

## Towards Decolonising Australia

John McLaren

It is a commonplace that former colonies remain tied to the imperial centre by their inherited institutions. Culturally, they remain tied both by language and by the forms in which their cultures express themselves. The form of the novel remains tied to its origin in the early stage of imperialism, when the domestic freedom of the individual was purchased by subjugation of the peoples of empire - workers and peasants at home, slaves in the plantation colonies, whole peoples in the newly subject states, indigenes and convicts in the settler colonies. Even in independent postcolonial states, the novel continues to confine possibility within the same colonial and capitalist hierarchies of freedom and order. In his work, The Great Indian Novel, Shashi Tharoor has broken from this pattern by rewriting modern Indian history as a reprise of the Mahabharata. This paper will examine three options used by settler Australian novelists to escape the dominance of metropolitan order. The family chronicle takes possession of the colonial place but can only reproduce the imperial patterns within the new colonial space. The novel of migration frees its characters from this dominance but jeopardizes their possession of space. Finally, the novel of resistance reclaims its space by locating the place in the past. These forms will be examined in the work of Miles Franklin, Frank Hardy, Adib Khan, Janet Turner Hospital, Liam Davison and Rodney Hall. Finally, the paper will suggest that Australia can become postcolonial only by

coming to terms with the rewriting of national history from the perspective of the Aboriginal peoples whose displacement and marginalization provided the conditions for colonialism.

Although we may agree that nationalism is a nineteenth century invention, and that national traditions are based on mythological histories, nations are not free to adopt any mythology they choose. The two great Indian epics, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, are not restricted in their provenance to India. They are deeply embedded in the folklore of Indonesia and Sri Lanka, and remain current in Fiji, where such writers as Subramana and Satendra Nandan have used them both as a touchstone of Indianess and a barrier to be transcended. Siva can no longer be returned to her home and ritually cleansed; she must learn to live as a native in her new homeland. But in India itself the epics provide a common basis for a national identity, a basis that Tharoor has exploited to satirize the failings of contemporary leaders and to suggest ideals that may offer guidance in an earthly future if they are able to turn their gaze from both the material prizes of this life and the spiritual promises of the next. Similarly, the United States has been able to use as a measure and a promise of its national history the foundation myths of western society. The quest epics of the Odyssey and the book of Exodus explain and justify its settlement, the battle myths of the Iliad and Paradise Lost provided exhortation and comfort for the wars it has engaged in during the twentieth century. Yet, although these myths may comfort individuals, the attempt to adapt them as national myths in Australia has generally failed.

The quest myths, with their image of the promised land, proved difficult to localise in colonies that were founded on convictism and expanded into, rather than

away from, deserts. Like the explorer Thomas Mitchell, the novelist Henry Kingsley attempted to paint the land as “A new heaven and a new earth”, but this vision was destroyed both by reality and by the sardonic humour of the settlers themselves, represented in the writing of Henry Lawson and his contemporaries.<sup>1</sup> The Aborigines were more commonly perceived as miserable or brutish than as noble savages, and thus the wars of settlement did not achieve the glamour of the American frontier wars. In history, Ned Kelly, and in fiction Rolf Boldrewood attempted to supply the lack of a noble enemy by glorifying the bushrangers, but their attempts remain ambiguous.

While myths proved difficult to translate, forms did not. The two most common forms of Australian fiction were the yarn, which became extended into the discontinuous narrative, and the family saga, which of course is also known in India through work like Vikram Seth’s A Suitable Boy, as well as Salman Rushdie’s novels. The discontinuous narrative became a particularly important form for the expression of the fragmentary, disconnected experiences of migrants who failed to fulfil their expectations of mastering their new landscape. This failure similarly became central to the family saga in Australia, but behind it lies the paradox of the frontier. This paradox has been identified in American fiction by Leslie A. Fiedler, who recognizes that the frontiersman who escapes a corrupt civilization at the same time by his work tames the wilderness and so brings it into the domain of civilization. In the same way, Frederick Jackson Turner’s ideal of a democracy nurtured in the freedom not only fails when the frontier closes, but is fatally flawed

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<sup>1</sup> See Paul Carter, The Road to Botany Bay, Faber, London and Boston, 1987, pp. 99-135; *ibid.*, Living in a New Country, Faber, London, 1992, p. 87; John McLaren, Australian Literature: an historical introduction, Longman Cheshire, Melbourne, 1989, pp. 35-6, 39-41.

by the dependence of the frontier on the capitalist centres from which the pioneers flee.<sup>2</sup> The form of the family saga is shaped by historical continuity, and so emphasizes this dependence. The alternatives it offers are the replanting of the old civilization or the defeat of the family in the new land.

Although we might argue that the family saga goes back to the Oresteian trilogy and the blood-soaked tales of Thebes, in its modern form its origins are synchronous with those of the bourgeois state. Taking a hint from Stephen Knight's discussion of Tennyson's Arthurian legends, we might say that the form gives shape to the worries of a bourgeois society where the sites of paid work have been separated from the domestic, and the concerns of fidelity, property and inheritance become a matter of intrigue and negotiation rather than of physical force and state power.<sup>3</sup> When the objects of these concerns are translated into new lands, the saga becomes a form of the quest narrative. The hero, needing to maintain or establish his family, voyages to the colony, where his hopes and worries come to be projected on the land, that simultaneously removes the man and threatens the woman and the home that he first establishes and then abandons in search of further support or fortune. Kay Iseman argues that this construction is the product of the male insecurity, which sees the land as the woman threatening his security and identity.<sup>4</sup> However, the land functions similarly in the work of Barbara Baynton and Henry Lawson, as well as in the family sagas of Henry

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<sup>2</sup> Leslie A. Fiedler, Love and Death in the American Novel, Cape, London, 1967 [1960]; Henry Nash Smith, 'The Myth of the Garden and Turner's Frontier Thesis', in James C. Work (ed.), Prose & Poetry of the American West, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln and London, 1990, pp. 524-36.

<sup>3</sup> See Stephen Knight, Arthurian Literature and Society, Macmillan, London, 1983, pp. 160-63.

<sup>4</sup> Kay Iseman, Women and the Bush.

Handel Richardson and Miles Franklin, suggesting that its construction as enemy is the product of material rather than merely mental experience.

Typically, the family saga in Australia starts with the settlement of the land, and continues through the generations that either make it their home or are driven from it. It is thus inextricably involved in imperial history, originating in the home country and frequently returning there to finish. Unlike an American saga like The Immigrants, which emphasizes making of a new world, hiding its continuing dependence on the old world, the Australian saga is about transplanting the culture of the home country. In historical terms, Don Watson explains this in the desire of those who have been dispossessed to reproduce the known society in which they in turn will be the masters. This model appears as early as Henry Kingsley's The Recollections of Geoffry Hamlyn, where the main characters seek in Australia the wealth that will enable them to restore their fortunes at home. With variations, this model lies behind Henry Handel Richardson's The Fortunes of Richard Mahony and Martin Boyd's sagas of the Langtons and of Lucinda Brayford. In Richardson's work the land defeats Mahony's ambitions by first granting him and then taking away a fortune while at the same time alienating him from both his past and his present. In Boyd's novels, the first generation transplants a model of civilization that they eventually bring back to the home country, only to find that the source has itself become corrupted. In the sagas where the action remains in Australia, the first generation is either corrupted or destroyed, while later generations become absorbed in civilization and fail to maintain the alternative ideals planted by their forerunners. In Miles Franklin's All That Swagger, old Danny established his rural kingdom but loses his family. Brian Penton, in the

trilogy beginning with The Landtakers, shows the innocent Derek Cabell corrupted by the land as he gains the vigour needed to tame it to his will. The later volumes show this vigour dissipated in later generations as it is subjected to the structures of urban society and wider political conflict.<sup>5</sup> More recently, Patrick White revived the genre in his The Tree of Man, yet while this novel contains all the elements of the saga it is concentrated within the lifespan of one man, who survives the conversion of the forest into his farm and then the absorption of the farm in the city, while his daughter declines into urban gentility and sterility and his son into criminality and death. Stan Parker, the questing hero, achieves his goal only in an ambiguous glimpse God granted to him just before his death. In his later work, White concentrates rather on this quest for spirituality than on the family elements of the saga. The exception is, of course, The Twyborn Affair, where the family saga is the past that the central character, Eadie/Eddie Twyborn, spends his life in a quest to escape.

The bomb that ends Eadie's life at the close of The Twyborn Affair can be read as the death of both the hopes of regeneration that the old world had invested in the new and of the illusions of true culture in which the new world had decked the old. Although Eadie/Eddie's change of identity and gender have enabled him to escape the restrictions of any particular society, and he has found a measure of satisfaction in each, ultimately his hopes in each are frustrated. The novel then can be taken as expressing White's disillusion with the possibilities of any modern civilization, and therefore as a valediction to the whole enterprise of imperialism

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<sup>5</sup> Only the first two novels of the series - The Landtakers (1934) and The Inheritors (1936) - have been published. For the third, see Patrick Buckridge, The Scandalous Penton: a biography of Brian Penton, UQP, St Lucia, 1994, pp. 196-98. Although this third volume takes the characters back to England, Buckridge notes that its framework remains firmly based on the experience of Australia.

that the quest form of the family saga at once celebrates and criticizes. Yet several recent novels demonstrate that, if the family saga is dead, the quest novel retains its potency as a means of escaping from imperial origins to a postcolonial future.

The link between the family saga and imperial history ties it to realist narrative in which the story of the family becomes a metonym for the process of settlement. Some recent novels, however, have presented the experience of settlement in mythical terms that, by escaping realism, also escape from the frontier trap of merely reproducing the culture of the home country. This is despite the fact that their mythology, necessarily, is itself European in its origin.

Rodney Hall, in his political fables Just Relations and Kisses of the Enemy, seeks to escape from realism into myths of nature, in the form of rainforests growing and whales singing, but the historical form of his narratives defeats him. The myths he creates function merely as symbols enriching but not supplanting the realistic story. In the trilogy that begins with The Second Bridegroom, however, the myth structures the narrative, turning the realism of the setting into a metaphor of an eternal quest that is renewed in history but, like the contest of Krishna and Arjuna, lives forever outside it.<sup>6</sup>

The novel begins realistically enough, although with an element of the gothic, as the convict narrator is hauled onto deck still manacled to the body of the man he has just murdered. Even this moment, however, has mythical overtones of the doppelganger, the other self who is a constant reminder of what his companion is not. Once the narrator escapes from this self, plunging into the bush and being taken in by a mysterious tribe of Aborigines who at once capture him and give him

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<sup>6</sup> Rodney Hall, The Second Bridegroom, McPhee Gribble, Ringwood, 1991.

succour, the narrative moves with the logic of myth rather than of reality. Hall, like Patrick White in A Fringe of Leaves, presents the Aborigines from the outside, and therefore avoids the danger of either sentimentalizing or idealizing them. White, however, places his Aborigines within the frame of the tale of the lost white woman, and thus inevitably within the pattern of the natives as savages, primitives who threaten the cultural identity of the white intruder. Hall, in contrast, leaves them outside his narrative, disappearing at crucial moments, entering into no personal relationships with the narrator, keeping him not at the fringes but outside the boundaries of their lives. They thus perform a mythical role in the narrative, protecting the narrator within the alien landscape, discovering to him its intricacies while emphasizing his alienation from it.

The mythological weight of Hall's novel falls not on the Aborigines but on the narrator, who remains unnamed, although he is carefully placed within a Gaelic background of the Isle of Man. He does tell us that his brother's given name is Hall, so suggesting that he, as narrator, is a younger brother of the novelist, himself a migrant to Australia. Historically, he is a convict sentenced for forgery, but he meditates on the fact that his whole identity is a forgery, a work of art that owes its success to both the skill of the artisan who forges it and the originator whom he copies. In this particular case, the forgery is of a work that has never existed - Caxton's one hundredth book, a "Commentary upon Twofold Victims of Fate in the Thebaid of Statius, from the Press of William Caxton, Anno 1491". As a forger, the narrator is both master and slave of the supposed original. His narrative is offered as a love letter to the wife of his own Master, the settler who has purchased him. He dreams that she wants him to be both her master and her slave -



the second bridegroom of the ancient earth mother who, in both Celtic and classic mythology, takes successive grooms for the summer and the winter:

Going back to the most ancient of times before history there was a Goddess who took two bridegrooms each year - have you heard? - one for the winter and one for the summer. Each had the task of killing the husband who had lain with her for the six months before him. (p. 66)

While wandering through the forests of the new land, the narrator, the winter king, speculates about his rival, until eventually he is drawn back to the settlement which, partly at his bidding, is destroyed by fire. He kills the Master, only to find that his original double-ganger, comes back to life and once again draws him back to the settlement, where he imprisons him. Here he pours out his hopes and love to his lady, desperately seeking to become her second bridegroom. After the conclusion of his narrative, however, the novelist adds two letters that show that the lady herself was a forgery of the narrator's imagination, and that the regeneration he had hoped for had eludes him..

The labyrinthine wilderness through which the Aborigines conduct Hall's narrator is the counterpart of the woods through which mediaeval knight errants wandered in search of the lady of their imagination or, in the idealised narratives, the Holy Grail. For this wanderer, the Grail is the settlement, which he can possess only by killing the summer king and taking his place as groom t the lady. Although he destroys the lady's Master, we are left in doubt about whether the Master was the true summer king, and the lady herself rejects the wanderer as his successor, or winter king. Her role is a metaphor for a process of settlement which imposes masculine will on an alien landscape rather than allowing its feminine. By rejecting

the wanderer from the wilderness, and with him potential the wisdom of the land, embodied metaphorically in the figures of the Aborigines, the lady rejects the possibility of myth and imprisons herself and the settlement in history rather than finding for it the freedom and sanction of myth.

The mythology of Hall's novel is essentially pre-Christian, with mediaeval overtones. Its effect is to reject the whole enterprise of settlement as based on an incompatibility between the nature of the land and the motives of the settlers, an incompatibility that could be overcome only if the settlers were able to recover a premodern consciousness. Its emphasis falls not on the fact of settlement but on the resistance to it. It is thus similar to Liam Davison's the White Woman, which tells the story of a party of settlers seeking to rescue a white woman who is rumoured to have been captured by Aboriginal tribes.<sup>7</sup> As in Hall's novel, Davison emphasizes the unreality of the white men's experience as they wander through a bush that has the properties of myth rather than of history. Like Hall's narrator, they fail in the object of the search, but the woman herself takes on the properties of myth, becoming not a woman lost to civilization but a figure outside civilization and mocking the beliefs on which it is grounded. To the extent that she speaks at all, it is to tell us that we can possess the land only by renouncing everything we brought to it.

By contrast, Robert Drew's novel, The Drowner, celebrates the engineer as the hero of a modernism that overcomes the deficiencies of nature. The culminating event of the novel is the completion of the pipeline that brings water to Kalgoorlie, but along the way its characters are absorbed in such modern miracles as

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<sup>7</sup> Liam Davison, The White Woman, UQP, St Lucia, 1994.

photography, the scientific control of disease, and the construction of railways and harbours. Its central metaphor is water, which, in the most material sense, both sustains and extinguishes life. But while the technology of the engineer brings to Kalgoorlie the water that frees it from a hostile environment, the engineer's technology is rooted in the age-old art of the drowners, the men who nurtured the water-meadows of the Avon in Wiltshire.

William Dance, the hero of the book, is an assistant to the historical Charles O'Connor, the man who designed the pipeline to Kalgoorlie and fought it through against the opposition of the petty-minded, only to be driven to despair and suicide before its successful completion. As a boy, Dance learns from his father the art of drowning, but takes up engineering to escape from his family as much as to continue its traditions. But water continues to shape his life. He meets his love, Angelica, in the pool at Bath, where his body recalled "that second's tensile softness in the bath. The beauty of her form and movement". (p.39) He takes her with him over the seas, first to view the Victoria Falls and the prehistoric irrigation works nearby, then across a stormy Indian Ocean to a house by the Swan River in Perth. But the water that gives her to him also takes her away, first by the blackwater fever she contracts in Africa, then by her descent into alienation and madness on the bank of the Swan. Then, in the tank filling from the pipeline in Kalgoorlie, the water restores her to him. His combination of skill and art, of love and will, makes whole both the life of Kalgoorlie and his own life.

On its way to this conclusion, the novel also provides realistic pictures of the traditional ways of Wiltshire and the hectic frontier life of Kalgoorlie and the variety of characters brought together by the lure of gold. Although set at the time

of federation, the work presents Australia as a settler province, with Kalgoorlie as a metonymous image of its history. The writer gives us glimpses of the Aborigines, but they remain outside the chief action, victims rather than subjects. The burden of the novel however does not fall on its historical metonymy but on the metaphoric significance of the water as both a source of life and an object of technology.

Through the person of William Dance, water is linked to the actual and mythological history of England, but through his actions it becomes a means by which the new settlement gains independence both from its past and from the heat of a land that, before the coming of the water, is both the source of its wealth and the agent of its imprisonment in a frenzy of heat, greed and disease.

Hall and Davison both present the land as resistant to settlement, accessible only if it is realized in myth. Drew develops such a myth, but his novel uses it to implant and naturalize what remains an essentially alien civilization. Such writers as Thea Astley, in Reaching Tin River, or Janet Turner Hospital, in Charades, have tried to find most universal myths that lead the reader beyond the purely Australian experience. On the other hand, Aboriginal writers like Sam Watson or John Muk Muk Burke, suggest in their novels that Aboriginal myth contains both an explanation of the violence of settlement and a possible way beyond it. To this stage, however, few non-Aboriginal writers have been able to profit from this mythology without either sentimentalizing it or merely appropriating it. The escape from this dilemma may depend on settler society as a whole accepting the realities of their history and the myths they have been enacting. It also depends on extending Salman Rushdie's observation that we are all migrants now. If, as migrants, we are not to remain trapped in atrophied mythologies translated from

our homelands, we must mythologies also migrate, remaining always the same but always changing in reponse to historical circumstance. We may only be able to avoid the more virulent expressions of religious and nationalist sentiment by learning to separate myth from history, but we will only truly possess our own histories and the places we inhabit as we learn to recognize the myths that drive and frame our histories.

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