

The Writing of *The Secret River*

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I'm honoured to have been asked to present the Blaiklock Lecture for 2005. I'm also very pleased to have the opportunity to put on record my gratitude to the University, and to the School of English, Art History, Film and Media in particular. Their generosity in providing me with an office in which to write has been of enormous assistance to me in the writing of *The Secret River*—an act of support both to the practicalities of writing and the morale of the writer. Thank you.

Some families have a silver milk-jug or an embroidered christening-robe that are handed down from generation to generation. Our family didn't have those, but it had a story about an ancestor, Solomon Wiseman of Wiseman's Ferry.

As my mother told it, Wiseman had worked on the Thames in the early nineteenth century and in 1806 had been transported to Australia for an unknown offence. Once here he'd settled beside the Hawkesbury River and made good. He'd died a rich and respected man, being buried, so the story goes, in top hat and tails, a box of sovereigns at his feet.

It was a common enough story of early Australia and had never been of great interest to me until I joined the hundreds of thousands of others walking across the Harbour Bridge in 2001 for 'Reconciliation'. Doing that walk, I realised that when Wiseman settled on the Hawkesbury, he must have had dealings with the Aboriginal people of that area—the Darug and the Darkinjung.

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It became an urgent need for me to know what his relationship to them had been.

Every novel needs an engine to drive it through several years of work. The story about Wiseman was the engine for *The Secret River*.

My first idea was to write a work of non-fiction about the story of Wiseman—as a representative settler—and the Darug. What happened on the frontier—not in the abstract or the generality, but in the particular, to one man, in one place?

Research into Wiseman's background in London quickly led me to the transcripts of the Old Bailey trials. From these I learned that he'd been a lighterman of 30 when, on a dark night, he was caught red-handed stealing some timber. As his employer grabbed him by the collar, Wiseman cried 'For God's sake Mr Lucas have mercy, you know the consequence!' (the timber was valuable, and the consequence would have been a mandatory death sentence). In the moment of reading those words—his own words, travelling across 200 years!—I could hear the voice of a living, breathing, terrified man. In that moment, the abstraction of 'history' suddenly became personal.

The Mitchell Library and the Government Archives held a surprisingly full paper trail of Wiseman's life in Australia. In some of the documents his signature appears, although contemporary anecdotes about him suggest that he couldn't read or write beyond his own name.

After his arrival in 1806, he was assigned to a master (probably his wife). He got his Ticket-of-Leave after a year or so and in 1810 was granted an Absolute Pardon. The term of Wiseman's natural life had turned out to be about four years.

Over the next five years he set about making money. He ran an inn in Sydney, then borrowed several hundred pounds and had two boats built for him, with which he ran a lucrative coastal trade in cedar, coal, and farm produce. Disaster struck in 1817. Both his boats were wrecked within a few months of each other and he had to surrender his inn to discharge his debt. In 1818 he and his family (by then he and his wife had six children) went to

live on the Hawkesbury River at a place now known as Wiseman's Ferry. He prospered from farming, trading and other ventures and died a rich man.

Between the lines of some of the documents—the petitions and letters to the authorities—something of his character emerges: shrewd, persistent, ingenious, willing to beg and truckle if it would get whatever permission or indulgence he was after. For example, in August 1817, soon after the wreck of his boats, he petitioned the Governor for permission to fetch cedar from Port Stephens:

... May it therefore please your Excellency to bestow on your petitioner for the sake of himself and heavy helpless family who are enveloped in misfortune, the indulgence of procuring and bringing up the said timber.

Your Excellency's petitioner has a wife in an actual state of invalidity and six children.

Wiseman employed a clerk who lived in his household and presumably produced, at his employer's dictation, such documents as this one from 1828, a request to be assigned a carpenter—a class of person rarer and more valuable in the colony than rubies.

... I am at present awkwardly situated, my stable is left in an unfinished state—the carpenter whom I employed has decamped and like all the other scoundrels of his description who leave their employers when they get in their debt, so did he after getting in mine—he is a free man therefore I shall take out a warrant for his apprehension if I can possibly trace him out. ...

By the end of all this research I was the world authority on Solomon Wiseman. Whatever he had left behind to prove that he had once lived on the earth, I had unearthed. I was getting excited about the book now and could see how these vignettes could take their place in a kind of mosaic of information about Wiseman.

However, there was a vital piece of the story missing. In all the hundreds of documents by and about Wiseman, there was absolute silence on the matter of the Aboriginal people.

Perhaps (as the family story suggested), they'd 'all gone' by

the time Wiseman arrived on the Hawkesbury, although I doubted that. The lower Hawkesbury was the outer edge of settlement—the frontier—in 1818. It seemed incredible that the Darug would have already ‘gone’.

It was also possible that the Wisemans had co-existed so peaceably with the Darug that there’d been nothing of sufficient note to appear in the record.

Either way, if I hoped to explore the theme of early black/white interaction, that silence was no use to me. It was clear that the project would have to become a work of fiction.

The advantages of fictionalising the story were that I could explore the theme I wished to. The story could be shaped for maximum drama and accessibility and thus its theme would reach a wider readership.

The disadvantage was that of all historical fiction—the reader can’t know where ‘history’ ends and ‘fiction’ begins. With a subject as controversial as this one, readers would be able to dismiss the book as ‘nothing but a novel’.

The best I could do was to write fiction, but to base it as closely as I could on the historical record. I’d use the story of Wiseman as far as it would take me, and then I’d base the rest on real people, places and events from the record. I’d adapt, embellish and extrapolate, but I wouldn’t actually invent.

The difficulties of creating a convincing early nineteenth-century lighterman’s world seemed insuperable. Research has its limitations in providing the kind of moment-to-moment authenticity that a novel needs. I needed incidents, the small but actual moments of which a life is made up. I also needed to know the kind of thing no one ever bothers to write down: what did they eat for breakfast? In the absence of elastic and zippers, how did they keep their pants up?

A way into the actual moments was suggested by the historical record. Governor Arthur Phillip, in particular, left wonderfully vivid accounts of specific events.

One of the incidents that caught my ear was an account of the

first meeting between Phillip and the Aboriginal people of Broken Bay. Phillip and his men had been welcomed into Pittwater by an 'old man' and others who assisted them in every way they could. The next day, this happened:

A hatchet and several presents were made to them, and as I intended to return to Port Jackson the next day every possible means were taken to secure [the old man's] friendship ... but when it was dark he stole a spade, and was caught in the fact. I was displeased with him, and therefore, when he came to me, pushed him away, and gave him two or three slight slaps on the shoulder with open hand, at the same time pointing to the spade. This destroyed our friendship in a moment, and seizing a spear he came close up to me, poised it, and appeared determined to strike ... but after a few moments he dropped his spear and left us.

With the benefit of twentieth-century hindsight it's clear that this unfortunate moment is based on ignorance and misunderstanding on both sides. Phillip knew nothing of Aboriginal protocols regarding guests and hosts: the 'old man' probably knew nothing of European ideas of property and theft. As Inga Clendinninghas so convincingly argued, such moments were based on cultures with no common language—metaphoric as well as literal.

This was exactly what I needed—the nuts and bolts of an incident in which ignorance and misunderstanding quickly turned to distrust and hostility. I gave the scene, with minor changes, to my character William Thornhill (for the adaptation of this scene in the novel, see page 142 of *The Secret River*).

A way into that other dilemma—the what-kept-their-pants-up question—was more difficult. For example in my research I kept coming across a thing called a 'slush lamp'—obviously some kind of primitive lamp used by the poor. But what was it? What did it look like, and what kind of light did it make? What kind of fuel did it burn?

Being a creature of the twentieth century, I did the obvious—I Googled it. To my astonishment there were several hits, and on the basis of what I found there, I set about making my own slush lamp.

I cooked the family some lamb chops for dinner and poured the fat into a saucer, then took a thin strip of fabric from the edge of one of our fraying bathroom towels and hung it over the edge of the saucer. I lit it with a very modern match—flints and tinder was a whole other story—and stood back.

In the next few minutes I learned more about the actuality of slush lamps, and all that their actuality implied, than any amount of reading could have taught me. I learned that the light from a slush lamp is tiny—half the size of a candle flame. I also learned that the lamp gave off quantities of thick black smoke, and that it smelled, overpoweringly, of lamb chop. Suddenly I could see that bark hut on the bank of the Hawkesbury—almost completely dark, full of smoke and a smell—not of fresh lamb chop, but elderly salt pork or beef fat. I also realised that the fat in the lamp, for people this poor, would have been food. Fat was a luxury. You had the choice: light, or a scrape of dripping on your bread.

The other way into the actuality of the settler experience was to spend many days in the bush. A local Hawkesbury guide showed me the traces of Darug and Darkinjung life still recorded on the landscape itself, written on trees and rocks: trees from which canoes and shields had been cut, the scars still visible in their trunks; axe-grinding grooves in the beds of streams; cave paintings; rock engravings. I realised these 'texts' had been all around me, and I hadn't had the eyes to read them until shown. Now I saw them everywhere and realised how fully this landscape had been inhabited and used by the Aboriginal people. The landscape—its full history and its empty present—became a sort of touchstone that I returned to again and again in the writing.

In early drafts I tried various different 'voices' as a way of telling the story.

Third person seemed a good way to tell it—it gave me the flexibility to enter the consciousness of as many different characters as I liked and to provide narrative information that none of them could know.

The problem was, as soon as I tried third person, the writing took on the tone of the worst kind of research-heavy 'historical novels': coy, a little facetious, and horribly know-all.

First-person offered the advantages of an enforced intimacy between reader and character. Given the themes I was exploring, it was important for the reader to live through the characters' experiences, not simply stand back and judge them.

On the other hand it would be very difficult to sustain a convincing nineteenth-century lighterman's voice for three hundred pages. Peter Carey had just pulled off a similar virtuoso act of ventriloquism in *The True History of the Kelly Gang*, but I didn't think I could do as well.

Using a first-person narrative would also deprive me of the opportunity to convey anything Thornhill himself didn't know.

What I chose in the end was the 'smoke and mirrors' voice—third-person subjective. The main consciousness is Thornhill's, but there's a little elbow-room for the author to whisper into the reader's ear.

That whispering especially took the form of a certain kind of writing about the landscape. In early drafts, without really intending it, I'd humanised the landscape through imagery: trees 'gestured', the dark 'skin' of the rock overlay its golden 'flesh', and so on. Without having to be over-explicit, a sense was emerging of the Aboriginal presence as part of the landscape—people and country as one. As draft succeeded draft, that seemed a good way to convey something of the closeness of the identification between the land and its original people.

Reading the primary sources, the difference between eighteenth- or nineteenth-century sensibility and our own is stark. The idea that certain races were inherently inferior to others, and the idea that slavery was acceptable, are just two that are deeply foreign to us. Thornhill, born in 1777, was obviously a product of that time.

But which part of his time? It was an age of racism, but it was also the age of Rousseau and the Enlightenment. As an illiterate worker on the waterfront, Thornhill would have been spared the

pseudo-science of the time that justified racism. He wouldn't have been reading Rousseau, but he would have come into daily contact with sailors from other lands, in the kind of familiarity that undercuts racism.

Just what Thornhill's world-view might have been was far from clear. This seemed a problem, until I realised that this uncertainty gave me the opportunity to show the variety of settler responses to the Aboriginal people. This response went all the way from the 'treat them like vermin' attitude of the character Smasher Sullivan to the acceptance and respect shown by Thomas Blackwood. Somewhere in the middle, travelling a journey of increasing understanding, was William Thornhill.

Giving Thornhill a journey rather than a fixed attitude also allowed some space for the reader to move. At the beginning of Thornhill's journey, for example, he sees that the Aboriginal people built no fences or houses and planted no crops. In the world he knew, that meant they did not own and did not use the land. As the book progresses, he comes to see that these are not the only markers of ownership and use. Watching his Aboriginal neighbours, he realises that they have as great a sense of territory as any Briton, and that in their own way they are farmers—managing the land in their own way—at least as much as he is.

I wanted to write a reasonably naturalistic book that would bring the events vividly to life for a reader, so naturalistic dialogue was in order. However, it was almost impossible to get a sense of how an illiterate Thames lighterman of the late eighteenth century would have spoken.

Almost by definition, the kind of spoken language used by the illiterate was not written down or recorded in any way. All the sources, for example, mention the 'foul oaths' for which the watermen were famous—but what were they exactly?

In the first draft, I used the word 'fuckin' liberally in the dialogue. It was a quick way to make the dialogue rough, coarse and brutal, so that I could hear a voice as I wrote. But even as I

was writing it, I knew it would have to go: apart from the numbing effect of its over-use, it felt much too modern. It had served its purpose, but I went looking in earnest for other ways to achieve the same effect.

Literature gave me a few leads: Dickens, Fielding, Defoe, Sterne, all contributed a few turns of phrase. But the vernacular in literature has already gone through a considerable filtering process. Sterne at least shows you the filter—all those dashes—but I wanted to know what the filter had caught.

Accounts of eighteenth-century Cockney were useful, although they, too, stepped delicately around anything too colourful. Although I knew Cockney had changed enormously in the nineteenth century, I made lists of contemporary Cockney usage:

I done it, I seen it
He axed me
Learn = teach
Arse about face
Had a bellyful of that
Give us it
Dressed any old how

I was especially interested in the ones I'd heard here in Australia and which had obviously made the journey with their owners.

I remembered phrases my grandfather (a poorly-educated country labourer) had often used: 'when all's said and done', 'by and by', 'My word, 'donkey's years', 'I'll do it directly', 'as plain as the nose on your face', etc. To my ears these had the sound of an earlier and less educated language. I also remembered kids I'd gone to school with who'd used 'youse' and ended their sentences with 'but' in the sense of 'though', or said 'was' for 'were' (as in 'You was dobbed.'). Whether these were authentically antique usages I didn't know, but they at least *sounded* antique.

Private letters by definition were written by people more educated than the illiterate William Thornhill, but the letters of Mary Reiby, for example, gave me a few phrases:

The necessaries = the toilet

I will watch every opportunity to get away in 2 years

I have near a hundred pounds about me and am never without a box of tea in the house.

One of the best sources, though, were the transcripts of Old Bailey trials, 'taken down in shorthand' by a clerk. They had certainly been cleaned up as they made the transition to paper, but now and then something of a real spoken voice breaks through:

Q:Were you drunk?

A: I was not drunk nor I was what they call real sober; I 'was sensible'.

... I said, what in the name of fortune possessed you to do it [steal some sails], his reply was, the devil got into my head.

... You are a pretty fellow, we have got you now; Harfield said damn me if I don't do for you, I said you are a blackguard and a scoundrel to use me in this manner when I have been a friend to you divers times, he said, you may be damned; damn my eyes if I live to come back, if I don't do you.

... Prisoner's defence: I am as innocent as the child unborn.

I thought that present-day 'Aboriginal English' probably also derived some of its distinctive features from early settlement: for example, the use of the word 'gammon' in the sense of humbug, common in Aboriginal English, sounded to my ears like a fossilised remnant of an older English.

I have pages and pages of colourful words and phrases, some of them—'I give him a souse across the chops' or 'shut your bone-box'—irresistible. Early drafts are full of them. But because they're so obscure and so little heard, they drew attention to themselves. Even when their meaning was clear from context, they sounded forced, contrived, artificial. They screamed 'well-researched historical novel'. In the end almost all of them had to go.

The only 'antique' words I left were the ones where the meaning is completely clear and which are reasonably familiar, if

only from literature—words like ‘physick’ , ‘apothecary’, ‘britches’— or ones that are still used today, although unusual: ‘rotgut’, ‘tucker’, ‘victuals’.

Another dilemma was whether or not to try to convey the pronunciation of words by spelling them phonetically: ‘Gawdelpus’, ‘nuffink’.

In early drafts I tried this, but realised that it had the effect of making the speaker very much the ‘other’—a member of a quaint or peculiar group whose language has to be spelled out. It implies that the writer (and reader) are the standard from which these other speakers deviate, so, even when it doesn’t intend to, it has a belittling effect. It’s hard to take seriously the emotional interiority of a character who’s speaking in a laboriously spelled-out ‘dialect’. (Of course, if the entire book is written this way, this doesn’t seem to be a problem. In *Huckleberry Finn* or *A Clockwork Orange* the ‘dialect’ becomes the standard language, not a peculiarity, and the reader soon adjusts.)

The other problem is that all those apostrophes and funny spellings are very distracting for a reader. As a reader myself, I find myself sounding out the dialogue to make sense of the way it’s written on the page, and that breaks the spell of the reading.

I heard E. Annie Proulx—a great writer of ‘non standard English’ characters—speak about this: she said that she tried to make the order of the words convey the ‘accent’ or cadence, to use distinctive words and phrases, and to use phonetic spellings only very sparingly. Where she uses phonetic spellings, they’re usually of words that we’ve grown used to seeing written in non-standard ways: ‘git’ for ‘get’, for example. A scattering of such words, she thought, and working on the rhythm and cadence of the sentence, gave you an accent more harmoniously than all that tedious stuff with apostrophes.

I thought this was an elegant solution, and got rid of all but a very few phonetic spellings, leaving only a few common ones such as ‘ain’t’. For a while I tried ‘going to’ (as in ‘I’m going to pick it up’) as ‘gunna’ or ‘gonna’ but both of these looked wrong—

familiar enough, but too modern, somehow. 'Going to', on the other hand, was much too 'correct'. In the end I spent a lot of time re-arranging the dialogue in order to avoid the phrase completely.

Above all, I deleted. I found that if dialogue was very short and there wasn't too much of it, I could get away with the sleight-of-hand I was attempting. Anything longer than a sentence or two and I was in trouble.

In all my efforts and research, I was looking for something that had energy and that sounded authentic—something unusual, colourful, atmospheric, but not outlandish. In the end, after a great deal of fascinating research, I decided that my job as a writer of fiction was not to re-create the authentic sound of eighteenth-century vernacular. No eighteenth-century Thames waterman was going to rise up from the page and prove me wrong, after all. My job was to create the illusion of authenticity.

In early drafts the Aboriginal characters had conversations in English with the Europeans. But this presented difficulties. From the historical record I knew that many Aboriginal people learned fluent English with a speed that astonished the settlers, but the people on the frontier of the Hawkesbury probably wouldn't have had enough contact with settlers to make that likely. They would, I guessed, have understood a fair amount of English and spoken it to some extent. But to be convincing, Aboriginal characters would be speaking broken English.

The problem was that characters in fiction who speak broken or pidgin English, and who are therefore unable to express nuance or complex ideas in speech, tend to end up as caricatures. Writing down their speech verbatim sounds condescending.

As the drafts progressed, Aboriginal dialogue was pared away more and more. There's now only one short scene where an Aboriginal character speaks English.

Removing virtually all the Aboriginal dialogue deprived me of opportunities to show character and convey information (such as about the destruction of the yam-beds leading to hunger). On balance, though, the sacrifice seemed the lesser of two evils. It deprived the Aboriginal characters of the chance to reveal

themselves—but on the other hand it didn't make them stumbling caricatures.

During the writing I wrestled with questions of 'truth'. I was writing 'fiction'—what was my responsibility to the 'facts'?

Writing historical fiction, I decided, brings with it a responsibility at least as great as the historian's. Novelists don't have to do footnotes. Their interpretation of the past can't be checked or challenged. And yet if the fiction works—if it speaks to the reader and carries them into a sense of the lived reality of the past—the fictional version of that history is what many readers will retain.

The fictional experience is a powerful one precisely because it's not an argument, it's an experience. It's learning by doing. That experiential kind of learning isn't particularly valued in a culture like ours that privileges analytical ways of learning—but it's how we learn the important things: about falling in love, about feeling fear or ecstasy.

As a novelist I felt bound to take this responsibility seriously. Like a historian's, my job was to take the relics of the past and interpret them with as much honesty as possible. Like a historian, I couldn't pretend not to have my own views and prejudices. The honest thing seemed to be to acknowledge them and work with them. Like a historian, I should always be working from first principles—the historical record, the logic of landscape and the realities of human behaviour—towards the themes, rather than beginning with the theme and choosing only the relics that would support it. My understanding would, of course, be limited and partial. But mine was not the only book on this subject, and between the works of many different writers, something true would emerge.

The great privilege of being a writer of fiction is being able to enter other lives, other worlds, and to invite the reader along with you. Some lives and some worlds are harder to enter than others. A novelist might spend five years or more inhabiting them in order to find the words for them. At the end there are no simple answers—the best you can hope for after all that work is to be left with the fruitful mystery of human behaviour.