

Black Diggers

by Ben Brooker

Black Diggers, written by Tom Wright, directed by Wesley Enoch, and produced by the Queensland Theatre Company, received its world première at the 2014 Sydney Festival in January. Then, the full clamour of Australia's more than \$400 million centennial commemorations of World War I was not yet audible; by the time the play reached Adelaide in March 2015 – a few weeks shy of the centenary of the doomed Allied landings at Gallipoli – the noise was deafening. Amidst the generally bellicose reverence and formal and political conservatism of commemorative offerings from almost all of the country's major performing arts companies, *Black Diggers* held in its unambiguous name the promise of a fresh perspective on a national myth whose cultural expressions, for all their economic and social investment, can seem remarkably homogenous.

As many as a thousand indigenous men joined the 1st Australian Imperial Force between 1914 and 1918. It is their stories that *Black Diggers*, with an epic theatre-like sweep of fifty years and something like a hundred characters, ostensibly sets out to tell through its ensemble of nine males. The multiple narratives, individualised though still occasionally indistinct, nevertheless reflect the abhorrent realities faced by many indigenous soldiers: racism at home, different treatment as POWs, white opposition to their being allowed to enlist at all (this softened as Australian casualties in Europe mounted and domestic support for the country's involvement in the war waned). Wright, drawing on research by David Williams, deploys fascinating and funny minutiae around the attempts of indigenous boys to sign up, which frequently involved the invention of Anglo names, and lies about parentage – absurdly, 'substantial European descent' was a criterion for entry into the AIF.

Twenty-one-year-old Hunter Page-Lochard, in a standout performance, plays Bertie, a teenager who insists on signing up despite his mother's vociferous objections. He survives the war, but is so traumatised that he can no longer speak. Enoch and Wright invite us, I think, to read Bertie's silence as a metaphor for the continuing under-acknowledgment of the contribution

made by indigenous diggers to the campaigns in Gallipoli, Palestine, and Flanders. But such acknowledgment, however laudable, leaves untouched a greater injustice: that, after the war, Aboriginal servicemen faced the same prejudice and second-class citizenship that had been their lot before going off to fight on behalf of an empire that had stolen their land and murdered their ancestors. So too, substantially, does *Black Diggers*.

The wartime vignettes that make up the play's middle section and incorporate all the familiar tropes of war – the hardships of life in the trenches, the gallows humour and grim camaraderie, the brutal hand-to-hand combat – merely affirm an uncontested fact, one that can all too comfortably be absorbed into the war's extant narrative: that Aboriginal soldiers on the frontlines faced the same horrors, and were broadly accorded the same rights, as their white counterparts.

Absurdly, 'substantial European descent' was a criterion for entry into the AIF

Wright has said that he wanted to take these tropes and 'just put black faces into [them]', but this is precisely the problem: that *Black Diggers*, by focusing for too long on more or less interchangeable lived experiences of the war, leaves too late, and ultimately says too little about, the critical point of difference between white and black diggers. Many of the latter returned from a war fought under the flag of democracy to a country that continued to institutionalise their oppression and lack of rights. Not only could returned indigenous servicemen still not vote, they were denied postwar entitlements, and many discovered that money they had sent home from the front for their families had been stolen or that their family land had been appropriated for the use of white veterans.

To be fair, *Black Diggers* does assay these issues – and with commendable power and poignancy – but I could not shake the feeling, as a bugler played the Last Post at the play's conclusion, that increased recognition of indigenous soldiers in World War I, while in itself an important corrective to the war's predominantly Anglo-Australian mythology, runs the risk of absolving, and even embracing, the very architecture of their vast betrayal. ■

Black Diggers, written by Tom Wright, presented by the Queensland Theatre Company as part of the Adelaide Festival. Performance attended 13 March 2015.

Ben Brooker is a writer, editor, critic, essayist and playwright. His longer review of *Black Diggers* and *Rotunda* (New Zealand Dance Company) can be found online in Arts Update on our website.

Theatre royalty

A dual biography of two acting legends

Desley Deacon

DOUBLE-ACT: THE REMARKABLE LIVES AND CAREERS OF
GOOGIE WITHERS AND JOHN MCCALLUM

by Brian McFarlane

Monash University Publishing, \$39.95 pb, 259 pp, 9781922235725

Although many attempt it, writing the biography of an actor of a previous era is fraught. They consist mainly of lists of movies or plays long forgotten. The reception of their art is recorded by critics, once all-powerful, but now unknown. Their personal life and personality are hidden behind a screen of studio publicity. Writing the lives and careers of two stars might seem to double the difficulty.

Brian McFarlane, however, has overcome these difficulties admirably and shown in *Double-Act: The Remarkable Lives and Careers of Googie Withers and John McCallum* that a dual biography, if the subjects are married, can be twice as good. The theatre and movie public seem to love a married couple. This was certainly the case with this duo, who are rightly called Australian theatre royalty in this entertaining and informative book.

Googie Withers and John McCallum were both children of the Empire, born in 1917 and 1918 in Karachi (in then British India) and Brisbane. (Googie's unusual nickname seems to have been given her by her Indian ayah.) Their peripatetic childhoods prepared them for the transnational lives they lived as adults. Withers was seven when she left India, living first in Paris and then in England. John's father was the proprietor of Brisbane's Cremorne Theatre. His restless British-born mother moved the family to England when he was nine, and he attended school there and in Switzerland for three years.

Withers began her career in 1932, in the chorus of musicals. She was quickly noticed for her confident, sassy personality and good looks. When she was

called in for a film test, she was so impressive that she immediately replaced the young woman cast for the part. By the time she met McCallum she was a well-established star; she had been engaged to actor Michael Wilding (who later married Elizabeth Taylor); and had a love affair with novelist Richard Llewellyn (*How Green Was My Valley*).

McCallum returned to England in 1936 to study at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art. Handsome and intelligent, he was just beginning a promising West End career when the war took him back to Australia and the armed forces. After the war he set off for Hollywood via London, where the burgeoning British film industry snapped him up. In 1946, on his third film, he met his co-star, Googie Withers. The couple married in January 1948. The box office loved them together, and they co-starred in five more films over the next six years. They also found time to continue their stage careers, and both made their débuts in the new media of television. With Withers' mother and a nanny to help, they never contemplated any break in her career when their first child, Joanna, was born in 1950.

In 1954, at the height of their popularity, the theatrical giant J.C. Williamson's Ltd (JCW), invited them to make a tour of Australia. They were a great success, socially as well as professionally. McCallum even managed to appear in the film *Smiley* (1956) while he was in Sydney. At the end of their tour, Frank Tait, head of JCW, took him aside and offered him the position of joint managing director.

They returned to Australia permanently in 1958. Withers had just made

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THE POETS' STAIRWELL:
A PICARESQUE NOVEL
by Alan Gould
Black Pepper
\$27.99 pb, 326 pp, 9781876044800

In 1977 the aspiring poet Alan Gould travelled through Europe with his friend Kevin Hart. Just such a tour forms the narrative thread for Gould's latest novel, *The Poets' Stairwell*. This is a roman à clef and those in the know will enjoy the identification game.

More interesting, though, is the intellectual journey; Gould's virginal twenty-seven-year-old hero, Claude Boon, slowly defining his own poetic self against the austere and particular mode of his strikingly talented younger friend, Henry Luck. A vagabond he might be for these few months, but Boon is no *picaro*. Adventurous and willing to abet the occasional rogue, he is decidedly not one himself. Though well into adulthood, Boon undergoes a steady process of maturing and self-understanding during his journey. The subtitle of *The Poets' Stairwell* could as well be 'A Bildungsroman'.

I have always been attracted to Gould's narrative voice; his selected poems, *The Past Completes Me* (2005), is the only book of poetry I have ever reviewed: I liked it too. There is a genial insistence on following his own muse (perhaps Clio, as Henry Luck suggests). The narrative pace is leisurely, but there is none of the pretentiousness which so often mars 'literary fiction'. It is true that concessions are not made to the etymologically naïve. In the first stairwell of the story, their nostrils are assaulted by 'the fetor of concrete'. But more often a startling and amusing image is hewn from workaday materials. There are many, but it is hard to beat the image of Henry clutching the Yugoslavian Branca 'as though she were a cupboard he had rescued from a flood'. There are acrobats and tricksters in the poets' stairwell, but Boon keeps ascending, with Gould, admiring their antics but not ultimately distracted from his own artistic illumination.

Gillian Dooley

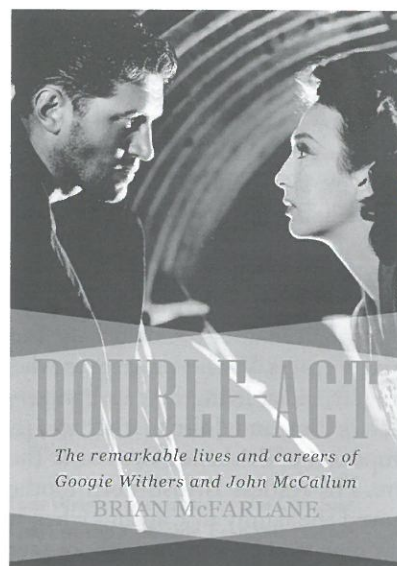
a triumphant Shakespearean début at Stratford-on-Avon (*Hamlet* and *Much Ado About Nothing*). McCallum spent seven years as joint managing director of JCW alongside the ageing Tait. His tenure included the enormous success of *My Fair Lady*, the legendary Sutherland-Williamson Grand Opera Co. tour, and appearances by Marcel Marceau, Harry Belafonte, and Vivien Leigh, the latter directed by their old friend Robert Helpmann. But he resigned a year after Tait died and he had succeeded him as managing director. One reason for his resignation was the board's veto of his plans for further film-making, following their involvement in the production of *They're a Weird Mob* (1966). Over the next few years, his major achievements were in television, where he produced that Australian icon *Skippy* (1968–70), followed by *Barrier Reef* (1971–72), the first Australian series sold to a major American network, and *Boney* (1972–73), featuring Arthur Upfield's half-Aboriginal detective. But his movies – forgotten today – did not catch the spirit of the Australia's New Wave, and he returned to the theatre.

While McCallum was steering the fortunes of Australian theatre, film, and television, Withers established herself as a favourite with the Australian public. Like many of the 'Ten Pound Poms' who settled in Australia in the 1950s and 1960s, she found it 'a young, vigorous place'; and she always praised Australia as a wonderful country to bring up children. She was an actress at the top of her powers, and audiences appreciated having someone of her calibre on their stages. With the growing availability and comfort of long-distance flights, she was able, like many after her, to maintain an international career, making her Broadway début in 1961 (*The Complacent Lover*, with Michael Redgrave) and returning regularly to London's West End. As she noted shrewdly, all of these 'homecomings' – to Australia and to England – were great for publicity.

Australians also liked the Withers-McCallum double-act. Their happy family life gave their public a comfortable feeling, softening the image of McCallum the businessman with that of the loving father and husband,

and turning Withers the jet-setting actress into a normal housewife and mother. Together they maintained their act on stage, film, and television until 2002, when, in their mid-eighties, they made their last appearance on stage in London, in *Lady Windermere's Fan*. When McCallum died in 2010, they had been married for sixty-two years. Withers died eighteen months later.

Brian McFarlane, an expert on British and Australian cinema, has carried off his difficult task with great skill. He notes wryly that this is essentially a happy story, without any hint of scandal to add spice. Nevertheless, it is fascinating to watch how the pair achieve and maintain the delicate balancing act that is a successful theatrical marriage. McFarlane manages to provide in an entertaining manner much information that could be tedious. The many anecdotes and reports with which he fills out the personality of his two subjects have the scent of truth, rather than of the publicity desk, and convince us that the couple were, indeed, as pleasant as they are pictured. This book will provide lively – and for some nostalgic – reading for the general public and will be essential reading for historians of British and Australian theatre, film, and television. ■



Desley Deacon is a writer and historian living in Sydney. She is currently working on a biography of Australian-born actress Judith Anderson.

Frontier story

David Whish-Wilson

COMING RAIN
by Stephen Daisley
Text Publishing

\$29.99 pb, 270 pp, 9781922182029

For this reviewer, it's been a long five years since the publication of Stephen Daisley's *Traitor* (2010). The rightly acclaimed and award-winning début novel wrote of the terrors of war, and the life on the land of one irreparably damaged New Zealand soldier, David. As an exploration of the damage done to an ordinary and unappreciated man, the prose was often hauntingly poetic, often carrying the weight of what can't be said – the sadness and the tragedy that is too immense to take in. In this respect *Traitor* was a truly original vision, and yet many of its thematic concerns, its deft use of the telling detail, its beautiful descriptions of landscape and ear for dialogue are also present in *Coming Rain*.

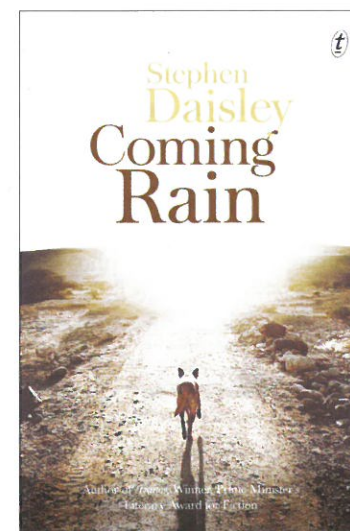
The novel takes place in 1956, largely in the 'marginal wheat and sheep lands' of the South-West of Western Australia. Lew, a young man in his early twenties, and Painter, his older companion, work as a team charcoal burning and shearing, moving from job to job in Lew's old truck. Lew is eager for experience, and the novel opens with his seduction by an older woman, using him as a stand-in for her husband killed in the war. Painter however is well-beyond taking any interest in matters-of-the-heart, having burnt his bridges during his drinking years. Daisley describes him thus: 'wearing a blue Jackie Howe singlet. Unshaved face. A bald head worn brown in the sun, covered in scars and odd bumps. Both ears were lumped, cauliflowered, and his left ear was much smaller. The nose broken so many times there was no bridge left. He had big wrinkled hands covered in tattoos of birds and stars.' Painter is a man who has learned, often from bitter experience, to 'lie to tell the truth and distrust the truth as a lie'. Indeed, it's an authentic feature of

the masculine relationships in this book that a man like Painter is most impressive when he's silent, immersed in his labours, working alongside his younger companion. When the pair arrive at the eastern-wheatbelt station of John Drysdale, to shear a thousand-odd head of sheep, this importance of work as the emotional core at the heart of their relationship becomes foregrounded, and allows Daisley free rein to employ some of his most vivid writing. Here the minutiae of farm life are rendered with respect and sympathy, emphasising the ingenuity by which farmers have adapted an alien technology to the demands of the new land. Lew and Painter work with a resourcefulness and unspoken pride that expresses the truth that it's the respect for the job, and the self-respect associated with doing the job right, in which the true dignity of work is to be found.

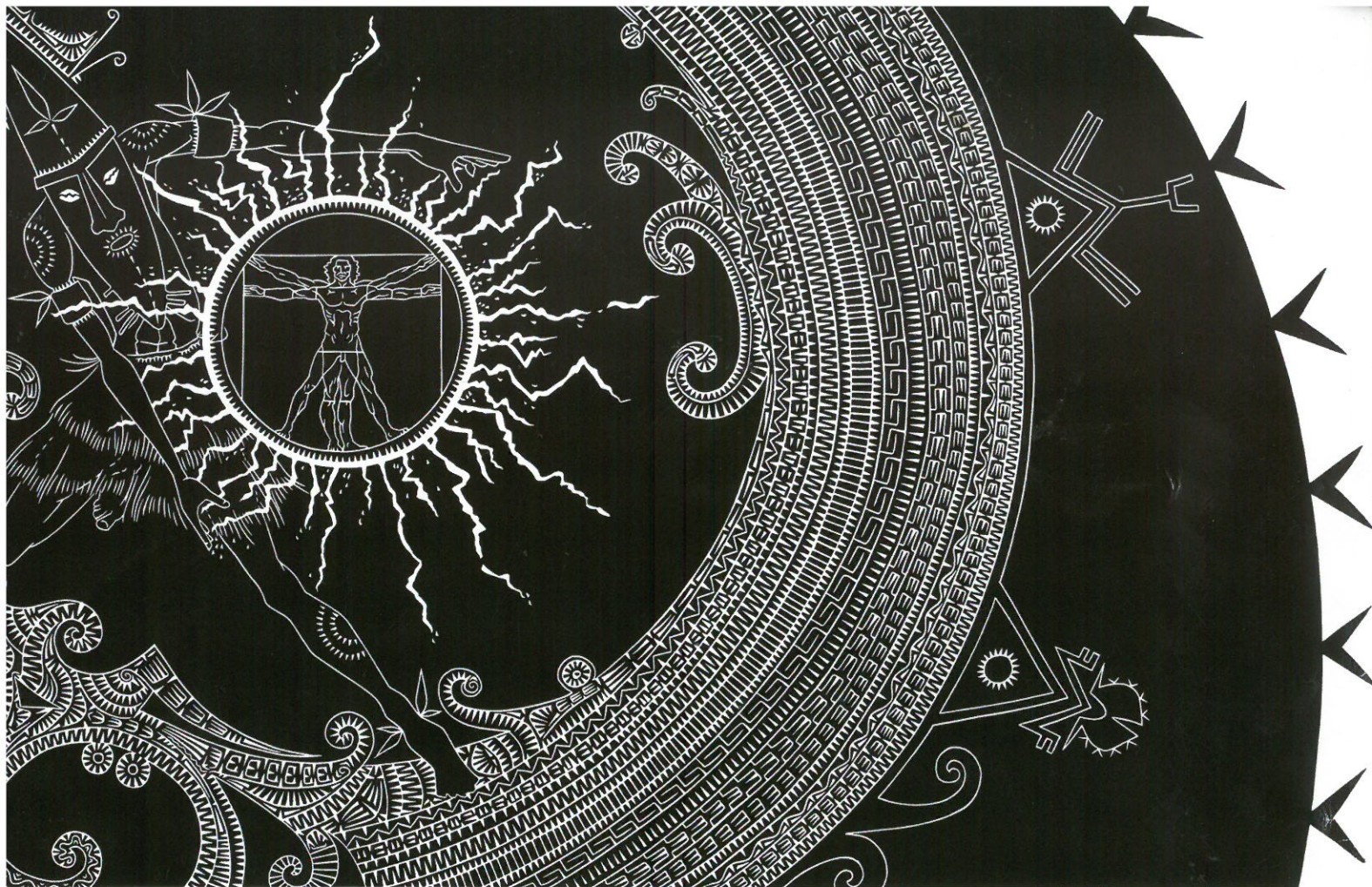
When Clara Drysdale, the daughter of the boss, meets Lew, however, the younger man's head is turned. She is a young woman of considerable charm, of a private-school upbringing and therefore an unlikely match for the perennially barefoot Lew. As well as her beauty, Lew is impressed by the devotion of her animals to their mistress, and her tenderness towards her animals. The pair embark upon a gentle courtship, albeit one discouraged by Painter and forbidden by the boss, John Drysdale (who resembles a subject in a Russell Drysdale painting, with his 'Chains of wet dust in the wrinkles of his neck. His Adam's apple moving up and down as he swallowed. The burnt side of his face had white zinc cream on it. Some dust had stuck to the cream. Like the colour of bloodwood through the zinc.') The pair find privacy at a local waterhole, and the intimacy they discover there is part of an important and unspoken paradox – they are on stolen land, in fact the site of a massacre, and yet while there is no reconciling or healing what cannot be understood, it's precisely the space and absence of others that allows them to be as natural and free as children, where their 'overwhelming desire for each other was the desire to be alive'.

In counterpoint to this narrative is the parallel story of a dingo bitch on

the run from Abraham Smith, a dog-shooter also responsible for 'cleaning the place up' of its Nyungar inhabitants. This second narrative strand suggests an ancient re-enactment of one of the archetypal life-cycles of the South-West landscape, in spite of the intrusion of the 'monstrous presence' of the European farmers, their crops and animals. Acute in her observations, her literally ground-level perspective also provides a closer and symbolically indigenous reading of the landscape, represented by way of a keenness of sense and a close understanding of place passed down over hundreds of generations. Even as her relationship with a wounded young male dingo mirrors Lew and Clara's developing relationship, the whites still see the dingo as they once saw the black – as inherently savage, unable to be tamed, still subject to rule. 303. The narrative tension that her struggle to survive brings to this moving and brilliant novel is considerable, particularly as it heads towards a conclusion that in its tragedy and tenderness is perfectly in keeping with both the 'desire to be alive' and the colonial logic and history of the South-West frontier. ■



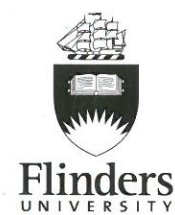
David Whish-Wilson is the author of *The Summons* (2006), *Line of Sight* (2010), and *Zero at the Bone* (2013). His most recent publication is *Perth* (2013), in the NewSouth city series. He lives in Fremantle and coordinates the creative-writing program at Curtin University.



STRAIT PROTEAN

the art of Brian Robinson

Presented by Flinders University Art Museum in association with Mossenson Galleries, Perth and KickArts Contemporary Arts, Cairns for the Adelaide Festival Centre's 2015 Come Out Children's Festival.



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Brian Robinson, ... and on the 6th day he created man (detail), 2010, linocut, black ink on paper, edition 12/40, courtesy the artist and KickArts Contemporary Arts, Cairns CRICOS No. 00114A

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AUSTRALIAN BOOK REVIEW

INDIGENOUS ISSUE

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Felicity Plunkett

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