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Grenville on the Frontier

FEATURES

In December last year, Malcolm Turnbull blasted the City of Fremantle for its bid to hold a Australia Day fireworks display and citizenship ceremony not on 26 January but two days later, in what the council promoted as a ‘culturally-inclusive alternative event.’ The council’s snub of the national celebration could not go unanswered. What, after all, is more culturally inclusive than Australia Day? Indignant, Turnbull threatened to revoke the council’s right to hold the ceremony. By politicizing the Citizenship Act, Freo council had sent the public an ‘anti-Australia Day message.’ Mayor Brad Pettitt saw off protests from local business groups (who let off their own fireworks) and the United Patriots Front (who went off at a rally), but at the eleventh hour bowed to government threats of prosecution. The alternative event went ahead—without fireworks or ceremony.

This is not the first time the date assigned for national self-congratulation has been called into question. Commemorating the arrival of the First Fleet in Sydney Cove and the onset of settler colonialism has long carried the suggestion of Anglo-Irish ascendancy. In 1938, celebrations were overshadowed by an Aboriginal Day of Mourning; in 1988, by Invasion Day commemorations; in 1992, by Survival Day concerts. In 2007, the Rudd government backflipped on its policy promise to change the date, starting an online conversation that swelled into the #changethedate movement behind Fremantle’s alternative event. In fact, questioning the ambiguous symbolism of 26 January is now part of the national ritual.

The brouhaha over ceremonial behavior in Freo unfolded during the 2016 broadcast of the SBS series First Contact, the reality TV show in which celebrity types confront their own ignorance of Aboriginal Australia. The show’s point of controversy was delivered by David Oldfield, the former Tony Abbott staffer and advisor to Pauline
Hanson. Oldfield played his part when he declared that Aboriginal culture should have died out with the Stone Age; that the Stolen Generation was in fact saved; and that the TV show itself—despite its casting of Oldfield as curmudgeon—was little more than ‘a propaganda exercise in shame and guilt.’

Oldfield struggled to prove the existence of a propaganda campaign, but amply demonstrated the difficulty Australians have long had seeing a downside to colonization. The idea that non-Indigenous Australians have benefited from colonization at the expense of Indigenous Australians continues to meet with resistance. Historian Ann Curthoys locates ‘the angry rejection of the idea that Australia has a racist past’ in ‘some deeply-held beliefs about white Australian historical experience.’ Non-Indigenous populations in Australia, Canada, Israel and the US see themselves as victims—of geopolitical forces abroad and elites at home—and so have little sympathy for the losers in the colonization race. The polarization of positive and negative views of Australian history obscures this point.

Australian popular historical mythology stresses struggle, courage, and survival, amidst pain, tragedy, and loss. There is a special charge associated with the status of victim in Australian historical consciousness, and it is notable how good non-Aboriginal Australians are at memorialising their own sufferings. Looked at more closely, the contest over the past is perhaps not between positive and negative versions, but between those which place white Australians as victims, struggling heroically against adversity, and those which place them as aggressors, bringing adversity upon others.

The prominence of the Aussie Battler in the national story has kept Indigenous Australia in the shade. ‘The native tragedy does not yet serve as the motif of dramatic, literary or artistic work of any consequence,’ Bill Stanner remarked back in 1939. ‘There are no epics on the last of the tribes. There are no national monuments to a vanishing people.’

Recent Australian literature has tried to fill this gap in the nation’s monuments. In Andrew McGahan’s White Earth (2004), Kate Grenville’s The Secret River (2005), Alexis Wright’s Carpentaria (2006), Alex Miller’s Landscape of Farewell (2007), Gail Jones’s Sorry (2007), Kim Scott’s That Deadman Dance (2011), and Lucy Treloar’s Salt Creek (2015) settler culture is viewed through the lens of the revisionist national history that emerged in the 1970s. Robert Clarke and Maggie Nolan have earmarked these novels ‘fictions of reconciliation’. Each addresses the reconciliation politics of the last several decades and the history wars sparked by the 1997 Stolen Generation report, often in scenes of frontier violence at odds with the preferred story of peaceful settlement.

In broader terms, these novels represent the latest or ‘cosmopolitan’ phase of frontier narratives—after convict and pioneer phases—which reconstruct the heroic narrative of settlement and the Gothic tropes used to configure it. Each phase can be distinguished according to the ideological needs of the period regarding the need to explain, justify or critically reflect on the progress of settler culture since the First Fleet.
From the start, the colonial experience of imprisonment in strange and hostile country suggested the Gothic, as if the monsters and malevolent spirits of traditional Gothic Romanticism had made their haunts in the primeval forests, black gorges, and melancholy gums of the Australian outback. The Gothic mode came to express not just the colonial experience of exile but the cultural mission of overcoming it. The convict story of oppression at the hands of a British Pharaoh received epic treatment in Marcus Clarke’s *For the Term of His Natural Life* (1874). Clarke’s melodramatic tale of transportation and wrongful imprisonment in Port Arthur narrated the national myth in Gothic mode. In his oft-cited remarks on the ‘weird melancholy’ of Australian scenery, Clarke conceived the project of self-determination in a mix of mythic and Gothic tropes. If settler Australians were ever to find an identity of their own they would have to learn to love exile on this alien land. Only then might ‘the poet of our desolation’ begin ‘to comprehend why free Esau loved his heritage of desert sand better than all the bountiful richness of Egypt’.

The mythic structure of exile and the victimological narrative it sustains is the common thread of convict and pioneer legends. If the convict story of early Australian Gothic is fondly recalled today it is because of our distance from it. The stigma of the convict ‘stain’ was still fresh in the minds of settlers when it was replaced by the pioneer legend in the national psyche. Henry Lawson’s editor at *The Bulletin*, A.G. Stephens, denounced the ‘Englishman Marcus Clarke’ in a bid to accelerate the drive to cultural independence.

Despite the democratic bearing of the pioneer legend, however, the Bulletin School song in praise of itinerant rural workers was only for the ears white Australian men. The sufferings of white men dominate the foreground, a struggle with an empty land—not its dispossessed inhabitants—that justifies sovereignty over it. Lawson’s ‘The Drover’s Wife’ made it clear that the land was no place for a woman; and his eponymous Bush Undertaker disinters Aboriginal remains before consecrating Christian ones. Lawson’s stories, once praised for their gritty realism, are now hailed as Gothic vehicles of frontier mythology that justify the sovereignty of settler culture. The history of Aboriginal dispossession sinks from view only to reemerge as ghostly traces in a timeless landscape.

It took an Englishman, ironically enough, to channel the spirit of place in Australian writing outside the national myth. In *Kangaroo* (1923), D.H. Lawrence responded to the mystical sense of a presence in the Australian bush. Drafted on a three-month visit in 1922, Lawrence’s novel of ideas frets over the decay of industrial civilization, but the writhing of settler anxiety can be seen through the prism of his Eurocentric concerns.

The vast town of Sydney didn’t seem to be real, it seemed to be sprinkled on the surface of a darkness into which it never penetrated… the low coffee brown cliffs looked as silent and as aboriginal as if white men had never come.

The roots of settler culture were shallow. Richard Somers’ encounter with the ‘phantom-like’ spirit or ‘presence’ in ‘the hollow distances of the bush,’ with its ‘weird,
white dead trees,’ carried the heretical suggestion of intrusion on ancient lands. The white man’s presence in the bush, overseen by ‘a terrible ageless watchfulness,’ trespasses on sacred ground—in ignorance and with fatal consequence, as in ancient myth.

Patrick White resumed Lawrence’s Spenglerian theme. *Voss*, his 1957 epic, shares with *Kangaroo* a utopian concern for recovering an organic spirit of place imperiled by the mechanized relations of modernity. *Voss* explores the Gothic splendors of the Australian spirit as a region accessible only to the pioneer hero shriven of his materialist ambitions. The frontier in *Voss* is less historical or geographical than it is metaphysical. Its scenes of first contact have been criticized for spiritualizing Aboriginal culture rather than envisaging its role in a cosmopolitan context. In the same year that Simon During consigned the novel and its patrician author to the racist attitudes of the colonial past, the mythic modernism of *Voss* was reprised by David Malouf, the novel’s librettist, in *The Conversations at Curlow Creek* (1996). In *Voss*, as in the modernist Aboriginalism of Arthur Boyd, Sydney Nolan, and Albert Tucker, Aboriginal Australia reemerges as a kind of national unconscious which must be claimed and included in the broader narrative of nationhood.

It was Peter Weir’s 1975 adaptation of Joan Lindsay’s *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1967) that put the term Australian Gothic into circulation amongst film critics. Coined in the late 1980s, the term itself exemplifies the cosmopolitan shift in Australian writing towards a revisionist account of settlement. In the years between Lindsay’s novel and Weir’s film, public support for Aboriginal people gathered momentum with the Wave Hill strikes and the 1967 Constitutional Referendum. Weir’s film carried the critical suggestion (in a way Lindsay’s novel did not) that white Australian experience, formed in encounters with an alien landscape, concealed historical guilt at Aboriginal dispossession. The mystical intuitions of Lawrence and White in the bush begin to resolve into the lineaments of a revisionist history.

The new history comes to the fore in the reconciliation novels of the last two decades. *The Secret River* (2005), recently adapted for stage and small screen, is the best known and most controversial of these novels. Attacked from left and right, its popularity derives from the middle-of-the-road politics that saw hundreds of thousands of ordinary Australians, Grenville among them, join the Reconciliation Walks in the year 2000. The book’s title refers to a remark from Stanner’s 1968 Boyer Lectures on ‘the secret river of blood’ that flows through Australia’s history. Grenville pivots the tropes of Australian Gothic to chart the secret river as it runs through a national story dominated by the pioneer legend, which faces away from the violent history of Aboriginal dispossession towards the economic blessing and social harmony provided by settlement. While it lacks the subtlety, complexity, and penetration of Miller’s *Landscape*, a many-sided exploration of the generational effects of massacre that enacts a work of mourning, *The Secret River* telescopes the psychic history of white Australia—as carriers of European culture, on the one hand, and displacers of Aboriginal culture, on the other hand—from the standpoint of revisionist history. The violence inked out of frontier history is written back into it with an eye to the damaging legacy of colonialism on the present.
The frontier is not a stable historical location but an example of the ‘contact zone’ of colonial encounters, as Mary Louise Pratt calls it, ‘where different cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination.’ Frontier mythology refers to the narrative one culture develops to dominate the other. In Australia’s case, bush and pioneer mythologies assimilated the dominated culture to the ‘uninhabited’ land itself. Critical appropriations of frontier mythology thus challenge the long held legal fiction of *terra nullius*.

The cosmopolitan standpoint from which Grenville views the contact zone of frontier Sydney inflects her focal characters, Will and Sal Thornhill, with an uncommon sensitivity to the significance of their encounters with local Aboriginals. The success of the novel depends in part on how we read this ‘double perspective,’ as Sue Kossew calls it, ‘that of the contemporary author casting a critical eye on the proceedings and that of its protagonist, William Thornhill, bound in his own historical time-frame and yet sensitive to many of the repercussions of his actions.’

Thornhill’s sensitivity is closer to the author’s than to the victimized settler mentality Curthoys describes. So much is clear from Grenville’s 2006 memoir *Searching for the Secret River*, which relates how the biography she was writing of her pioneering ancestor changed course during the Harbour Bridge Reconciliation Walk. As it dawned on Grenville that her ancestor probably took part in the violent dispossession of the Dharug on the Hawkesbury 200 years earlier, the remote symbolism of reconciliation suddenly struck home. The stroll to reconciliation ‘suddenly seemed all too easy’ without the hard crossing ‘through the deep water of our history’.

Reconciliation was never going to end in the ten-year plan of the Hawke government. *The Secret River* thus ends where it begins, with silhouettes of the haunted psychic history of the white settler. On his first night under foreign skies, the convict Thornhill is jolted by the arrival of an Aboriginal man at the door of his bark hut. Shaking his spear, the man melts back into the darkness and silence of the forest; but the forest, Thornhill frets, ‘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’. Thornhill is determined to find the security promised by land ownership denied him in Georgian England, and after plying his trade as a waterman on Sydney Harbour, he follows the example of Thomas Blackwood and claims a small plot by the Hawkesbury.

The hard-fought success of the Thornhills is overshadowed by reports in the Sydney *Gazette* of Aboriginal raids on white farmers. In Grenville’s picture, the settlers’ desire for the security promised by land and property, aggravated by the economic insecurity that saw them transported in the first place, is so strong as to motivate organized killings on raiding tribesmen. The climaxing massacre scene is based on eyewitness accounts of the Waterloo Creek killings of 1838. We take our leave of Will Thornhill years after the massacre, anxiously scanning the cliff tops for signs of trouble. The Thornhills can never rest securely on their property, despite replacing the frail bark hut, that symbol of pioneer virtue, with the fortress-like Cobham Hall and its enclosed, English-styled garden. The implication is clear. Australia’s settler culture can never rest at ease with itself.
Grenville’s motivation for writing a historical novel of frontier Sydney — laid out at length in a memoir, on a website, and in numerous interviews — has opened her to criticism on several fronts. Her claim that the novelist’s imagination improves on the work of historians—that empathy provides privileged access to the historical record—was met strongly by historians. Grenville staked her claim in the middle of the history wars; she even hinted that her novel would end them. At the time, John Howard used the Australia Day address to the nation to call for the end of revisionism and the return of the pioneer legend to the nation’s classrooms. In this politically charged context, the success of The Secret River with Australian audiences seemed to jeopardize the distinction between history and fiction with a mixture of both, posing as ‘a sweet alternative to the real thing,’ as Mark McKenna fretted in The Australian.

The historians were rattled not by Grenville’s historical novel but her ostensible claim that it could replace historical writing. Fearing The Secret River’s many fans were taken in by the claim, McKenna sharpened the distinction between history and fiction. Inga Clendinnen followed suit in her Quarterly Essay, casting doubt on art’s sovereign claim to a larger or imaginative truth. Reading frontier history through the lens of reconciliation policy yields incomprehension not understanding, a rejection of colonial heritage against the cosmopolitan benchmarks of the present. Contra Grenville, empathy does not prise open the past; it locks us in the present.

The idea that frontier conflict might have been avoided had open and honest dialogue reigned on the frontier, floated by Grenville in her ABC interview with Ramona Koval, was a case in point; a textbook case, for Hirst, of projecting contemporary standards of social inclusion onto the past. ‘Actually,’ he notes drily, ‘if Aborigines had earlier understood the settlers’ intentions there would have been more violence and sooner.’ The vision of settlement without violence is, in other words, a liberal fantasy. For Jenny Stewart, The Secret River thus serves as a ‘reverse midrash,’ in which the guilt-wracked heirs of settler culture search the archives for signs that delegitize white sovereignty.

The historians landed some telling blows on Grenville, who responded by qualifying her claims to the point of yielding them altogether. If The Secret River is not to become another casualty of the history wars, then it must look beyond the archive for a defense of its art.

By presenting Thornhill’s pioneer story as exemplary, Grenville aspired to write a national epic, an origin story that narrates the egalitarian achievements of the first settlers without forgetting their terrible costs. Her tools are literary not forensic; rhetorical not evidentiary. The Secret River is, accordingly, best read in terms other than those Grenville has framed for it. The historical novel in the realist mode will never escape the sort of criticism pointed at Grenville: departing from the historical record and projecting the present onto the past. The needs of plot, drama, character and so on demand such departures; for if the historian is tied to the archive, the novelist is bound by the audience. The novelist’s distortions of the historical are necessary not just for artistic purposes, however, as fidelity to the historical record was never the exclusive goal in the first place. Rather than read The Secret River as ‘true history’ by cordonning off its departures from the historical record (or, as Clendinnen advised, by returning it to
the fiction section), we might instead think of it as a critical appropriation of frontier mythology.

The genre that best captures this critical appropriation of the national myth is the historical romance. The romance form is released from the demands of historical accuracy implied by realism. The so-called liberties the novelist takes with the historical record no longer need excusing, for they mark the points where a historical defense of progress is mounted. The old criticism of the historical novel as costume drama does not apply to historical romance, which restores the boundaries—between past and present; fictional and historical—that Grenville’s empathy tries to overlap.

By restoring these boundaries we can see how *The Secret River* uses the distance provided by an imagined past to address the social issues of the present, namely Aboriginal recognition. In this reimagined version of frontier life, the convict settler Thornhill is infused with a wider consciousness of his actions than any settler could possibly have had. With their eyes on Grenville’s exorbitant methodological claims, historians dismiss this infusion as mere projection: the cosmopolite in pioneer dress. But if the narrative goal is not the past but its inheritance in the present, including its mythologized presence in current discourse, then the charge of anachronism doesn’t stick.

Grenville’s most important tool lies not in the archive or even in her empathy but in myth. *The Secret River* does not attack the pioneer legend as racist and sexist ideology (after feminist and postcolonial scholarship), but rewrites it, updating the national myth to bring it into line with the cosmopolitan orientation of the present. The narcissism of settler subjectivity is exploded in a critical retelling of the national myth, providing orientation in the present with an expanded sense of national belonging. The progressive achievements of social inclusion that have characterised the political scene since the Whitlam era are thereby included in the national story.

The novel’s denouement has been criticised as overcooked: an allegory of original sin that makes Thornhill resemble the waiting figure in Franz Kafka’s ‘Before the Law.’ Walled in by prosperity, overcome by emptiness, he scans the cliffs above Cobhall Hall for returning tribal elders, as if to learn the secret of belonging his property ownership can never grant him:

> He could not say why he had to go on sitting here […] Even after the cliffs had reached the moment at sunset where they blazed gold, even after the dusk left them glowing secretively with an after-light that seemed to come from inside the rocks themselves: even then he sat on, watching, into the dark.

The figure of Thornhill’s guilt may be overdrawn, but it remains consistent with a critical appropriation of frontier mythology. If the key to Kafka’s parable may not exist at all, Grenville places the key to Thornhill’s in the hands of her contemporaries. His penitential waiting points to a utopian future, but also to the cosmopolitanism of the
present, to a culture robust enough to accept—not wallow in—the sins of its parent culture. Similarly, the unsettling of the narcissism and racism of the settler mentality is pointed not at the distant past but at the Hansonism of the Howard years and its return in the era of Turnbull and Trump. It is meant as a contribution to the politics of recognition, not the tyranny of guilt.

The liberal idealism of The Secret River, attacked on the right as guilt politics and on the left as white-washing, is typified by Thornhill’s abortive attempts at dialogue with native tribesmen. Thornhill sees similarities between Aboriginal and Christian ceremony; Aboriginal nomadism and Aristocratic idleness; etc. He reads the scars on the chests of Dharug men as ‘a language of skin’ and compares their ceremonial songs to the gilt-edged books in the Governor’s library. Crucially, he realises nomadism does not mean absence of land tenure, for the Dharug plant daisies and eat the roots. He conceals this guilty knowledge of rudimentary Aboriginal agriculture when he uproots daisy plants and resews corn seed. The settler’s central claim to cultural superiority and political sovereignty—agriculture—is exposed as the ideological work of frontier mythology.

Thornhill’s consciousness of Aboriginal culture is infused with post-Mabo sensitivities, to be sure; but there is more at work here than the liberal illusion ‘that the conquest could have been done nicely,’ in Hirst’s scathing dismissal. Such representations posit a cultural origin, as it were, for the sort of intercultural understanding that is a feature of cosmopolitan democracy. Whether such an origin is invented or not hardly matters. What matters is that we hold it to be true, especially as the federal government tampers with citizenship laws in search of those elusive ‘Australian values’. While we know Thornhill’s stuttering attempts at dialogue with the Dharug will fail, we also know they will, in the long run, bear fruit, as they represent the progressive tendencies in settler culture.

When Sal Thornhill discovers the abandoned Aboriginal camp after the massacre, she experiences a similar moment of recognition as she notices the signs of domestic life scattered about the camp. The scene has been faulted by left critics for reducing the humanity of Aboriginal culture to those of its aspects that most resemble settler culture, but it nonetheless models an intercultural understanding that has to start somewhere. Sal’s exclamation—‘you never said... they was here’—echoes Henry’s Reynolds question on behalf of the generation raised on the idealised version of Australian history: why weren’t we told?

For right critics, Grenville’s Aborigines are noble savages and her convict settlers ignoble ones. The sympathetic portrayal of the Dharug as peaceful nomads living in harmony with the land is indeed sentimental but defensible in the context of a critical appropriation of the frontier myth. The Sydney Gazette reports of tribal atrocities are cast in a skeptical light, with the implication that the colonial newspaper incited settlers to revenge attacks. Here is an example not of Grenville’s faithful use of the archive but her willingness to question it. Historical documents are not the medium of unvarnished truth. As the legal fiction of terra nullius indicates, they are, often enough, vehicles of the national myth. The settlers are not demonized as a group in any case but contrasted
according to their attitudes to the Dharug. Thomas Blackwood’s progressive attitude to the land and the local tribes is contrasted with Smasher Sullivan’s. Blackwood lives openly with an Aboriginal woman whose medicinal knowledge cures Sal’s infection; Sullivan keeps an Aboriginal sex slave and mistreats the land. While Blackwood can’t prevent the massacre, his progressive attitude aligns pioneer virtues with the cosmopolitanism of the present.

*The Secret River* does not aim to magically undo conquest but to reconcile the national identity embodied in frontier mythology with the Reconciliation movement in national politics. Retelling the story of who we are in relation to our history, it reevaluates the frontier myth in the light of the destructive effects of colonization. In a bid to break the standoff between heroic and black armband history, Clendinnen posed questions in her Boyer Lectures to which *The Secret River* can be read as a response.

Why deny the courage of those early settlers? Why deny their cruelty when sheep were taken or a shepherd speared? Why deny the horror when they took their guns and hunted down black men, women and children? What most surely unites Aborigines now is their shared historical experience at the hands of whites, and that is a history that we, who are their fellow citizens, know too little about.

These questions are addressed not in a historical novel approximating the historical record but in a historical frontier romance exposing the uncritical transmission of the frontier myth of peaceful settlement. The goal is not ‘true history’ but an understanding of Australian identity in relation to the past, one which has, until recently, ignored the secret river of blood for the consolations of the pioneer legend. Read as romance not realism, *The Secret River* complements the work of historians like Clendinnen. Novelist and historian alike emphasize the tragic miscommunication between frontier settlers and Indigenous peoples. Both take pride in the generational achievement of Australia’s cosmopolitan civic culture, of the settlers who, ‘despite their loneliness and fear, despite their cruelties, built a society where centuries-old shackles of class were struck off in a generation.’ Both are mindful of the fact that this egalitarian achievement was initially a white man’s club that took many years to include peoples from different cultures, colors and creeds. And both refuse to ignore the ‘scar on the face of the country, a birthstain of injustice and exclusion directed against that people who could so easily provide the core of our sense of ourselves as a nation, but who remain on the fringes of the land they once possessed.’

The progressive tendency implied by the Thornhills’ various acts of intercultural understanding, which is inclusive of aspects of indigenous knowledge, is measured by the limited extent to which they shed the alien consciousness of entrapment typical of early Australian Gothic. The quest for identity in Australian literature returns to a persistent sense of alienation from the land and its first inhabitants. Thornhill learns to see the Aboriginals as more than just fauna, as separate from the land and with a claim to it. And he learns to see Australian fauna, too, as more than just freaks of nature. At first sight, the kangaroo, like the country and its native inhabitants, struck European observers as grotesque, uncanny, misshapen; in a word, Gothic. ‘But Thornhill was
discovering that if a man looked at a kangaroo for long enough, it was the idea of a sheep that became peculiar.’ Like Clarke’s poet of desolation, he begins to understand why Esau loved the desert sands above the richness of Egypt.

References
Mark McKenna, ‘Comfort History,’ Weekend Australian (March 18, 2006).
Laveau-Harvie calls the Rockies “practically a character in the book.” The other prominent “erratic,” then, is the Okotoks Erratic, a huge boulder deposited by glacial flow thousands of years ago which cracked and “fell in on itself,” and which “dominates the landscape” near her parents’ ranch house. The story is bookended by the geographical and spiritual origins of this fissured rock. We’re absolutely thrilled to share the news of two new staff appointments at the Sydney Review of Books. From 1 July Andrew Brooks and Alice Desmond will start working with our team at the Writing and Society Research Centre at Western Sydney University. Week in Review. Published on 05.11.15 in.