, with civic offices each side of a clock tower, taverns on corners and a chapel behind?’ (pp. 168-69). These forms of colonial ordering, which are essentially false to the country, are linked with Felim’s memory of the ‘perfect order’ (p. 134) on his native Isle of Man where ‘fields are ploughed in furrows straight as combs. Orchards are planted in rows’ (p. 135). But under the surface of this apparently perfect world there is a seething resentment of the colonial power against which Felim’s father and brother rebel. Hall contrasts the colonial order with the disorder of the Australian bush, ‘an endless land with a maze of jungle ridges fanning in every bewildered direction’ (p. 138) which is not easily subdued and tamed.

Fences are also associated with European agriculture and with property ownership. As Felim says, a fence:

marked a boundary across changed land. Grass inside the fence, though it might look like grass outside, was not at all the same: that grass was Property, as this was Nature. Trees had been cleared from the paddock. And the soil, yielding a lush crop, was being fertilized by cattle. (p. 86)

In this encounter we see what Sigrun Meinig calls:

the limits of a culture and its vision. In this case the fence demarcates English colonial culture. The agricultural changes of the Australian landscape which result from the settlement [...] epitomise[s] the defining power of colonialism: with the help of European methods, Australian nature is turned into ‘property’.⁸⁸

⁸⁸ Sigrun Meinig, *Witnessing the Past: History and Post-Colonialism in Australian History Novels* (Tübingen: Gunter Narr, 2004), p. 302.

A fence also serves to mark exclusivity, barring access to the land to those without explicit permission to be there, and it contrasts starkly with the unseen boundaries which the Aborigines use to demarcate space. As Greg Ratcliffe puts it, in Hall's novel the Aborigines 'do not recognise the Master's fence as a boundary'.⁸⁹ However 'they do recognise the destruction of their own space, which has rigid cultural delineations' but which is not recognized by the settlers who create physical borders as an expression of ownership.⁹⁰ The fence imposes on the landscape and signifies possession and dominance, a signification that is reinforced by the settler destruction of trees, which were habitually cut down as part of the clearance and settlement of the land. Arthur Streeton's 1890 picture *The Selector's Hut (Whelan on the Log)*, showing a pioneer settler resting on a newly felled tree in a cleared landscape, epitomizes the way in which the land was remodelled to suit its new masters and to reflect the English countryside with its tastefully modelled groups of trees in a parkland setting. Ironically, given the destruction it celebrates, Anne Gray's comment on this picture, in the catalogue to the 2013 exhibition of Australian painting at the Royal Academy, is that it shows 'an inhabited landscape, the figure suggesting a comfortable relationship between man and nature'.⁹¹ The felling of trees was at least in part, as Paul Carter suggests, because clearance is needed to mark the difference between land possessed and land to be possessed, so that 'as the frontier moves, nature is bulldozed into submission. There is no negotiation, simply the imposition of a new regime by force'.⁹² But the destruction of important aspects of the natural habitat such as trees, which form part of the Aborigines' geography and history, also symbolizes the British assertion of power over the land and its past.

In this remaking and reshaping of the land by the settler with no concern or respect for others we see another aspect of what Carter describes as imperial history, the

⁸⁹ Greg Ratcliffe, 'Terror Australis: Rodney Hall's *The Second Bridegroom*', in *Seriously Weird: Essays on the Grotesque*, ed. by Alice Mills (New York: Peter Lang, 1999), pp. 13-33 (p. 22).

⁹⁰ Ratcliffe, p. 22.

⁹¹ Ann Gray, 'Art Nation: Australian Landscape 1880-1920', in *Australia* (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2013), pp. 146-53 (p. 150).

⁹² Carter, *The Road to Botany Bay*, p. 158.

‘invention of the heroic pioneer, making a place out of nothing’ and creating ‘a place that speaks, a place with a history’ which will be retold across generations.⁹³ For fences, buildings and clearances become the markers that enable settlers to claim an historic link to the land. They have worked and developed it, unlike the Aborigines, and ‘the fact that the Aborigines did not employ recognisable agricultural practices was taken as evidence that the land was inefficiently used and therefore justifiably appropriated by those who could make “better” use of it’.⁹⁴ More fundamentally the Atholl farm, like similar homes and farms in works by Grenville and Scott discussed earlier, represents what Mary Louise Pratt describes as a ‘contact zone’, a place ‘where subjects previously separated by geography and history are co-present, the point at which their trajectories now intersect’ and where they ‘establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict’.⁹⁵ In Australia such sites are often created by different understandings of, and attitudes towards, the land.

It is Felim’s melodramatic decision to cross the frontier demarcated by the fence and to go down the road to the farm that sparks the major catastrophe in the novel, the burning of the settlement and the deaths of Atholl and many of his convict servants. Transgressing the established boundaries of property, the marginalized Felim, who has become almost a part of nature himself with his ‘scabby insect skin, stick limbs, and leaf veins down the inner side of thighs and forearms’ (p. 113), sets off to take his revenge on the colonial power that has oppressed him both in the Isle of Man, in England and in Australia. However, as in *Gould’s Book of Fish*, it is Aboriginal fire that is responsible for the destruction of the settlement as the Men attack the community which ‘imposed the lexicon of capitalist imperialism onto the Australian reality, and prepared the ground for the material transformation of the land’.⁹⁶ While Felim, still residually Eurocentric, misinterprets the motives of the Aborigines as being obedience to his will rather than anger with Atholl, their fires, almost as apocalyptic as those in Flanagan’s novel, destroy

⁹³ Carter, *The Road to Botany Bay*, pp. 246 & 155.

⁹⁴ Simon Ryan, p. 155.

⁹⁵ Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 2008), p. 8.

⁹⁶ Ratcliffe, p. 25.

both the buildings of the settlement and the animals which it houses as the natural and the native turn on the world of culture and private property.

After the fire the Aborigines leave and Felim is again alone in the forest where he finds and rescues the apparently resurrected Gabriel Dean, whom he believed he had killed at the novel's start. Dean, who had humiliated and mocked Felim on the boat so as to emphasize his position in the orderly convict hierarchy, has survived the fire but has 'with his cruel arrogance [...] entered his own chaos and been lost' (p. 144). In Dean we see another liminal figure, in many ways the counterpart of Felim, a man stranded between life and death, between settler and native. But where Felim has embraced the Aboriginal world, the maimed Dean, like the generality of colonizers, cannot adapt to it. He is dependent on Felim for his survival as, unable to comprehend the complex reality of the land seen up close, he becomes obsessed by the changing cloudscape which provides him with a form of escape. Felim takes Dean round 'a full circuit of the territory known to Men' (p. 152), to show him the world in which he, Felim, now belongs, but Dean rejects that world, it is a place of 'food which he could not stomach, [...] water he could not accept' (p. 155). While Felim has found a way of belonging in the land which draws on that of the Aborigines, Dean refuses to make the imaginative leap necessary to do so. He remains on the settler side of the border, only able to belong in a world that has been recreated in the likeness of his native England and where he can eat food to which he is accustomed. So when Felim eventually brings Dean back to the farm, to the site of settler civilization, and they find a partly cooked cow, Dean eats, 'ravenous for half-cooked flesh of a taste he knew', while Felim 'could never stomach such food again' (p. 164). By this point Felim seems to have become a more authentic Adam than Atholl, finding himself in a primal Paradise where 'birds with no name called. Scents never before smelt called. Greens not green and browns not brown, leaves hanging vertical from their twigs to cast no shade' (p. 166). However like Adam he is betrayed and expelled from his Eden when Dean, in a refusal of the traditional convict values of mateship, takes hold of him and imprisons him in the store room of the farm, which has survived the fire. In doing so Dean reaffirms his affiliation with the settlers and their wish to tame the strange, to order the disorderly, to enforce conformity, and to

confine those, like Felim (and of course Dawes, Halloran and Rooke before him), who see things differently and for whom ‘life will not be trapped in boxes’ (p. 200).

Felim’s return to captivity, with its echoes of the return of Ellen Roxburgh and Jack Chance in Patrick White’s *A Fringe of Leaves*, is portrayed as the triumph of British civilization over the uncivilized world of Australia. We see ‘a clothed man bringing in a naked savage. This is a picture which we know from as far into childhood as we can recall, is it not? A British picture’ (p. 166). But this picture is, like the British settlements I shall discuss later, a forgery, a false image of what is happening, an image made by the British for the British. While in captivity Felim writes a series of love-letters to Atholl’s widow which her quartermaster, Earnshaw, falsely tells her are ‘filled with viciousness and indecencies’ (p. 204), but which contain Felim’s reflections on what he has learned during his time both as a convict and with the Aborigines. Central to them is his recognition of the falsity of the settler civilization from which he has fled and his desire to return to the more natural world of the land, where he can be surrounded by ‘the beauty of things without meaning or use’ (p. 193), rather than remain trapped in a world that sees nature in purely utilitarian terms. He wants to take her with him so that she can free herself from the artificial life she is living and exchange it for ‘a new life freed from the bondage and enslavement to the empire’s ideals of territorial expansion, commercial reward, and a new England in the Antipodes’, but is unable to do so.⁹⁷ Eventually he manages to escape and return to the land. In doing so he, like Jack Chance, leaves behind his native white culture, whose order and civilization have driven him to madness, preferring to return to the land where he belongs, and potentially to reconnect with the Aboriginal culture which he has previously found hospitable.

Neither Mrs Atholl nor Earnshaw evince any sympathy for their departed captive, who has crossed the fence from the world of property into the world of nature, and now see him as doubly outcast, being not merely a convict but one ‘succoured by savages’ (p. 205). Instead, like settlers more generally, they see themselves as victims, in their case of both an escaped convict and the Aborigines with whom he has consorted.

⁹⁷ Paul Genoni, *Subverting the Empire: Explorers and Exploration in Australian Fiction* (Altona, Victoria: Common Ground, 2004), p. 224.

Their central concern is with ridding themselves of these oppressors so that they can continue to develop the property and exploit the country for personal gain. For them, the only solution to the problem of both convicts and Aborigines is the same imposition of state order that marks the ending of *That Deadman Dance*, this time enforced by military violence, the sending of ‘redcoats [...] to make an arrest’ and the establishment of ‘a small garrison in the district for the protection of British rights’ (p. 204). This is an order that can make no accommodation with those who choose other ways of living, whether Aborigine or convict. It sees the land as an exclusively white settler possession not to be shared or ceded, an attitude, Hall suggests, that still rules contemporary Australia.

Hall’s critique of white settlement is reinforced by his presentation of it not only as an alien and barbarous irruption onto the land but also as the source of a false and counterfeit civilization. Forgery is central to *The Second Bridegroom* as it was to *Gould’s Book of Fish*, and, like Billy Gould, Felim is a convicted forger and has been transported to a country which, he soon sees, is essentially a fake reproduction of England, containing:

a hamlet perched on the shore, an outpost of stone and shingles like any little English port (forgery), its church a smaller copy of the very church you were baptized in (forgery), the citizens on the street respectable in full skirts and frock coats (forgery). (p. 103)

Felim’s time with the Aborigines shows him the fraudulent nature of settler civilization with its attempt to impose order and discipline on the country, creating at Sydney a town that appears to be thriving, with ‘hansom cabs lined up outside solid buildings, gentlemen on horseback, ladies with umbrellas, and sailors unloading crates of cargo’ (p. 179), but whose ‘whole port – not yet fifty years old – had a worn-out look’ (p. 180). As Felim puts it in one of his letters to Mrs Atholl:

Your husband has had you in bondage to his cause of creating a counterfeit England by cutting down strange trees and digging out plants with no name. He

has had you in bondage to the comfort of being able to call this thing a cabbage, this thing a peapod; of fencing animals you can call a cow, a horse, and keeping them fenced in case they recognize freedom with less trouble than civilized man. (p. 194)

By challenging the authenticity of white Australia Hall ‘sets out to deconstruct the narratives of the imposition of the order and the benefits of empire which were central to the explorers’ journals’ and also challenges ‘the explorer’s right to name places based on insufficient knowledge’.⁹⁸ More fundamentally, he undermines the foundational narrative of settler Australia which rests on the concept that from the very beginning settlement was beneficial in that it brought order from chaos and turned a wilderness into a productive country. In doing so he also challenges the idea that the settler population authentically belongs on the land, suggesting that, when compared with Aboriginal ways of living on the land, their claim to belong is as false as the civilization they have sought to construct. Hall has said that he wants to show ‘that it is possible for the “invading people” – roughly speaking that’s the European people – to be deeply part of this country’.⁹⁹ However, his presentation of the falsity of early settlement, and its destructive impact on the environment, questions the extent and depth of their attachment to the land. It also again exposes the failure of imagination that seeks simply to reproduce the former home in a new country without regard for the local and the native.

However the concept of forgery plays a wider and more complex role in the novel, for Hall, like Flanagan, also applies it to the construction of Australian history. Towards the novel’s end, Felim writes that during his time with the Aborigines he ‘could go blank enough to be open to knowledge’ (p. 191) and that this openness to a different epistemology caused him to realize that ‘there can be no such thing as the discovery of a land’ (p. 191). As he asks, ‘what do discoverers do? They put names to landmarks unknown to them and not named by anybody they ever heard of. But do we imagine the Cape of Good Hope came into being just to be called that name?’ (pp. 191-

⁹⁸ Genoni, ‘The Post-colonial Explorer’, pp. 23 & 20.

⁹⁹ Braun-Bau, p. 99.

92). Rather than discovering new places the explorer ‘invents what he sees’ (p. 192), he sees something for the first time and gives it a name in order to create knowledge ‘where before this there was only untouched ignorance’ (p. 193). By dismissing exploration, discovery, naming and mapping as a form of fraudulent invention, Hall also challenges the idea that Australian history started with the European discovery of the country, or the first landing. His image of Cook’s arrival, where ‘you can watch the great man leap out – success makes him young and springy – wading ashore to print the sand with the first boot mark ever made here. Well, aren’t a hundred other eyes also watching? Don’t the ocean wash away the imprint?’ (p. 193), shows up the absurdity of the concept both of *terra nullius* and of territorial possession. Hall here essentially delegitimizes settler claims to the land and implicitly restores it to Aboriginal possession, a possession that can be shared with but not ceded to the British,

In Felim’s approach to exploration and discovery Hall exemplifies the spatial history promoted by Paul Carter, a history ‘that discovers and explores the lacuna left by imperial history’.¹⁰⁰ He also remembers what imperial history forgets, the prior existence and possession of Australian Aborigines who, to the makers and writers of imperial history, were ‘not physically invisible, but they were culturally so, for they eluded the cause and effect logic that made the workings of history plain to see’.¹⁰¹ By challenging the form of imperial history that sees the country as nothing but a ‘blank, awaiting colonial inscription’, Hall reinserts the Aborigines into Australian history and into Australian place-making.¹⁰² As Paul Genoni puts it, the novel is:

the journal of the explorer that colonial Australia never had; the explorer who tried to see the layered meanings beneath the surface of his new environment, and who struggled to understand the land as it existed beyond those features which could be ‘discovered’ or possessed in the cause of the empire.¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰ Carter, *The Road to Botany Bay*, p. xxiii.

¹⁰¹ Carter, *The Road to Botany Bay*, p. xx.

¹⁰² Simon Ryan, p. 11.

¹⁰³ Genoni, ‘The Post-colonial Explorer’, p. 26.

Hall uses Felim to confront the national narratives of settlement and belonging, to question the claim that it was the settlers who created the country, and in doing so to re-envision, and rewrite, the nation's history.

At the same time as he subverts the myths and stories of settler Australia, Hall also subverts the conventions of the convict novel and the expectations of its readers. *The Second Bridegroom* does not play to the ideas of the convict as victim of the brutal British rulers. Felim's suffering at the novel's start is at the hands of his convict mates. Moreover Atholl puts his capitalist desire to make money out of Felim's labour above his wish to be revenged for the killing of Gabriel Dean, saying to Felim 'you owe me fifteen shillings for this man. [...] Why should I waste another fourpence on powder and shot to be rid of you?' (pp. 6-7). When Felim has escaped and 'waded ahead alone, stepping up the sandy shore' (p. 9) in a parody of the landing of explorers and colonists, he soon loses his imaginary fear of 'the Master with his whip, felons slaving at the bloodhunt' (p. 30). Realizing that he is not a subject of great interest to his former companions he regains the agency he had lost as a prisoner and is empowered to make his own decisions and act as he chooses. There is no ambivalence in Hall's presentation of the land, which is shown as being sublimely beautiful except where the settlers have damaged it. Similarly the Aborigines are not figured as the threatening savages of white settler imagination but rather as independent beings with their own beliefs and culture. Only its melodramatic episodes, such as Felim's first sight of the Aborigines when he realizes that 'the black tree stumps behind me were not trees either, though they stood still as rooted things and old beyond the span of human generations. I had been trapped by weirds of a kind no book of travels ever described' (p. 31), places the novel firmly in the traditions both of the convict novel and of Australian literature more widely.

Hall's novel, written in 1991, prefigures much of the argument over the land, possession and belonging that followed from Mabo and Wik. It mounts a fundamental critique of the settler claim to own history and the land and its erasure of the Aboriginal contribution to both. It also unsettles the claim that there is 'an unmediated connection between the settlers and the land', a fantasy in which 'nobody else is involved, just

settlers and the natural landscape’, and in doing so displaces their sense of place and history.¹⁰⁴ Where other writers who raise these issues, such as Grenville, ultimately retreat into an essentially conservative mood, affording their readers the luxury of having their certainties troubled but not fundamentally upset, Hall provides a more thorough-going critique of settler claims to the land. He presents settlement as destroying and exploiting the ecology of the country, bringing a false idea of order and development to it, and justifying this by the future benefits that would accrue, since ‘any piracy, any theft, any evil would be made all right by the future: isn’t this the truth of our colonial philosophy’ (p. 17). In his presentation of Felim as the anti-colonist, the man scarred by his experiences of British rule across the globe, Hall condemns the way in which settlement destroys the ecology of a place so as to impose order and convert it into a European capitalist paradise. He looks for an alternative national narrative that takes a more respectful and sensitive approach to the land, one that is not built around white settler values, that does not seek to eliminate the Aborigines from land, history and nation.

However, at the end of the novel he seems to despair of achieving this. The Aborigines have vanished, Felim has disappeared, and Mrs Atholl prepares to repeat the pattern of violence and dispossession, calling for the Governor to ‘take *expeditious* action in the matter of establishing the Rule of Law to prevent and discourage mutiny in new districts such as ours’ (p. 213). Hall sees this as the result of a failure to find ways of sharing ownership of the land and a refusal to recognize Aboriginal legitimacy. The settler drive for exclusive possession inevitably leads to a fractured society in which those who contest the dominant ideology are effectively outlawed. To remedy this requires a fundamental change of attitude. Hall eschews easy answers such as the belief that reconciliation can be achieved without pain for the non-indigenous peoples in terms of addressing both their forged history and their illegitimate possession of the land. Rather he suggests that now, as in the past, reconciliation requires these issues to be

¹⁰⁴ Patrick Wolfe, ‘Islam, Europe and Indian Nationalism: Towards a Postcolonial Transnationalism’, in *Connected Worlds: History in Transnational Perspective*, ed. by Ann Curthoys and Marilyn Lake (Canberra: ANU E-Press, 2005), pp. 233-65 (p. 235).

addressed honestly and calmly, and with proper recognition of mutual rights and obligations.

Land and Nation

As I discussed earlier, the story of the settlement of the land is central to Anglo-Celtic Australians' sense of their identity. The image of the pioneer, sometimes with his family, travelling to new land, converting it from untamed wilderness, fending off Aboriginal incursions and establishing a successful farm is celebrated in fiction and art. It provides a story of redemption from the convict past, a redemption that is completed by the inheritance of the land by succeeding generations who continue to care for and improve it. Lawrence Buell, writing about what he calls 'place-attachment' in his 2005 book *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, makes the point that 'place consciousness and bonding involve not just orientation in space but temporal orientation also'.¹⁰⁵ Belonging and being at home in a place, in other words, are historical as well as spatial, they involve the past as well as the present and the future. This reflects how many settler Australians construct their relationship with the land, that it stems from the time they have worked on, improved and cared for the same physical space. This idealized image of the relationship with the land is deeply implicated in settler Australians' concept of place and belonging and in turn with their sense of stability and security. Moreover this image, in magnified form, underpins their view of their relationship to the country as a whole, to which they feel bonded both by physical possession and by historical inheritance. It is the foundational story on which the settlers base their claim of entitlement to the land and dispute Aboriginal claims of belonging

Both Flanagan and Hall contest this narrative, showing the settler impact on the land as being both violent and destructive of the country's ecology. Hall contrasts the untouched land, described by Felim in pre-lapsarian terms as 'the most secret place on earth. Perhaps no human foot has ever trodden here' (p. 26), with the degradation of the

¹⁰⁵ Lawrence Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), p. 72.

land by Atholl and his men, as a result of which ‘the natural aspect of the place was wiped out’ (p. 43). Similarly Flanagan stresses the way in which the colonists transform the natural world of Sarah Island into an urban hell. In their representation of the destructive nature of settler Australians’ interaction with the land, both Flanagan and Hall can be seen, in Laurie Hergenhan’s words, to ‘represent the current tendency to fit the issues raised by convict “beginnings” into broad and continuing cultural patterns’.¹⁰⁶ The destructive attitude to the land that began with the early colonists also marks modern Australia, with its commitment to damaging activities such as mining, its lack of concern for the impact of human activity on the climate, and its instrumental approach to the natural world. This is exemplified by the Abbott government’s proposal, later modified, to dump mining refuse close to the Great Barrier Reef and its plan to remove large areas of Tasmanian forest from UN heritage protection to allow it to be exploited for commercial gain.¹⁰⁷ Both writers see the attempt to transform the land into a simulacrum of Britain, to make it fit for European agriculture and profitable for its owners, as part of a wider settler attempt to re-create Britain in Australia and so to reaffirm the connections between the colony and the metropole. They argue that the attempt to reproduce British civilization and values in Australia is essentially a self-deceptive attempt to forge Australian culture and history. They also argue, more forcefully than Keneally and Grenville, that ‘the “original” of English culture, transplanted to Australia, does not retain the unspoiled quality of “original” but turns into false appearances’.¹⁰⁸ Flanagan and Hall suggest that the shibboleths of settler Australia, its commitment to the Anglo-Celtic past, its belief in the heroic story of settlement and belonging on the land, and its refusal to acknowledge the history and rights of the Aborigines, are continuing to block the country’s ability to engage

¹⁰⁶ Laurie Hergenhan, *Unnatural Lives: Studies in Australian Convict Fiction*, new edn (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1993), p. xvii.

¹⁰⁷ Jamie Smyth, ‘Culture Clash’, *Financial Times*, 9 September 2014, p. 11; Miranda Gibson, ‘Fight for Tasmanian forest protection is not over’, *The Drum*, 24 June 2014 <<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-06-24/gibson-fight-for-tasmanian-forest-protection-is-not-over/5546050>> [accessed 26 March 2015].

¹⁰⁸ Meinig, p. 312.

effectively with the issues that confront them, particularly how to repair relations with both the land and the Aboriginal peoples.

Like Keneally and White in the 1960s and 1970s, both writers see clear connections between the convict past and contemporary social ills, and suggest that these can only be cured by, as a first step, looking clearly at Australian history and recognizing its malign, as well as its benign, elements. However, both seem profoundly pessimistic about the capacity of Australians to do this. While Flanagan, in the earlier *Death of a River Guide*, provided the dying Aljaz with a glimpse of an alternative way of living in the land, as demonstrated by his Aboriginal ancestors, there is no similar optimism in *Gould's Book of Fish*, which Devlin-Glass has described as offering 'a process/resolution as black and challenging as the grimmest novels in existence'.¹⁰⁹ In this novel those Aborigines who escape massacre are degraded and corrupted and provide no positive model for living in the land, a land that has in any event been destroyed by the settlers in the attempt to transform it into a replica of England. By the novel's end that forged Australian society has collapsed in on itself, but Flanagan sees no end to the cycle of destruction and falsification, saying that 'they'll forget what happened here for a hundred years or more, then they'll reimagine it' (p. 401), turning disaster into triumph in the same way as Jorgensen and the Commandant re-imagined the story of Sarah Island. By presenting the Australian past in terms of Tasmanian Gothic Flanagan offers little hope of change and renewal.

To the extent that Flanagan sees a hope for the future, it lies, as I have suggested, with the settler population, which needs to learn from its past mistakes and to renew its relationship with the country it inhabits. It is too late for the Aboriginal population to help by demonstrating other ways of living on the land. However this approach repeats the trick used by Keneally, Grenville and Carey which erases the Aborigines from the land and promotes the settler perception of Australian identity and history. The dangers of this approach are clear in the constitutional preamble which Flanagan, like Carey,

¹⁰⁹ Devlin-Glass, p. 179.

drafted after the failed referendum on changing Australia to a republic. This speaks of how:

From the ancient painted gorges of the Fitzroy River to the ever-new rainbow of the Great Barrier Reef, from a Manly ferry at dusk to Uluru at dawn, from the many dreamings and the many nightmares, from the rainbow serpent to the Burma Railway to Kuta Beach, we strove to make a nation of free and generous people united by a belief in liberty and in truth.¹¹⁰

Later the ‘we’ here are defined as ‘the issue of every land and every past’, a formulation which pointedly denies any explicit role to the Aborigines as original inhabitants and dispossessed owners of Australia.¹¹¹ The preamble gives little other than a cursory nod to Aboriginal culture and history in a picture of Australia that could be drawn from a tourist board brochure. The history it invokes as having shaped the Australian nation is white history and the tragedies white tragedies. There is no mention here of massacres of Aborigines and no recognition of dispossession. Like the Carey preamble discussed earlier, Flanagan emphasizes the centrality of the Anglo-Celtic inheritance and the unitary country, and in doing so denies the multicultural present of Australia. In the same way, Flanagan’s lament for the destruction of Sarah Island in *Gould’s Book of Fish* provides no space for an Aboriginal contribution to achieving an alternative way of living in the land. Flanagan sees the Anglo-Celtic cultural hegemony, starting with the convict settlement, both as bearing responsibility for despoiling the land and at the same time as the only hope for restoring it. It is the white relationship with the land that is critical, in the same way as settler history is at the centre of Australian history, and there is little indication of the possibility of learning from other peoples and their experiences of living in the Australian environment.

Hall’s novel also reaches a bleak conclusion in which the cycle of violence and destruction seems destined to repeat itself unless and until the settler population tackles

¹¹⁰ James Bradley, ‘Six Preambles to a Republican Constitution of Australia’, Australian Republican Movement, 11 June 2003 <<http://tasmaniantimes.com/jurassic/preamble.html>> [accessed 13 December 2011].

¹¹¹ Bradley, ‘Six Preambles’.

the legacy of its past and admits that its narrative of colonial history is one-eyed. However, while Flanagan largely writes the Aborigines out of his story of the land and gives them no role in the Australian future, Hall identifies them as providing an alternative and legitimate model for living on the land, one that recognizes the underlying fragility of the Australian ecosystem and works to conserve it rather than to exploit it. His condemnation of early convict settlement for its destructiveness, and for its creation of a false civilization intended to reproduce England in Australia, is counterpointed with his representation of an Aboriginal society that is respectful of the natural environment. In Felim John he creates a figure who stands between the two attitudes to the land but is unable to bring them into alignment. His apparent madness and flight at the end of the book reflects his inability to act as a bridge between cultures and his fear of the inevitable triumph of a European approach to the land that he finds profoundly troubling.

However I believe that Hall's fiction can and should be read more positively, as:
 a poignant and disturbing vision of an Australia as it might have been, an Australia of lost opportunities, a utopian possibility that imagines a place capable of transforming a people rather than a site for ecological destruction wreaked by a population's failure of imagination.¹¹²

Hall calls for a renewal of the settler relationship with the land, one that is based on caring for rather than wantonly destroying the environment and that recognizes and takes action to secure the rights of the Aboriginal peoples to the land. Achieving such a future requires settler Australians to re-imagine their identity and history for the post-Bicentennial age. In doing so they need to move beyond the binary of either/or – either our land or theirs, our history or theirs, our nation or theirs – to envision a country where land is shared rather than exclusively possessed and where history is recognized as the multiple and complex story of many peoples rather than imposed as a unitary narrative of the past. As such Hall's work seems to me to be the only one of the convict novels I

¹¹² Bill Ashcroft, Frances Devlin-Glass and Lyn McCredden, *Intimate Horizons: The Post-colonial Sacred in Australian Literature* (Hindmarsh, South Australia: ATF Press, 2009), p. 305.

have studied that both recuperates the convict novel from its conservative role in endorsing the settler narrative of Australia and envisages an alternative future for the nation.

CONCLUSION

In Peter Carey's 1985 novel *Illywhacker*, Leah Goldstein says that she is 'sick to death of trying to decide what it meant to be Australian' and goes on to argue that 'there was no such thing as Australia or if there was it was like an improperly fixed photograph that was already fading'.¹ Many others have felt the same way, believing that the endless discussions and debates about Australian history and identity are both fruitless and a distraction from the more important issues of how Australia sees its future, and particularly its future relationship to other countries, most obviously the Asian-Pacific countries which are its neighbours. As long ago as 1981 Leonie Kramer was concerned that 'an insistence on the importance of "Australianness"' can lead to 'a severely limited view of the possibilities of Australian literature'.² However, the nature of Australian history and identity has continued to exercise a centripetal pull on the country's citizens and writers. The arguments between 'those settler Australians for whom *geography* was dominant, who wanted to become Australasians, part of the Asia-Pacific hemisphere, and those for whom *history*, and their British identity, dominated all else' started early and continue to this day.³ In recent years, I would suggest, it has been history that has been the dominant focus of fictional writings.

In this thesis I have considered the way in which a number of novels published broadly between 1988 and 2008 have explored a central aspect of the Australian past, the period of early settlement by transported convicts and their gaolers. I have examined how the legacy of early convictism has profoundly influenced the ways in which Anglo-Celtic Australians see themselves and their past, and how that influence has been mediated through fictional representations. I have argued that Marcus Clarke's foundational convict fiction, *For the Term of His Natural Life* (1874), has been critical in the construction of the myths and narratives that are central to settler Australian ideas

¹ Peter Carey, *Illywhacker* (London: Faber and Faber, 1986), p. 545.

² Leonie Kramer, 'Introduction', in *The Oxford History of Australian Literature*, ed. by Leonie Kramer (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1981), pp. 1-23 (p. 23).

³ Alison Broinowski, *The Yellow Lady: Australian Impressions of Asia* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 5.

of what it means to be Australian. I have also suggested that the concern with national origins, the desire to understand how the stories and myths arising from early colonial settlement have influenced contemporary attitudes and ideas, is particularly marked at times when the accepted narratives of Australian history and culture have been under pressure. This is exemplified by the literary turn to convict history both in the 1960s and 1970s and in the period between 1988 and 2008, when the traditional settler narrative of the Australian past as a progressive story of triumph over a hostile land and peoples was put under a powerful critical spotlight, particularly in relation to its treatment of Aboriginal Australians.

I have suggested that the History Wars, which were a dominant feature of public discourse in the 1990s and early 2000s, provided novelists with an opportunity to engage creatively with Australia's past, to reassess the traditional settler narratives of exile, victimhood and belonging, to question the gendered presentation of the nation's story, and to challenge the historical amnesia over important aspects of the country's history, in particular the story of relations between settlers and indigenous peoples. The debates about how to view Australia's history and identity provided space for writers to create a new narrative of the Australian past, one that would reinsert Aboriginal Australians into the Australian story and also reframe the relationship between the settler and the land. By turning to the early colonial period as a setting for their stories, and building them round the figure of the convict, the novelists I have considered also had the chance to refresh the concept of the convict novel and to rescue it from its traditionally conservative role in articulating the settler narrative.

I have also argued that for the most part these novelists, despite their best intentions, have been unable to establish a convincing vision of an alternative Australian narrative, to create a picture of an Australian past that both recognizes the tangled nature of its history and underpins a vision of an Australian future that is appropriate for a diverse and multicultural nation. This failure of vision is testament to the enduring power of the dominant Anglo-Celtic culture. While there is evidence of an increased willingness in that community to recognize that Australia's history was more complex

than has been traditionally allowed for, there is continuing resistance to more wide-ranging attempts both to rewrite and re-right the past and to acknowledge the continuities between the attitudes of early settlers and those of contemporary Anglo-Celtic Australians. This refusal has been particularly marked in relation to any assertion of Aboriginal land rights, which have been denied because of fears that they would undermine the rights of settler Australians to the land and throw their occupancy of the country into doubt. The thoroughgoing critiques of the Anglo-Celtic narrative of the nation that are needed to achieve the reconciliation between indigenous and settler Australians that many profess to want continue to be rejected as disturbing a settled past and undermining national achievement. Despite the attempts to reconceptualize the settler Australian narratives of the past, and to uncover the hidden histories that they conceal, the Australian identity that continues to surface in these novels is a modified version of the Australian Legend, the image of the heroic settler and bush-worker whose faults can be excused in the light of their achievements. Under the revisionist surface, the conservative nature of the convict novel has generally continued to assert itself.

While the Australian past and the nature of Australian identity have dominated the fictional landscape over recent years, it is an open question whether settler Australian introspection will continue to be central to Australian writing and criticism in the future. Two moves may help to unsettle this perspective on past and present. The first is the growing influence of Aboriginal literature, which looks at the nation's history and future in very different ways. The critical and commercial success of novels such as Kim Scott's *Benang* (1999) and *That Deadman Dance* (2010), and Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* (2008) and *The Swan Book* (2013), which have won or been short-listed for the Miles Franklin Award, suggests a growing interest in Aboriginal fiction.⁴ At the same time Aboriginal life writing, building on the success of Sally Morgan's *My Place* (1987), has met with 'widespread national and international acclaim' both because of its close connections to the oral tradition of Aboriginal story-telling and because it can

⁴ Kim Scott, *Benang: From the Heart* (Fremantle: Fremantle Press, 1999) and *That Deadman Dance* (Sydney: Picador, 2012); Alexis Wright, *Carpentaria* (London: Constable & Robinson, 2009) and *The Swan Book* (London: Constable, 2015).

‘close many of the gaps in Australia’s history’.⁵ Anita Heiss and Peter Minter trace the increasing recognition of Aboriginal literature to the political and social activism of the 1960s and 1970s, particularly the galvanizing effect of the 1988 Bicentenary, suggesting that Kath Walker’s decision to readopt her traditional name of Oodgeroo Noonuccal was ‘a defining moment in the evolution of contemporary Aboriginal literature, reflecting both an individual and a collective resurgence in the confidence of Aboriginal culture’.⁶ As a result, ‘the reach and impact of Aboriginal literature grew exponentially, attracting large mainstream audiences that were increasingly sympathetic to Aboriginal cultural and political demands’.⁷ This can be seen as fulfilling the prediction made by Adam Shoemaker in his 1989 book *Black Words, White Page*, published immediately after the Bicentennial celebrations, that black Australian writers would grow ‘in numbers, confidence and skill’ and would increasingly be found ‘expressing and moulding [...] Aboriginal nationalism’.⁸ As such, Aboriginal writers can be expected to continue both to challenge the traditional constructions of Australian nationalism and to disturb the settled state of the Anglo-Celtic majority population.

At the same time, while many Anglo-Celtic novelists remain concerned with aspects of the country’s past that can be seen as central to the concept of Australianness, such as those depicted in Richard Flanagan’s *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* (2013), there are welcome signs of a move away from a concern with Australia alone and towards a creative engagement with the transnational in novels such as Gail Jones’s *Sixty Lights* (2004) and *Five Bells* (2011), which look respectively at a young Australian woman's encounters with British and Indian society in the Victorian period and at the increasingly cosmopolitan nature of contemporary Australian society.⁹ Moreover the

⁵ Sally Morgan, *My Place* (Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1987); Belinda Wheeler, ‘Introduction: The Emerging Canon’, in *A Companion to Australian Aboriginal Literature*, ed. by Belinda Wheeler (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2013), pp. 1-13 (p. 7).

⁶ Anita Heiss and Peter Minter, ‘Aboriginal Literature’, in *The Literature of Australia*, ed. by Nicholas Jose (New York: Norton, 2009), pp. 7-13 (p. 12).

⁷ Heiss and Minter, p. 12.

⁸ Adam Shoemaker, *Black Words, White Page: Aboriginal Literature 1929-1988* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1989), pp. 4 & 15.

⁹ Richard Flanagan, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* (Sydney: Vintage, 2013); Gail Jones, *Sixty Lights* (London: Vintage, 2005) and *Five Bells* (London: Vintage, 2012).

increasing influence of migrants as political and cultural leaders may result in a greater focus on how to ensure that contemporary Australia is a liveable country for an increasingly diverse population. The growth of diasporic literatures in Australia, particularly Asian-Australian literatures, suggests that issues such as the relationship between migrant populations and Anglo-Celtic Australian culture may take a more prominent role in the future. Recently *Questions of Travel* (2012) by Michelle de Kretser, herself of Sri Lankan origin, has won its author both the Miles Franklin and the Prime Minister's Literary Awards for a novel that explores such concerns.¹⁰ There is clearly significant potential for a fuller fictional engagement with the issues of creating and sustaining a multicultural Australia drawing on the experiences of migrant communities. If this comes about then the archaeological excavation of early colonialism may become a niche specialism rather than a dominant theme of Australian literature and critical commentary, opening space for a wider engagement with the world beyond the country's shores.

If so, this will be welcomed by those who have been concerned with the dominance of the issues of the nation and history in Australian critical discussion over recent years, despite repeated calls for a different and more outward-looking approach. In 1994, Graeme Turner noted that while 'Australian cultural critics have been arguing long and persuasively that nationalism is no longer a plausible means of articulating a common identity for those living within the geo-political entity called Australia' there was no evidence of 'the "demise of nationalism" in Australia or anywhere else'.¹¹ Later in that decade, Gillian Whitlock was concerned that 'good readers, and good citizens, and good literary scholars, approaching Australian literary and cultural formations still present this nation and its subjects in isolation, or configure its relations elsewhere in terms of binary oppositions between home and away, the national and the cosmopolitan', and called for 'forms of insurgent scholarship which consider the

¹⁰ Michelle de Kretser, *Questions of Travel* (Crows Nest, New South Wales: Allen & Unwin, 2013).

¹¹ Graeme Turner, *Making it National: Nationalism and Australian Popular Culture* (St Leonards, New South Wales: Allen & Unwin, 1994), pp. 119-20 & 121.

national from an inter-cultural perspective'.¹² More recently Lars Jensen has argued for a challenge to 'a particularist reading of the nation's mental territory which has been established as *the* only generally acceptable reading of the nation', and has advocated the use of the range of multicultural narratives 'as a powerful critique of the received model of national evolution'.¹³ Similarly Graham Huggan has sought a critical approach that, while not abandoning the nation, engages with 'perspectives that move across and beyond it: perspectives that map the changing relations between nationalism and cosmopolitanism'.¹⁴ A turn away from the national and towards the transnational in fictional writings, together with a wider perspective on Australian issues encompassing ecological and environmental concerns, for example, may enable the broader critical discussion that these theorists have called for.

However, the effectiveness of these challenges to the Anglo-Celtic narratives of Australian history and identity remains uncertain. It is only relatively recently that Aboriginal literature has broken out of the marginalization that marked it for many years when anthologies and literary histories treated it as a literature separate from mainstream Australian literature.¹⁵ The recent national growth in interest in the work of Aboriginal authors could easily be reversed, while recent Government cuts in funding for Aboriginal support, and Prime Minister Tony Abbott's comments about Australia's history beginning with the 1788 white settlement, suggests a trend in parts of the white community to suppress Aboriginal voices.¹⁶ At the same time the growing paranoia

¹² Gillian Whitlock, 'Australian Literature: Points for Departure', *Australian Literary Studies*, 19 (1999-2000), 152-62 (pp. 153 & 161).

¹³ Lars Jensen, *Unsettling Australia: Readings in Australian Cultural History* (New Delhi: Atlantic, 2005), p. 28.

¹⁴ Graham Huggan, *Australian Literature: Postcolonialism, Racism, Transnationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 150.

¹⁵ Leonie Kramer's 1981 *Oxford History of Australian Literature* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1981) found no room for Aboriginal literature while Bruce Bennett and Jennifer Strauss's more inclusive *Oxford Literary History of Australia* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1988), despite integrating discussion of many Aboriginal writers into the main chapters, still had two chapters specifically devoted to Aboriginal writing.

¹⁶ Helen Davidson, 'Australia was "unsettled" until British came, says Abbott', *Guardian*, 5 July 2014, p. 20; Amy McQuire, 'Tony Abbott Says "Nothing But Bush in Australia Before White Settlement"', *New Matilda*, 14 November 2014 <<https://newmatilda.com/2014/11/14/tony-abbott-says-nothing-bush-australia-white-settlement>> [accessed 17 November 2014].

about the extent of Asian migration, combined with the frequently racist discourse about the threats of asylum-seekers and refugees to the integrity of Australia, may reduce interest in diasporic literature and help to drive the country back towards a renewed rejection of the foreign and the alien reminiscent of the 1890s.

More generally, fears of the impact of migration on Australian culture and increasing concerns over terrorism sparked in part by the country's involvement in wars in the Middle East have the potential to bring about a renewed bout of national introspection and a further revival of the dominant Anglo-Celtic culture. This may be exacerbated by the current resurgence of isolationism attributable to the desire both to protect Australians from the impact of the global financial collapse which started in 2008 and to maintain governmental denial of climate change. Any turn inward may lead to a reprise of the History Wars, perhaps in a more intensified form, and could close some of the openings to alternative views of the past that emerged at the end of the last century. If so, we can expect to see another clutch of fictions that use Australia's early colonial past to examine its troubled present and future, and the well-worn genre of convict fiction will come into its own again. The question then is whether such historical fictions in the future will be any more successful in challenging the dominant settler narrative than those that have been produced in the recent past.

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