



“Opportunistic Transpositions and Elisions”: Roger McDonald’s *The Ballad of Desmond Kale*; or, The Fiction Question: Who Owns Stories?

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THE “MAKING A FICTION OF HISTORY” PANEL AT THE 2007 Sydney Writers’ Festival included award-winning novelist, Roger McDonald, and renowned historian and public intellectual, Inga Clendinnen. Given Clendinnen’s well-publicized attack on the “opportunistic transpositions and elisions” (16) of historical fiction generally, and Kate Grenville’s *The Secret River* in particular, I was anticipating her criticism of McDonald’s historical novel, *The Ballad of Desmond Kale*, especially of what I considered its elision of indigenous genocide and dispossession. Instead, Clendinnen specifically exempted McDonald’s work from her arguments against historical fiction. Clendinnen’s praise of McDonald’s novel (which won the Miles Franklin Literary Award in 2006, the same year that Grenville’s book was short-listed) caused me to look anew at her essay and his novel. Returning to Clendinnen’s “The History Question,” I was struck by the disjunction between her insistence on the political significance of “stories” about history, and her claim that authors of fiction have only aesthetic, not moral, obligations in their work.

I also noticed a resonance between Clendinnen’s views on Anzac Day and McDonald’s construction of an ideal history of Australian settlement. In *Ballad*, McDonald explicitly constructs the inland as an ideal site of equality, freedom, and authentic Australian settlement. Yet as I will argue, this construction is enabled by, at the same time as it conceals, an aggression towards and rejection of women and homosexuals, as well as working-class and indigenous people. Discussing Australian national identity in relation to Anzac Day, Clendinnen honors the “good legacy Australians took away from the First World War” (12). Although aware of the exclusions underlying this legacy, Clendinnen seems highly invested in the all-white, all-male origins of Anzac Day: her “throat still tightens” remembering the Dawn Services she attended in the late 1930s, when she “was still too young to count as female (women were of course banned from this sacred men’s business)” (11). Being one of the Others excluded from this ritual, Clendinnen occupies an ambivalent position in relation to this signifier of national identity, and consequently, to what Jennifer Rutherford has termed the “fantasy of Australia as the site of a privileged and realised good” (15).

Nevertheless, Clendinnen’s depiction of the “good legacy” of Anzac Day has connections with the more aggressive and unambivalent manifestation of this fantasy in McDonald’s book. In accepting and supporting the fantasy of Australia as quintessentially free and equal, such constructions of national identity camouflage, at the same time as they enable, the aggression to and rejection of the Other that underlies white Australian society, historically and today.

Clendinnen’s “sympathy” with John Howard in her celebration of Anzac Day—and “even with his longing for a clear, celebratory story of how Australia got to be the fine country it undoubtedly is” (2)—reveals the wider resonance of this shared fantasy. Such correspondence between constructions of national identity by figures associated with the “left” in Australia (Clendinnen and McDonald) and Howard, an icon of the “right,” suggests a contraction in available and permissible sentiments about nationhood. As the Australian nation becomes increasingly fearful of external and internal Others—an attitude especially apparent in Howard-era discourses of terrorism and refugees—the idea that Australia is good becomes obligatory. (At the same time, the violent consequences of that fear expose the lie of this joint fantasy.)

In the light of the widespread portrayal of Australia as a good nation, it seems significant that McDonald’s prize-winning manifestation of this fantasy has received so little critical attention. Indeed, whereas Grenville’s book has been vigorously debated by both historians and literary critics, McDonald’s novel has received only brief reviews.¹ Mimicking and realizing the semi-conscious desires of contemporary white Australia, and masked by aesthetic conventions and an overt discourse of freedom and equality, McDonald’s fantasy of an all-white, all-male Australian society avoided criticism. Responding to this deficit of critical attention, and taking *Ballad* as symptomatic of a broader fantasy informing contemporary Australian society, this essay explores the dark underbelly of such constructions of nationhood.

At the end of *Ballad*, most of the main characters, and many others, congregate at Ducks Mole Reach and prepare to travel further inland to join the escaped convict and

renowned sheep breeder, Desmond Kale.² Although this movement inland occupies only the final section, its associations and implications provide the novel's primary impetus. The inland is repeatedly described in terms of freedom and equality. Thus, the leaders of the movement inland—Kale, and later, Tom Rankine—are characterized in terms of their belief in these principles. Convicts sing about Kale's escape and follow him inland because he is "a boast to the downhearted, and bother to the secure" (561) due to his expressed opposition to the British-colonial government. Rankine becomes another convict hero because he "went to lengths unmatched in the annals of Botany Bay to be sure somebody downtrodden was as comfortable as himself" (430). Rankine leads the "town on many legs" that meets at Ducks Mole Reach. This town comprises an ostensibly equal community of convicts, emancipists, and their families, who "gather and combine their separate portions," moving inland to join Kale "as one" (627).

A firm contrast is established between the convict-citizens of Rankine's town and the ostensibly free settlers and ex-convicts who eek out a meager existence on the acres bequeathed to them by the governor. According to the convict Tharpe, in their "puerile labour . . . converting Botany Bay to a semblance of fields where seasons failed by rote," these "small settlers were little better than beasts of the field" (205). These "beasts" are the "small" but not the true settlers of Australia. They remain within the parameters established by the British-colonial government due to a failure of imagination. As Rankine says, "It is such a vast ocean of land, they cannot imagine it, and when they do try, do not get far" (154). A lack of imagination is aligned with England—where "[n]o great gifts of imagination were valued" (404)—and the pioneering movement inland emerges as a triumph of imagination as well as politics. The subversion of British social norms manifested in the equality of the inland is represented spatially: as a transgression of and freedom from the established boundaries enclosing and limiting Sydney. Whereas those who farm land allotted to them by the government are shackled beasts of the field, the convicts who follow Kale and Rankine inland are aligned with the free-roaming sheep, particularly in the way that "the dominance of one sheep over another is not absolute" (286).

The freedom and equality characterizing the movement inland is emphasized by the depiction of inland spaces in terms of safety, comfort and healing. Rankine's town is merely the final and most populous manifestation of what can only be described as a domestication of the Australian inland. Meg (Kale's daughter and, later, Rankine's wife) remembers escaping with her mother from "a place of prostitution" to live in a bush characterized by domestic safety, comfort and plenitude: "We lay on the riverbank and made shapes out of clouds, collected wildflowers . . . and like the blacks we slept in a hollow tree and a very fine house it proved" (176). Similarly, when Rankine encourages Meg to journey inland with him, he domesticates that space by making:

rough country into a series of rooms—places of fanciful safety leaving out mention of thorns, insect stingers,

sunstroke, thirst, leaving out trackers, troopers, search parties with swords, guns, iron rings, and men bearing oiled and knotted whips. (179)

While this litany seems to challenge the construction of the Australian bush as a site of safety and comfort, these potential dangers of the inland are frequently rehearsed but never experienced by any of the convict-citizens. Accordingly, Kale and his lover Bidy Magee are able to travel inland by themselves for many months, without any apparent difficulty in finding food, water, or safe places to sleep.

Not only is the bush safe and comfortable for Kale, it seems actively to protect him. When he escapes, it is into "the white-trunked gum trees closing behind him," with the result that "[a] half hour later . . . Kale was gone from the world of punishment, gone as if he had never suffered in it" (11). Kale begins his journey, bleeding from fifty lashes. Inland, especially with Bidy to tend to him, he heals physically and mentally. Once ensconced there, and despite having "a hanging crime on his head, Kale felt better placed than he had in Ireland" (280). Rankine also heals by moving inland. Although he joins the town with "nerves badly blown" (552) after 420 days of imprisonment, he "would be easier in a few more weeks, with them all farther out, on some yellow grass plain slowly moving. Then they would get back everything that was fragmented" (628). A firm contrast is established between those who go safely inland and find protection and healing, and those who experience the "land itself as a punishment" (249). For instance, although agents of the British-colonial government are completely unable to find and return Kale, the convict-citizens who are inspired by his journey and wish to follow have no difficulty doing so.

This portrayal of the inland as the site of an ideal society is a direct inversion of the alienated, modernist aesthetic often associated with Australian narratives, frequently with reference to Patrick White's *Voss*.³ *Ballad* alludes to an alternative, Australian pastoral tradition, developed from classical literature, prominent in Australian landscape painting until the mid-twentieth century and emphasized in this text by the focus on shepherds (especially their centrality to the journey inland and the escape this allows from corrupt the metropolis). Both traditions respond in different ways to what Rutherford describes as the "threatening void" produced by colonization. Rutherford locates this void in the dissonance colonization creates between "a continent already spoken, imagined and peopled—but requiring a literal and imagined emptying for the colonial fantasy to unfold" (32). Novels that follow *Voss* in depicting the movement inland in terms of alienation, like Thea Astley's *The Slow Natives* or Gerard Murnane's *The Second Bridegroom*, signify some sort of "encounter with the void" (11): or as Rutherford more tentatively puts it, such texts reveal "a certain experience of emptiness, of a symbolic frailty or inequality to the task of representing this nothingness, that fantasy has never finally been able to occlude" (12). Such alienation is commonly identified with a postcolonial state.⁴ In particular, the failure of the inland journeys that often accompany this modernist

trope is understood in terms of "a general feeling of failure regarding . . . possession of the land and dispossession of the Aborigines" (Tabron 181).

The pastoral tradition, in contrast, is entirely premised on the success of settlement, and hence, on the immediate rejection of the void produced by colonization. This rejection was recently epitomized in Murray Bail's *Eucalyptus* and also emerges in texts like Christopher Koch's *Out of Ireland*.⁵ Rutherford argues that denials of the void of colonization operate specifically through the rejection and expulsion of the Other. This general argument has been made a number of times. However, Rutherford expands on it in an important way by asserting that this inability to contend with difference is concealed and denied in Australia by the dominant fantasy of Australia as the archetypal good and neighborly nation. Rutherford's description of this fantasy closely resembles the world constructed by pastoral narratives—namely, a world of

unequalled freedom, a sociality unmarred by the price of social order . . . a site of infinite promise, of an amicability without reserve, of an equality without rank, of a subjectivity without hidden depths, of a whiteness without genocide. (56)

According to Rutherford, this dominant fantasy operates through rejection of the old law (often aligned with the "old world") and establishment of apparent lawlessness. But as she demonstrates, this new order is in fact a reincarnation of the old, and one that is more violently antagonistic towards, and intolerant of, difference.

McDonald's ideal society may be figured as free and equal, but it conceals a far more conservative, nostalgic, and ultimately inequitable message and intent. Not only does McDonald's version of an ideal society fill any potential void at the center of the continent with industry and comradeship at the originary moment of colonization, its apparently emancipatory ideals are retrograde. The nostalgic quality of the freedom imagined in *Ballad* is suggested by the Fourth of July celebrations Warren and Titus experience on board a sealing ship:⁶

"To freedom!" [the crew] roared, and when Warren spoke the word, he saw the irons fall off men far away . . .

Quite soon men settled into more solemn drinking, turning every now and again to remember their American flag, which hung from the stern, and of which they were so proud. A defensiveness crept into the celebrations as the Dutch, French, and Irish sailors they had on board, and a lone German too, remembered they had a nationality, or if they were still under a foreign yoke, would fight any man who said they couldn't have a country of their own. (519)

Of course, this description of "a crew of deserters and escaped convicts" (567) ready to fight each other for their nations is ironic. Nevertheless, the resonance between Warren's vision of chains falling off men and the freedom of Australia's inland suggests that Warren's vision is intended seriously.

Recent history has conditioned us to view narratives of emancipation—whether of individuals or nations—as automatically positive and progressive. But it is important to realize that the freedom imagined in this passage, and elsewhere in *Ballad*, is freedom from the British-colonial government. Although a common theme in Australian mythology and literature—central, for instance, to the Anzac legend—this nationalist narrative of the young nation escaping the yoke of British-colonial servitude is entirely nostalgic. It harks back to a(n imaginary) time when there was an easily definable force to expel and be free from, and especially to, a time when non-indigenous Australians were constructed as the oppressed rather than the oppressors. Like Clendinnen's memory of the Dawn Service, this emphasis on freedom and equality conceals, and retreats from, divisions of gender, class, and race relevant to Australia historically and today.

The portrayal of colonization through the transportation of domestic spaces inland in *Ballad* may appear to challenge the common, patriarchal/colonial conflation of women and the land. Rather than women and the land both functioning as objects to be possessed by men, men and women together move to possess and domesticate inland Australia. In fact, the alignment of women, especially Meg, with the land rehearses the tired dichotomies of a patriarchal vision of colonization. For example, while courting Meg, Rankine brings her wildflowers. Following an extended description of Rankine surveying and approving Meg's beauty—"Her glossy dark hair . . . wide, hazel eyes . . . shining with energetic delight" and so on (168–69)—Rankine presents her with the "beautiful" flowers, saying: "They seemed to belong to you, Meg Inchcape, at least, when I saw them, I thought of you" (169). After admiring the flowers, Meg invites Rankine into her home for the first time. In such ways, the native-born Meg's beauty, pride, and wildness⁷ are associated with Australia. This association grants Rankine entry into a space previously concealed, just as his marriage to Meg precedes his movement inland.

The depiction of Rankine and Meg's subsequent relationship reinforces and privileges a patriarchal, and firmly patrilineal, form of settlement. Like Australia—which is frequently described as "*terra incognita*"—Meg is mysterious to Rankine, particularly because she will not have sex with him, even after he declares his love for her. Meg is waiting for Rankine to propose, and for them to be married. But this is not because she is averse to the idea of sex before marriage in itself. Indeed, she has had various "dalliances, hurried excursions in love" since Marsh (the father of her son Warren) and before Rankine. "[B]ut when it came to irreversible pledges she had been unmovable, and the reason was loyalty to Warren having a father at all, in a country where orphans and illegitimates were the order of the day" (140). Combined with the focus on domestic groups in descriptions of colonization, and the alignment of Meg with the land, this passage suggests that entry into the land is reserved for those willing to pledge themselves to fatherhood.

The validated and celebrated settler, in other words, is not the young, adventurous bachelor but the mature, responsible citizen. While the occupation of land in *Ballad* is sexual, such sexuality is of an authorized, paternal form. This privileging of the paternal signifier underlies some of the more curious occurrences within the text, such as why Meg's father Kale, rather than her illegitimate lover Marsh, penetrates first and furthest inland to discover a fertile, inhabitable continent.

Meg's insistence on marriage before sex, and the resulting emphasis on paternity, also illuminates the central theme of inheritance. Blood is determinant in *Ballad*—whether for sheep or humans—and there are constant references to breeding. The ability to herd sheep, for example, is inherited. Both Rankine and Kale are descended from families of sheep raisers. Kale passes this ability on to Warren, although in other ways Marsh was “an impactful sire” (365). While shepherding seems to pass solely through the male line, “if there ain't the matching ewes, the breeding is a waste” (273). A ram needs a good ewe (and a man needs a good woman) if they are to produce vital stock. On the surface, these references to blood and breeding are ironic. Nevertheless, Meg—the good woman—does in fact emerge as a conduit between important or “impactful” men: as Kale's daughter, Warren's mother, Rankine's wife, and Marsh's lover, Meg is the link between all the white male characters with an important relationship to Australia.

The focus on patrilineal inheritance relates to the class divisions that also inform *Ballad*. Although Kale and Rankine explicitly promote freedom and equality for all (white men), both men's fathers were gentlemen in Ireland and England respectively. The relationship between Kale and Rankine's social class and their position as leaders in the movement inland is reinforced (albeit satirically) by Tharpe's explicit references to class divisions in settlement. Dismissing small settlers as puerile beasts, Tharpe considers “the deserving poor” (204) to be the proper settlers of Australia: but only “a gentlemanly sort of Irish poor. It was the gentleman in Kale appealed to him, not the rebel” (205). The frequent allusions to Kale and Rankine's noble origins represents a self-conscious reference to the pastoral themes that run throughout the text: narratives in which men of high birth live among simple shepherds are common in this tradition. Yet this self-conscious literariness does not mitigate the determinant quality of patriarchal inheritance in *Ballad*. Although Australia is presented as a place where “everything became opposite of what it had been before . . . Those that were down were up, their wrongs made right” (479), in fact, the British status quo (in a seemingly idealized form) is reproduced, with English and Irish gentlemen leading the devoted lower class to an ideal inland settlement. While the non-gentlemen convicts work to provide food and infrastructure for Kale and Rankine's inland fiefdom, Rankine and Kale achieve wealth through wool.⁸ Thus, an explicit focus on equality and freedom conceals an elite, male-dominated vision of Australian settlement, one that not only maintains the status quo but upholds the power structures and ideologies that sustained the British landowning class.

Most significantly in terms of the discourse of settlement presented in *Ballad* is the elision of the history of indigenous disposition and genocide that enables the novel's vision of the ideal Australian society and settler. In all instances of movement inland in *Ballad*, the goal of white settlement is only achieved with the assistance of indigenous people: specifically, indigenous men. On Kale's original exploration he was accompanied Mun'mow. In his second journey out—with Biddy, in the present time frame of the novel—Kale is left with only

twenty-seven remaining ewes from so many hundred, and two greatly horned rams, . . . after the rest were speared. . . . when Clumpsy M'Carty appeared with a black man, Piper, who was able to speak to the attackers and persuade them off. They set to work building fences and yards where Rankine in two months would find them. (629–30)

Just as Piper rescues Kale's sheep, Titus ensures the safe inland passage of Rankine's town:

Tomorrow, as promised by Rankine, Titus would be the white man's best hope, and ride with Rankine and Warren, and the whole big company of livestock and people negotiating their way through country of tribes less friendly than this one's—cheeky buggers, Titus would call them, and shoot some. They would find a country to run sheep on. Then Titus would go back east where he came from, and like his grandfather, Mun'mow, live up along the creek somewhere, knowing what he knew. (635)

These passages may be interpreted as attempts at historical accuracy, rather than as a guiding framework for the conception of settlement. In his speech at the Sydney Writers Festival, McDonald emphasized (and gained approbation from Clendinnen for) his commitment to “fictional truth”—that is, the use of historically accurate references to provide a believable groundwork for fiction. Certainly, indigenous people assisted European explorers and settlers, sometimes in clashes against other indigenous groups.⁹

Yet if these passages are attempts at historical accuracy, their effect is to transpose the violent history of Australian settlement. This is particularly apparent in Titus's fulfillment of Rankine's promise: Titus, rather than any European, shoots indigenous people. As well as projecting all of the violence of colonization onto Titus, the fact that he calls these people “silly buggers” before killing them brings an awful levity to this depiction of the murder of indigenous tribes. If Titus functions as a tool to transform European settlement into “whiteness without genocide” (Rutherford 56), this process is personified in the appearance of Piper. Playing no part in the rest of the (very long) novel, Piper is simply “a black man” who arrives at the right time to save Kale and his sheep and build his fences.

Disavowal of indigenous dispossession and genocide is reinforced in other, less immediately apparent ways. In particular, the fact that indigenous men only assist certain settlers—that is, convict-citizens like Kale and Rankine town—reinforces

and authorizes the settlement idealized in *Ballad*. Another example of selective assistance occurs when Stanton's prize ram is stolen. With his tracking abilities, Mun'mow realizes that Rankine stole the ram, but tells Stanton it was attacked by wild dogs. I introduce this example in addition to the ones above because it emphasizes two important elements in the portrayal of indigenous assistance to Europeans in *Ballad*. Firstly, despite superficial appearances, Stanton specifically does not belong to the group of elite, heterosexual settlers celebrated throughout the text. Not only are his origins much lower than those of Kale or Rankine, his repeated homoerotic fantasies about Titus undermine his ostensible heterosexuality. Moreover, as Reverend and Magistrate in the colony, Stanton is a representative of the law of the "old world." Accordingly, his complete defeat in the latter part of the text manifests the generational and psychic struggle central to Rutherford's description of the fantasy of the Australian Good.

Secondly, Mun'mow's ability to read the land—which, in *Ballad*, is said to exist beyond "the western limit of signs" (35), and "past all civilized knowledge" (280)—and to know the truth (in this case, of the attack) symbolizes the original and special relationship to the land indigenous people are acknowledged to have in *Ballad*. This acknowledgement contrasts with a text like Bail's *Eucalyptus*, similar in other respects to *Ballad* (and also a Miles Franklin Literary Award winner) but widely criticized for reinstituting the myth of *terra nullius*. Yet *Ballad* does not uphold indigenous land rights. Instead, this original relationship to the land allows indigenous assistance of particular Europeans to function like a treaty—a contract that attempts to authorize European settlement of Australia in general, and in particular, to authenticate male, heterosexual, and white claims to Australian inland space. European invasion of Australia is re-imagined as the result of an initial acknowledgement of mutual goodness and worth between the indigenous custodians of Australia and certain Europeans. At the same time, this is a specifically male colonization fantasy.

The fact that only men are involved in the land treaty creates another relationship of exchange: while white women are exchanged among white men, the land is exchanged between certain white and black men. Indigenous men are presented as subjects in this exchange—as is suggested by the fact that Titus, after assisting Rankine's town, goes "back east where he came from . . . knowing what he knew" (635). But contained within this acknowledgement of indigenous male subjectivity is the expulsion of such subjects from the domestic space of white colonization. While friendly indigenous men are relegated "back east," uncolonized Australia is aligned with unfriendly Aborigines (that is, with Aborigines who resist rather than assist colonization). In other words, what lies outside the colonized realm in *Ballad* is not only a feminine realm awaiting penetration, but an unfriendly indigenous zone awaiting pacification.

Finally, although indigenous people are represented as having an original association with the land, *Ballad* institutes parity in the relationship of white and black men to Australian space.

Drawing on classical tradition, *Ballad* depicts an instinctive harmony, and relationship of mutual possession, between the white shepherds and the natural world. What seems a fairly benign construction becomes malignant when transplanted into the context of Australian land rights. It suggests that anyone living on the land possesses, and is possessed by, that land as much as any other: just as the sheep "become natives of the place they inhabit" (193), so do those who move to and into Australia. In granting everyone who lives on the land an equal relationship to it, *Ballad* does not deny original indigenous possession, but it makes that originality—and any special connection to the land that relationship might entail—irrelevant. Parity in the relationship of indigenous and white native-born people to Australian space is reinforced through an overt discourse of equality between Titus and Warren. These boys travel together, share hardships, and trust only each other. When they return to Australia together, they both kiss the land with equal fervor. However, this ostensibly positive representation of equality between a white and a black boy slides into a discourse of equal rights and relationship to Australian land. At the same time, the fact that Titus has no comparable vision of freedom and national sovereignty during the Fourth of July celebrations on board the sealing ship suggests that this apparent equality actually conceals the inequalities of Australian settlement. Thus, a discourse of freedom and equality is transplanted onto—and used to overwrite and simplify—a complex ethical situation, important both historically and today in Australia.

In concealing historical and social realities and inequalities (of race, class, gender, and sexuality) behind a mask of equality and emancipation, *Ballad* embodies Rutherford's description of the fantasy of the Australian Good. Certainly, the celebration of the good Australian settler in *Ballad* is produced by, at the same time as it conceals, fundamental aggression towards indigenous people, women, homosexuals, and the working class. As in Rutherford's analysis, this dominant fantasy is manifested in a rejection of the old law and institution of the apparent freedom of the new: in *Ballad*, this is signified by Kale and Rankine's explicit valorization of political equality and freedom, and rejection of British-colonial society and norms. But as Rutherford demonstrates—and as is apparent in the focus on paternity, inheritance, and class distinctions in *Ballad*—this new order is in fact a more aggressive reincarnation of the old.

This new society conceals any potential void at the center of the Australian subconscious (created by the dissonance of colonization and symbolized by the alienation of white people from the interior of the continent) through the domestication and pacification of the Australian inland, and the rejection and expulsion from that space of Others to the white, elite, heterosexual male settler. Accordingly, although *Ballad* does not institute *terra nullius*, Ken Gelder's comment on *Eucalyptus* is pertinent: "the novel's untroubled pastoral world gives us an image of a unified Australia that might have been if only it could pastoralise itself all over again" (51). Ultimately, *Ballad* reflects and celebrates the prejudices of

contemporary Australian society while concealing them by projecting them into an idealized past. By seeking refuge in the past, and celebrating traditional, colonialist values, *Ballad* presents a simplified reconstruction of what is a more complex and ethically problematic reality. As Rutherford notes, the glimpses of the dark underbelly of the fantasy of the Australian Good "believe more optimistic readings of Australian culture as a culture in transformation—the culture *par excellence* of a new inclusionary, multicultural and sexually equitable state" (12).

The fact that this particular version of Australian society is authorized by winning the Miles Franklin Literary Award challenges the comfortable view that aesthetically meritorious fiction can be appreciated unproblematically, without consideration of the politics from which it is produced. It is a responsibility of literary critics to uncover and explore the political undertones of fiction. Such explorations, however, are forestalled by the veneration of aesthetic values creeping back into discussions of Australian literature. This approach to literature emerges as a disturbing consequence of Clendinnen's assessment of historical fiction and produces some of the inconsistencies of her argument. It informs her claim that, while historians have a moral obligation to the past, novelists' "only binding contract is with their readers, and that ultimately is not to instruct or reform, but to delight" (31). Thus, Clendinnen approvingly quotes Peter Carey—a figure previously at the center of debates about history and fiction—when he asserts that "It doesn't matter what is out in the real world: this is art and you are making it to suit your needs" (32).¹⁰ Clendinnen excludes aesthetically meritorious fiction from political considerations. But, paradoxically, she objects to historical novels that, instead of simply "inform[ing] us about the past . . . project back into that carefully constructed material setting contemporary assumptions and current obsessions" (28). As my above argument suggests, this is exactly what McDonald's text does.

I have no problem with such projection: indeed, I would take Clendinnen's criticism as a workable definition of the potential pleasures of historical fiction. However, the contemporary assumptions and obsessions that inform McDonald's novel are exactly those that Clendinnen rejects elsewhere in "The History Question" and her other work. Not only does *Ballad* present the "self-congratulatory story of 'the frontier'—the American "style of patriotic 'history' . . . corrupt, feel-good 'history'" (58)—that Clendinnen condemns, but it manifests the "liberal fantasy view of our origins"¹¹ she also attacks: the view, Clendinnen explains, that "conquest—the taking of this land for our own purposes, which were incompatible with Aboriginal purposes—could have been 'done nicely'" (53). McDonald combines an emphasis on historical accuracy and emancipatory rhetoric with an over-determined aestheticism (manifested in his non-realist allusions to pastoral conventions and invocation of romance through the "ballad" conceit). The politics concealed within this concoction are difficult to see from Clendinnen's position of reverence for historical accuracy combined with a belief that what delights aesthetically cannot offend politically.

While McDonald's colonial fantasy seems specifically designed for the blind spots in Clendinnen's approach to historical fiction, it is also possible that Clendinnen overlooks the elisions and aggressions of McDonald's text due to her own particular vision of the Australian Good: her view of Australia as "a land of opportunity, with class divisions porous for people of courage and tenacity. My father and his father before him had proved it. I was consciously proud of that" (59). This is a vision that resonates with the overt meaning of McDonald's text, and with the notions of mateship and a fair go for battlers (or working families) that have been substituted for political debate in Australia. The effect of Clendinnen's blindness to, and sympathy with, the politics informing McDonald's text correlates with her attack of Grenville's book, a text that actually attempts to engage with the history and horrors of colonialism. In relation to fiction at least, discussion is reduced from broad moral raised by the representation of Australian history to a narrow focus on historical accuracy.

Clendinnen's contradictory attitude to historical fiction—that aesthetically pleasing fiction cannot be politically displeasing, and that novelists should tell the truth about the past—might be understood as her attempt to insist on the disciplinary authority and expertise of historians by reclaiming history's reference to the real. Given the crisis all the humanities in Australia are currently experiencing, discussions of disciplinarity are important. But I would point out that Clendinnen's position asserts history's boundaries by denying literary critics disciplinary expertise, or even a voice, in the debate about the relationship between fiction and history.

But her argument also has relevance to literary studies. First, her praise of *Ballad* demonstrates a reification of aesthetics has the potential to conceal politically regressive ideologies. Literary critics—like historians—have an obligation to attend to and remain vigilant about the politics underpinning fiction. We should still appreciate and celebrate literary accomplishment, but we should not be blinded to politics by beauty. Such vigilance seems particularly important in relation to those texts, like *Ballad*, that are authorized through literary awards such as the Miles Franklin, and which in turn become representative of the national canon, both within and outside Australia. Second, and more positively, literary critics can learn from Clendinnen's staunch insistence on ethical obligation in the face of the history wars. Although reading fiction to uncover the political intentions of the text is increasingly unfashionable in Australian literary studies, as Clendinnen says, "Given the power of stories, historians"—and here I would add, literary critics—"must be on constant alert regarding their uses" (65). Historians and literary critics may explore different narratives—and that said, I would not situate the boundary as strictly as Clendinnen—but a principle of ethical obligation provides a potential bridge by which Australian literary critics and historians might speak to each other and, moreover, work together to insist on the political resonance, importance, and responsibilities of all stories. □

NOTES

1 According to Austlit database records (accessed on 12 July 2007), *Ballad* has been reviewed in twenty-two magazines and newspapers (all Australian and largely in response to the novel being short-listed for, and then winning, the Miles Franklin Literary Award) and in three academic journals—*Antipodes*, *Australian Literary Review*, and *Westerly*—all following the award of the Miles Franklin.

2 At the beginning of *Ballad*, Captain Tom Rankine “of His Majesty’s N. S. Wales rangers” (7) frees Kale so that Kale can look after his flock of sheep and together they can produce the best wool in the colony. Kale travels inland with the herd while Rankine returns to Sydney to court, and later marry, Kale’s daughter Meg. Rankine also procures, for Kale, a lover (Biddy Magee) and the Reverend and Magistrate Matthew Stanton’s prize ram. Rankine is subsequently imprisoned on Van Diemen’s land for this theft, before he is pardoned by the new governor in return for agreeing to survey the route between Sydney and Kale’s inland location.

³Judith Tabron’s chapter on *White* contains extensive discussion of this trope. Paul Genoni theorizes this sense of alienation generally, and specifically in relation to *Voss* (92–95), as well as fiction by Thea Astley, Gerald Murnane, and Rodney Hall.

⁴Simon During’s analysis of *White* is an exception to this general rule. In During’s view, *White*’s oeuvre exists on the cusp between the colonial and the postcolonial moment.

⁵Ken Gelder makes this argument in relation to Bail’s book. Analyzing Koch’s novel, Hilary Harris identifies a similar “dismissal of the grief, and sacrifice . . . for some people living, and dying, in the wake of the colonial system” (158). Jeanette Hoorn’s recent book, *Australian Pastoral*, makes this argument in relation to Australian landscape painting from the late eighteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries.

⁶Warren is Meg’s son and the Reverend and Magistrate Matthew Stanton’s shepherd. Titus is an indigenous boy Stanton “rescued” from a “native camp” (12). Stanton takes both boys with him on a ship to England (where he aims to attain maps to reveal Kale’s inland location). However, he abuses Titus so badly that both boys escape the ship at Brazil. To return to Australia, they join the crew of a whaling ship and later a sealing ship.

⁷For instance, Meg is described as having “nothing but beauty and pride” (214) and as being “half Kale pride, half Inchcape wildness. One half bewildered the other” (215).

⁸Rankine even dreams of “a year ahead of him . . . when he would return to Yorkshire a rich man and reclaim his green acres” (377).

⁹Conceivably, the fact that Rankine promises Titus’s services—rather than Titus deciding to assist the settlers independently—contributes to historical accuracy. Personally, however, I am more inclined to read Rankine’s promise as a demonstration of his husbandry—that is, his consideration for, and care of, his town as befits a father-figure settler.

10 Similarly, their shared veneration of aesthetic quality causes Clendinnen to not even notice James Bradley’s other criticism of her argument; she is merely “grateful to the novelist James Bradley for his comradely wave from the other side of the ravine” (“Response” 67).

11 John Hirst, quoted in Clendinnen 54. Although Clendinnen disagrees with much of Hirst’s argument in “The History Question,” she shares his rejection of and impatience with this particular fantasy.

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