

Late Retrospectives on Twentieth-Century Catastrophes: the Novels of Ronald McKie

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In her 2009 Dorothy Green Memorial Lecture published in *JASAL*, Lydia Wevers endorses Green's claim that 'journalism encourages a strongly coterie view of life, bounded by certain pubs, certain restaurants and the club' (Wevers 2; Green 92). Dorothy Green wrote this in 1977 in a combined review of four novels by journalists, one of which was Ronald McKie's *The Crushing* (1977). She thereby added an intelligent aside to Patrick White's famous dismissal in 1958 of earlier Australian novels as 'the dreary, dun-coloured offspring of journalistic realism' (338). Presumably, in nominating a coterie view of life, dreariness and realism as distinctive failings, neither Wevers, nor Green, who worked as a journalist herself during World War II,¹ nor even White, would have wanted to expunge fiction associated with journalism from Australia's hypothetical literary canon. If such a canon exists, the removal of authors ranging from Lawson and Paterson, through Marcus Clarke, Brian Penton, Vance and Nettie Palmer, and George Johnston to Christopher Koch and beyond—many of whom were journalists by necessity rather than choice—would impoverish it beyond recognition.² The aim of this essay however is not to defend journalist-authors or 'journalistic realism' in Australian fiction, nor even to defend the good but flawed novels of a member of the journalistic sub-species, Ronald McKie, although I believe that these novels deserve more attention than they have received. Instead I propose to investigate the particular view of early twentieth-century Australian society and literary fiction that McKie's novels provide, forming as they do a point of intersection between various literary and social ideas and ideologies.

McKie was born 'in a white cottage beside the botanical gardens in Toowoomba, Queensland'³ on 11 December 1909, and died at Canterbury, Victoria, on 8 May 1991—his life symmetrically spanned the twentieth century. He published three novels, *The Mango Tree* (1974), *The Crushing* (1977) and *Bitter Bread* (1978), after retiring from a career in journalism that had reported many of that century's pivotal events, mainly in Australia but also overseas. From 1942 to 1972 his feature articles in newspapers and magazines kept pace with the writing of seven books—war histories, travelogues and social analyses, all of them in their different ways relevant to Asia.⁴ McKie first developed a fascination with Asia when reporting in Singapore for the *Straits Times* from October 1937 to September 1939. Far from being judged by readers as 'dun-coloured,' his war histories *Proud Echo* (1953) and *The Heroes* (1960) ran through several editions and multiple reissues. They lightened journalistic research with novelistic techniques such as outward and inward characterisation, variations in perspective and pace, a grounding in closely-observed details, and, if anything, an over-use of literary devices such as similes.

McKie reports that soon after joining the reporting staff of the *Sydney Telegraph* in 1935, he discarded a 100,000-word historical novel set in Queensland.⁵ When in his sixties he finally found time and a 'room'⁶ in which to realise his boyhood ambition of writing fiction, he redeployed the techniques he had practised over four decades of writing facts. Strong evidence supports his claim that he drafted his novels within a year or so of their publication date.⁷ At any rate, all three of McKie's novels were unarguably 'offspring' of the 'journalistic

realism' so fiercely critiqued by White. The catch is that by the 1970s they were about to become, if they were not already, an anachronism.

The first section of this essay examines the vision of Australian life during World War I, the 1920s and the Depression, which McKie's novels, drawing on his first-hand memories, transmitted to his son's and granddaughters' generations of readers.⁸ Under this heading I consider how the novels incorporate ideas about war, nationalism, insularity, immigration, race and economic hardship that McKie had fashioned individually before, during and after World War II, or had picked up collectively from his particular journalistic 'coterie' at Australian Consolidated Press. A second section discusses how McKie's belated fiction, which departed from most of its 1930s and 1940s realist forebears in being politically right-wing, negotiated publication in the 1970s, when upheavals in government, culture and ideology were contesting illusions that upward-spiralling prosperity had nurtured in Australia since World War II.

I. McKie's Fiction and the Early Twentieth Century

When McKie sat down to write his novels, he had behind him a lifetime of varied experience. *The Mango Tree* and *The Crushing* (1977) were inspired by his boyhood in Bundaberg Queensland, while *Bitter Bread* (1978) was based on his years in Depression Melbourne. He could also draw on his first-hand observations as a reporter of Asian and European affairs before, during and after World War II, and of events, such as the 'Pyjama Girl' murder mystery, the Petrov Commission, the Orr dismissal and the Opera House construction, which had defined Australian politics and culture up to the 1970s.

Although McKie's novels do not lack a critical edge or original ideas about the decades in which they are set, they negotiate a compromise between the catastrophes of War and Depression that so damaged the new Federation's confidence and creativity, and readers' desire to be reconciled with history and, on a deeper level, with the uncertainties and tragedies of living. His fictions offer an élitist portrait of culture and class, but counteract this, as Dorothy Green perceived, by 'love,' i.e. by valuing humanist ethics of kindness and compassion (*The Mango Tree* 202). All three of McKie's novels assume a central Anglo-Celtic identity for Australians, but seek paradoxically to liberate that identity from English political control and cultural dominance. In tone they drift among tragedy, farce, action sequences, sentiment and satire.

The Mango Tree and *The Crushing* use fictional sugar towns in coastal Queensland as analogies for Australian insularity and agencies for promoting immigration and learning from the wider world. Steeped as they are in older forms of nationalism, they implicitly advocate reconciliation with wartime enemies such as Germany and Italy, but elide living Aborigines from Australia's story. *Bitter Bread* contains a detailed, deeply-felt exposure of the effects of the Great Depression on ordinary Australian city dwellers, but looks to the strength of individuals and to gradual economic recovery as solutions.

***The Mango Tree* and the Great War**

Unlike other Australian novels that view World War I through young people's eyes, such as George Johnston's *My Brother Jack* (1964) and David Malouf's *Fly Away Peter* (1982), *The Mango Tree* neither dwells on the effects in Australia of maiming and war neuroses nor transports readers' imagination to the battlefield. Instead McKie's treatment of World War I

mimics the Australian media's coverage of the Vietnam War, in its final phase at the time of writing, by keeping the fighting in the reader's awareness, but limiting its impact.⁹ Like *Proud Echo* and *The Heroes*, McKie's first published fiction venerates courage and resilience as human qualities capable of mitigating, and even outweighing, war's horrors; but rather than confronting them in direct description, the novel shifts both the slaughter and the heroism from battles abroad to the provincial home front, where they prove to be containable.

The Mango Tree hinges on the relationship between Jamie, who as a stand-in for McKie is chief focaliser for the third-person narrative, and his Grandmother who brings him up after his parents' deaths. Neat chapters are dedicated to events between Christmas Eve 1917 and Christmas Eve 1918, the year in which Jamie turns seventeen (4). The small-town setting invites extrapolation to Australia as a whole—a 'broken nation'¹⁰ at the end of World War I, when towns and cities struggled to support the War effort in the face of shattering personal losses and social dislocation. Through Grandmother, McKie vocalises his idea that World War I destroyed the opportunity for building an Australian Utopia in which character, not inherited privilege, would decide status (57). His view finds endorsement in recent insights that Australia's participation sacrificed the new Commonwealth's chance 'to lead the world in democratic reform' (Lake 8). Jamie was born symbolically in Federation year, 1901; when, with the Great War fading slowly into history, he leaves his town behind, a tender last chapter looks northwards and southwards across the continent, backwards and forwards in time, with a deep sense of national and personal loss.

The misty sadness of *The Mango Tree*'s ending invites comparison with the conditional and shattered peace achieved at the end of *Fly Away Peter*. However, unlike Malouf's Jim, who slides with other young Australians into the chasm of the War,¹¹ Jamie is too young to enlist. *The Mango Tree* nevertheless traces his growing understanding of the carnage and its consequences at home. On the third anniversary of Gallipoli,

[d]imly now he felt the war as a presence. A gathering mass. Just mounting the horizon. Something that was no longer happening in another place to other people at another time. But rushing at him. . . . In a few months he would be seventeen . . . (121–22)

However, the subsequent narrative transposes the slaughter onto a local religious maniac who beheads the town's police sergeant gruesomely with a shotgun (136–37), and targets other citizens from the water tower, until a returned army sniper shoots him dead in a scene of surrogate warfare.

Later *The Mango Tree* negotiates between the War's unendurable realities and the reader's affirmation of life. The tragedies caused by the Spanish flu are countered by the heroic self-sacrifices of the doctor, nurses, Grandmother, Jamie, and their housekeeper Pearl in caring for the sick. Grandmother's own self-chosen dying at the point of victory over the pandemic provides the novel with a moving climax. Throughout *The Mango Tree*, Grandmother's actions exemplify the love and compassion which, according to her friend the Professor, are 'what life is about' (202).

Multiculturalism

The Mango Tree is also redolent with hope in that it offers a miniaturised model for a multicultural community. This was informed by the author's experience of Asia and Europe

before, during and after World War II, and supported at the time of writing by the idealism of the early Whitlam era (Bennett 441). McKie's first book, *This Was Singapore* (1942) exposes the arrogance and self-indulgence of expatriate British and Australians in Singapore and Malaya:

Sure of his privileges of comforts and position the Tuan builds round himself a high fence of three-ply and acts as though it was made of steel. . . . From behind his flimsy wall he rules. The higher he goes in his little hierarchy the more he worships the system which creates him. (208)

More than forty years later, McKie revealed that his arrival in Singapore in 1937 was an 'alarming' revelation of Australian insularity and ignorance, including his own: 'though Asia is set apart from its outrider islands, we Australians are still part of it.'¹² When, in 1964 in *The Lucky Country*, Donald Horne, a younger former member of Consolidated Press's 'journalistic coterie,' expressed a similar view—'We're all Asians now' (126)—many Australians had at last been willing to listen.

The opening to *The Mango Tree* draws on the historical founding of Bundaberg, when the local people deck the town with fresh gum boughs, a Christmas tradition adopted from the district's first German settlers (3). From the perspective of 1974, the description promotes reconciliation with an old enemy and a further assuaging of war's horrors. '[I]n return for help and favours' (7), the German families pay their respects to Grandmother, the town matriarch, who is of Anglo-Celtic heritage, with gifts of farm produce. The narrator emphasises that these descendants of German immigrants are 'fiercely Australian' (6). Similarly, a Greek, 'Georgi Comino, Australian,' commissions a mural for his café that commemorates the 'brave men' on both the *Emden* and the HMAS *Sydney* (59–60). These episodes maintain a core Anglo-Celtic Australian identity which is open to enrichment by other imported nationalities. Chinese market gardeners and shop-keepers process after the German farmers, presenting Grandmother with culturally appropriate gifts of fruit, vegetables, silk and fireworks. Grandmother is one of 'the rare few' to visit the Chinese in their homes: 'Chinatown was a ghetto, physically and in most minds' (7).

In *The Mango Tree*, Jamie's 'new and restless longing for . . . strange places he had never seen, for people he had never met or could never hope to meet' (11–12) further fictionalises McKie's lifelong critique of Australian insularity. The migrations of Queensland birds and animals, recorded with a loving detail that again foreshadows *Fly Away Peter*, whisper of overseas nations to which Jamie longs to escape. Visiting Italian musicians likewise 'brought with them a rumour of the breathing world beyond the black scrubs' (50). The novel's repeated references to immigrants and the attractions of southern Australia remind readers that, whatever their advantages, small northern towns, like distant island continents, restrict their inhabitants' experience and mental horizon.

Aboriginality, Mysticism and Nationalism

In contrast with immigrants, living Aborigines are notably absent from *The Mango Tree*, as they are from virtually all of McKie's books and reporting, which by and large perpetuate white Australia's twentieth-century amnesia about settler-indigenous interactions (Reynolds 1–21). Thea Astley's *A Kindness Cup* (1974) and Robert Drewe's *The Savage Crows* (1976) nevertheless confirm that by the mid-1970s novelists were beginning to awaken readers to the

savage realities of frontier conflicts. Astley in particular characterises Aborigines as human beings, rather than as cultural icons or subjects for scientific study.

In Chapter Six, the Professor, a Cambridge-educated but drunken remittance man, takes Jamie to ‘a shallow stony gully’ (76) beyond the town, where he traces indentations left by the sacred rings of the Boorool (presumably Bora), and describes the ceremonies that once took place: ‘The circle was the balance of life. . . . Silence is the inner well of quiet where wisdom is born’ (78–79); ‘the boys who became men here knew, as we are forgetting, the terror and wonder of God’ (76). The Professor emphasises the primacy of ‘mysteries not of a mere twenty centuries but twenty twenty centuries from the time of innocence. When the world was not yet contaminated by European men, the greatest of all destroyers’ (78). Jamie’s encounter with Aboriginal ceremony, mediated and overseen by an older white male and set apart from the daily life of his ‘tribe,’ amounts to a symbolic initiation. It speaks loudly of earlier and later settler utilisation of Indigenous culture by tourism and other commercial interests.

Clashing discourses nevertheless make up the Professor’s lessons: Aboriginal culture is revered for its wisdom and antiquity, but presumed dead. The Professor acknowledges the destructiveness of Europeans, but has no qualms about appropriating the Aboriginal voice and speaking for Aborigines on a basis of European scientific observation. *The Mango Tree* seems to derive these ideas from versions of Australian nationalism like the 1930s and 1940s Jindyworobak Movement, which sought to assimilate the spirit of Aboriginal culture by identifying with it (OCAL 408). Mystical nationalism of this kind came to fruition in 1942 in Eleanor Dark’s *The Timeless Land*.

As he grows, Jamie imbibes Grandmother’s love of Australia—a recognition of being ‘simply part of it. By becoming, inside one’s very being one with its deep vast mystery that will forever influence its people and make them new’ (19–20). Such passages spiritualise the unexamined ‘radical,’ i.e. working-class, nationalism that Anglo-Celtic Australians carried into the twentieth century from the Sydney *Bulletin* and other 1890s literature (Reynolds 19–21). McKie revisited his hope for an indigenous-white cultural conjunction in the title of his last book, *We Have No Dreaming*, a part-remembrance, part-polemic which he published in 1988.

The town hierarchy, presided over by Grandmother in *The Mango Tree*, therefore endorses a central Anglo-Celtic Australian identity which is open to decorous enrichment by European and Asian immigrant cultures. It elides living Aborigines, but claims for Australian-born Europeans a deep connection to the landscape modelled on Aboriginal people’s spiritual feeling for country.

Anglophobia

Paradoxically, McKie refines his assumed Anglo-Celtic basis of Australian identity by demanding severance from English patronage and power. In this novel, Grandmother, supported by the Professor, is again the main exponent of his vision, which recognises, without stating it directly, the British government’s failure to consult Australia about either the decision to enter World War I or about military goals and strategies. At a Grand Patriotic Rally, Grandmother rebukes Fred the Fattler, a ‘troublemaker’ who refuses to take off his hat for ‘God Save the King’ (88–89), thereby neutralising any moves towards a Russian-style workers’ revolution. Later, however, she vehemently reminds the crowd of Australia’s disproportionate sacrifices in the Empire’s wars, and upholds a separate national identity (90).

The songs that the townsfolk choose to celebrate the Armistice enlarge McKie's ironic critique of English control over Australia's destiny—'Land of Hope and Glory'; 'Rule Britannia. . . .' (196).

That McKie's anti-British nationalism reflected a personal dislike is suggested by his next two novels, in which English characters are the leading deceivers. Current events while he was drafting *The Mango Tree* again conspired to support his feelings, when, after prolonged negotiations, Britain joined the EEC on 1 January 1973, a move which some Australians saw as a betrayal.

The Crushing and the Roaring Twenties

Like *The Mango Tree*, McKie's second novel pinpoints a single year, in this case 1924 (6–7). The title is a pun, in that the narrative traces an elaborate swindle in the cane crushing season perpetrated on the leading citizens of Tarom, a fictional North Queensland coastal town (56–57) by three English tricksters posing as a family. Like the lovable but degraded Professor in *The Mango Tree*, Colonel Wade as gang leader demonstrates to the townspeople the dangers of automatic respect for English ethical and cultural dominance, and conversely the destructive delusions generated by provincial pride, which is code for Australian insularity overall (13). Although the dating of *The Crushing* to the jazz age makes it overall a happier book than *The Mango Tree*, the happiness is brittle, erected as it is on the citizens' overweening blindness and hidden mutual betrayals. Tarom's fate in fact invites reading as a semi-comic parable, a satire of the excesses of a reactive, expansive and noisy intermission that was ushered in by global warfare and disease, and closed in 1929 in global economic collapse.

Manifestations of Tarom's superficially bright new world include Dr Talbot Telfer's shiny silver-grey Napier, which has recently replaced the gig pulled by his friendly mare. The Doctor, who has served the town with benevolent self-sacrifice since his arrival in the 1880s, is the novel's moral compass. The movements of animals, especially birds, remind him, as they do Jamie in *The Mango Tree*, of the wider world: 'The tide was far out, the beach a spread of butter patterned by the feet of gulls and nervous runs of sandpipers back from Siberia or the Japanese Sea' (28). Doc Telfer deplures the era's devotion to 'things,' and, true to McKie's Jindyworobak style of place-based nationalism, preaches harmonious intimacy with nature (28–29). This anti-materialistic and environmental consciousness, like the auras perceived by the novel's protagonist, Lavinia Jobson, 'Mrs. T.J.,' links the 1920s setting with spiritual preoccupations of the 1970s, the Age of Aquarius.

The interplay in *The Crushing* between surfaces and depths is typical of McKie's writing in all genres, and Tarom's layout, like its superficially jovial social life, is symbolic of class and ethnic differences (8). Doc Telfer knows all his town's secrets—'secrets that hid behind many a bedroom door. Behind the mask of respectability, the façade of pride' (5). Compared with the nauseating cruelties and murders hypocritically concealed in Astley's comparable Queensland town of The Taws, however, Tarom's secrets are trivial (*A Kindness Cup* 42–47, 66–72). McKie's satire is accordingly benevolent and comic, and *The Crushing*'s only substantial reference¹³ to Aborigines concerns the Gurra Gurra clan's long-lasting hospitality towards an escaped convict (99).

Among Doc Telfer's secrets is the knowledge that Tom Jobson, who owns the mill and most of the town, is a serial adulterer. His employees and dependent business people collude to

maintain Tom's facade, but Joe Hudson, his underpaid book-keeper, takes a just revenge through secret plots. Meanwhile the three tricksters outshine the locals by cultivating false surfaces emphasising modernity. Delia Wade enrolls the whole community in classes on the Foxtrot, the Paso Doble, the Quick Step, the Jazz Waltz, and the Charleston, with its risqué squiggle and kicks. She wears cloche hats over her shingled hair, and short, long-waisted chiffon dresses (82). Meanwhile her pretend brother, Tim Wade, smashes speed records by riding his motor cycle at as much as fifty miles an hour (103–04), and Colonel Wade crafts an identity for himself as a wounded ex-soldier, whose bogus MC and DSO surpass all the local military honours. The tricksters wheedle their way into the citizens' trust, but signs of a coming cataclysm remind the emporium-owner of the 'awesome trail' of Halley's Comet that presaged the War (120). Overall, the hollowness and fragility of Tarom, its residents and visitors, replicates the shaky frenetic expansiveness of the Jazz age, both in Australia and internationally.

Bitter Bread and the Great Depression

At the end of a four-year journalism cadetship with the Brisbane *Daily Mail*, McKie was one of 250 employees sacked late in 1933, when the *Mail* merged with the *Courier*. He sailed steerage to Melbourne, and endured months of hunger and hardship while sharing a Richmond tenement with 'Gregory,' an English friend. Employment on the Sydney *Sun News-Pictorial* and the Melbourne *Age*¹⁴ gradually rescued McKie from poverty. Following his friend's death from pneumonia, he worked briefly as a press secretary to former Prime Minister Billy Hughes in Canberra before obtaining steady employment with the *Sydney Telegraph*.

Bitter Bread, which is set in 1934 (182), a neat ten years after *The Crushing*, vividly recreates late-Depression Melbourne, based closely on the author's responses at the time. The focaliser Ted Carter is another stand-in for McKie, more thinly disguised than Jamie in *The Mango Tree*. A former Brisbane cadet journalist born in western Queensland in the same year as McKie, Ted feels anger, distrust and near-despair, but unflinchingly ends by doing the decent thing. He buys food and lodging for his older university-educated friend Justin Stanley, who loses jobs because of his touchy intellectual arrogance and an English disdain for everything colonial. Ted's honest naiveté produces irony, as he is cheated financially by Justin, and devastated emotionally, at the end of the novel, by Anna Crewe, a young woman whose preference for Justin is obvious to everyone except Ted. Ted, however, is capable of learning and, when, having survived the Depression and his friends' betrayal, he sets out at story's end for his new job in Sydney, he has embraced the never-say-die philosophy of his battler landlady, Ella Bragg: 'If yer once know yer beaten son, then yer a bloody gonner.' (257)

Bitter Bread contains a moving 'journalistic realist' investigation of the small- and large-scale effects of the Depression. In genre it is indistinguishable from social realist novels written in the 1930s and 1940s. Because McKie's plot does not deal centrally with close family ties, but with characters briefly brought together in a tenement by chance and need, it lacks the intensity of *My Brother Jack*, which, like *Bitter Bread*, was a latecomer to Depression fiction. As in all of McKie's novels, suffering gradually gives way to hope for the future. Justice is done when Justin dies of pneumonia and when, through some heavy-handed symbolism, 'the wide golden eyes' of his 'golden girl' Anna (194) are revealed to be 'the colour of raisin' (253). Satire and lively action scenes lighten the novel's overall tone.

The Depression features initially as an affront to aesthetic standards—to the surfaces which are always important in McKie’s writing. Number Seven Latrobe Crescent offends all the senses (12–13) and also speaks of despair. The narrator claims the reader’s understanding both for past generations of urban poor, and for the present semi-comic battles between Mrs Bragg and her confused son, Blue (13). Through Ted, McKie details the demeaning small shifts essential for survival, and the Depression’s mass effects, such as the thousands of starving men admitted to hospital casualty departments to be fed and revived before being sent on their way (75–76).

Historically, of course, experience of the Depression confirmed many Australians in their commitment to Communism and an international workers’ revolution, including writers like Judah Waten, M. Barnard Eldershaw, Katharine Susannah Prichard and Jean Devanny. Looking back on the era from the relative safety of the 1970s, McKie rejects these solutions. A former architect, now doss-house inmate, whom Ted interviews for an article that he hopes will publicise the urgent need for ongoing aid, tells how he spoke in favour of Bolshevism at Yarra Bank, before concluding that, like the Nazi regime then arising in Germany, Communism would end in the establishment in Australia, ‘not of a workers’ paradise but of a minority party tyranny, a police state, in which the masses were not far removed from the position of serfs under the Czars’ (82).

McKie nevertheless validates Ted’s anger over the gross injustices he observes and experiences every day. His editor refuses to publish the doss-house article because of a policy ‘from above’ in Melbourne’s Centenary year ‘to play down the slump’ (82). Ted’s forays into the upper-class luxury enjoyed by his great aunt Elizabeth Trevelyn and her friends contrast powerfully with the privations at Latrobe Crescent (141). In the words of a cab driver, the unemployed receive ‘three bob extra susso for a bloke and five bob for a bloke and his missus’ to celebrate the Centenary—‘So that the jobless can share in the general rejoicing?’ ‘That’s right,’ the driver said, without glancing back. ‘Like bloody hell’ (162).

Without considering capitalism’s drive for unending growth, Ted searches amid widespread misery for the Depression’s causes. He blames ‘leaders—the same people responsible for half the world being out of work’ (97). Justin’s idea, that the cause was ‘the plague of fear’ (93, 97) stands without rebuttal. *Bitter Bread* implies a reformist solution to catastrophe in the form of gradual recovery and widening employment within the existing economic structures. Late in the novel, the young men’s experience of the celebrations suggests that, against the odds, ordinary people’s patient resilience has cleared a path, as it did through war and pandemic in *The Mango Tree*, to a brighter future: ‘They strolled down Collins in the middle of the street among girls singing. Groups in white, their dresses stained by the amber glow that abolished the stars. From some church choir, they sang hymns of praise, of rejoicing’ (192). Irony, however, may not be far away.

II. McKie’s Fiction in the 1970s

McKie’s retrospective novels, especially *The Mango Tree*, were received surprisingly well during their publication era. They won qualified approval from the literary commentariat and significant if short-lived interest from Australian readers. Several factors combined to ensure the novels’ success. One was that they embodied a nationalist tradition and a vision of Australian life which the older official guardians of Australia’s literary culture valued and wanted to preserve. In this the elders were abetted by a younger reading and movie-going public that was eager to rediscover, and as far as possible imaginatively to relive, Australia’s

past, wishing thereby to raise their country's profile in the world. These audiences expanded the place-based nationalism that had typified the Jindyworobaks with an awareness of the environmental fragility of the coastal or urban regions where they mostly lived.¹⁵ That McKie's novels meshed with the aspirations of both these groups, the scholarly and the popular, to preserve and conserve, explains their success in their 1970s publication decade. In several respects McKie's fiction marked the end of the early defensively nationalist phase in Australian literature, in contrast with the globally-oriented phase, featuring recognition of Indigenous and immigrant participation and rights, which was to follow.

McKie and the Literary Establishment

McKie's reputation as a journalist and writer, especially in Sydney, probably influenced the Commonwealth Literary Fund's decision to support the writing of *The Mango Tree*. When, by an initiative of the newly elected Whitlam Labor government, the Literature Board of the Australia Council was providing fitting financial assistance to Australia's creative writers for the first time (Brett 458, 461), McKie benefited from an extension that covered the writing and publication of all three of his novels and his part-autobiography, *Echoes from Forgotten Wars* (1980). He was lucky that his late spate of fiction-writing coincided with the Literature Board's 'dramatic impact' (Brett 457), but the received largesse did not moderate the right-wing political views that he had cherished since before the era of Petrov and McCarthy.¹⁶

As well as grants, Australia's official culture presented McKie with its highest literary accolade when *The Mango Tree* won the Miles Franklin Award in 1974. At sixty-five he was to date the oldest recipient of the Award, which *The Mango Tree* won against an average-sized field of eighteen novels (Heseltine 96–97). Harry Heseltine, who joined the judging panel in 1978, confirms that the announcement on 22 April 1975 'provoked no dissension in the media . . . while the author himself was a well-liked and respected journalist' (21). Intense controversies, notably the 'Demidenko affair,' were to erupt in the 1990s, but McKie's win was still a respite at the time between criticism of the judges' refusal to make the Award at all in 1973 (when only six novels had been submitted), and Xavier Herbert's ungracious behaviour at the 1976 Award ceremony for *Poor Fellow My Country* (Heseltine 22). The judges' decision was unexceptionable in that *The Mango Tree* obviously met Miles Franklin's criterion of 'presenting Australian Life in any of its phases.' While it is not 'of the highest literary merit' throughout, chapters and individual passages are, as the judges' report stated, 'beautifully written.' Moreover, it is an engaging book to read, especially for young readers.¹⁷

Contemporary reviews like Helen Hewitt's confirm both the quality and the unevenness of *The Mango Tree*, but in awarding the prize to McKie, the judges responded to more than the 'coterie-dom and cronyism' that, as Lydia Wevers argues, 'go with the territory' in small national literatures like those of Australia and New Zealand (2). Although Award judges Colin Roderick and Beatrice Davis were former editors at Angus and Robertson, which had published all seven of McKie's earlier books, William Collins published McKie's novels and late reminiscences. *The Mango Tree*'s mystical nationalism would have appealed especially to the panel's third permanent member, the poet Ian Mudie, who had belonged in his youth to the Jindyworobak and Australia First movements, while Miles Franklin's friend and accountant George Williams may have thought that the book fulfilled the spirit as well as the letter of her will. In 1974 the four permanent judges were of a similar age to McKie,¹⁸ and Roderick and McKie had grown up in Bundaberg in the same decade.

Interfaces with Film

In the exact year that *The Mango Tree* won the Miles Franklin, the public's fascination with romantic versions of Australia's past was about to be gratified in cinemas. *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975), *Storm Boy* (1976), *The Devil's Playground* (1976), *The Getting of Wisdom* (1978), *The Irishman* (1978) and *My Brilliant Career* (1979) deal, like McKie's novel, with the pains and joys of growing up in early twentieth-century Australia. McKie may have had an eye to film rights while writing, since both *The Mango Tree* and *The Crushing* revel in action sequences similar to those that the Australian industry was soon to adapt from American Westerns. The rumbustiousness and pictorial exactitude of events like the super-boozy funeral in *The Mango Tree*, and the snobbish garden party invaded by hundreds of goats in *The Crushing*, insert 1970s visual entertainment modes into these novels' representations of 1918 and 1924. Yet McKie's bush town farces also wield a bitter edge that recalls Henry Lawson's classic story about a funeral, 'The Union Buries Its Dead.' Both novels also feature vivid filmic descriptions and plays on perspective.

When the inevitable movie of *The Mango Tree* itself was released in 1977, the director was Kevin Dobson, and Michael Pate, not McKie, wrote the screenplay. Apart from a magnetic performance by the Irish-American veteran, Geraldine Fitzgerald,¹⁹ the film marked a low point in the Australian film renaissance,²⁰ and is not a sound basis for evaluating *The Mango Tree* or McKie's other novels. Internet images and excerpts, and advertising for the DVD, bolstered by reissues and a new edition of the novel, sustained a trickle of interest into the twenty-first century, but no substantial academic commentary on McKie's fiction has post-dated the first wave of reviewing and reporting.²¹

***The Crushing* and the 1970s**

Contrasts in Dorothy Green's review of *The Crushing*, 'Quartet for Three Horns and a Virginal,' which this essay began by quoting, reinforce my argument that McKie's neglected novels and their reception illumine the 1970s as an important transition point for Australian fiction. Green begins by noting that three of the authors whose works she is reviewing 'are in their thirties, one is in his sixties.' Like the Miles Franklin judging panel, who were of a similar age to herself, she evidently saw the justice of acknowledging McKie's foregoing achievements: 'McKie's period piece, fanciful as it is, is perhaps the least blinkered; probably because, though his novel is parochial, his experience of life has been the least parochial' (92).

Principally, the review contrasts *The Crushing*, equated with 'a Virginal,' with the 'Three Horns' of Robert Drewe's *The Savage Crows* (1976), Craig McGregor's *The See-through Revolver* (1977) and Frank Moorhouse's *Tales of Mystery and Romance* (1977). Green leaves it to the reader to grasp her title's sexual symbolism, which presages her satiric references to the goatish relationships that Drewe's, McGregor's and Moorhouse's protagonists, i.e. the 'Horns,' have with female characters who function chiefly as acoustic reflectors for male egoism and neuroses. By contrast Green notes that 'The hero of McKie's novel *The Crushing* is a heroine, Mrs. T. J. Jobson, for whom sex has become a marginal interest through no fault of her own' (93)—i.e. 'a Virginal.'

Green also makes her musical symbolism the basis of a contrast in the novels' treatment of sex and excreta: '[I]t would be safe to give [*The Crushing*] to one's maiden great-aunt' (94); 'McKie belongs to the row-of-asterisks school and, after a session with Drewe, Moorhouse and McGregor, a line of dots would be welcome' (93). In fact, their novels show that these 'smart new-wave Australian writers' (92) were bursting to exploit the 'new possibilities'

which the *de facto* collapse of censorship had opened up (Brett 454–55); but as a newspaper man habituated to restrictions McKie continued to write in the older ‘purer’ way. A more important contrast is that whereas Green saw that in *The Crushing* ‘McKie’s heart . . . is in the right place, bless him’ (93), the three ‘Horns’ wallow in scepticism, nihilism and a concomitant mood of ‘acquiescence’ (94). Green’s understanding of eastern and western philosophies surfaces throughout her review, and on this foundation she builds her case for civilised restraint, positive values and continuing the fight—ideas that were mostly unquestioned by the older traditions that McKie’s fiction brought forward into the 1970s.

Conclusion

Ronald McKie’s novels, this essay has argued, create a place where defining trends in twentieth-century Australian ideology and fiction meet or criss-cross. Drawing on the author’s memories of childhood and early manhood, McKie’s fiction provided snapshots of Australian life, spaced at roughly ten years apart, which helped to shape 1970s Australian attitudes to World War I, the Roaring Twenties, the Depression, the north, small towns, class, race, the national identity, immigration and Australia’s connectedness to the wider world. Secondly, as much as anything, this essay is an attempt to refine understanding of Australia’s literary history in the 1970s. I have suggested that McKie’s retrospective novels were welcomed in the 1970s by a younger generation keen to enjoy romantic versions of Australia’s past, and that they provided a platform from which senior commentators and Award judges could reassert traditional virtues like courage and kindness, and the worth of the nationalist literary tradition that was passing.

NOTES

¹ Drusilla Modjeska comments: ‘Dorothy Green had one break from teaching. During the war she worked as a journalist, first on the *Daily Telegraph* and then for the ABC. In 1942 she was sent to Brisbane to set up and run an independent news service for the ABC. It was hard work but good training, for journalism gives a sense of audience and an understanding of political realities which are hard to achieve within the cloistered preoccupations of the universities. After the war and the return of men to journalism, Dorothy Green went back to teaching.’ (*The Music of Love*. Introduction 4).

² Writing in the August 2014 edition of *Australian Book Review*, new novelist Kevin Rabalais celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of *My Brother Jack*, by former journalist and World War II correspondent, George Johnston, in terms that are anything but dun-coloured: ‘The novel begins with the burnished quality of something handed down through generations, its opening lines like the first breath of a myth. . . . [T]he work remains a watermark for Australian literature’ (46–48).

³ *We Have No Dreaming* 2.

⁴ See the list of McKie’s books, 1942–1972, in ‘Works Cited’ above.

⁵ Hazel de Berg, Hazel. National Library of Australia, sound recording of Ronald McKie made in 1975, <http://catalogue.nla.gov.au/Record/940512?lookfor=%22hazel%20de%20berg%22%20AND%20%28ron%20R%20mckie%29&offset=1&max=11> and family tree: <http://gdavis.id.au/family/trees/d24844.htm#i33697> accessed February 6, 2014. See also Sandra Symons’ report of her interview with McKie (1977).

⁶ In the sense explored by Virginia Woolf: ‘In a second floor dressing room converted to work room in his Paddington home [McKie] sits, writing steadily for seven hours a day’ (Sayers 17).

⁷ McKie was a prolific recorder and publisher of his life story. He wrote *The Mango Tree* while living in ‘a century-old house’ in Paddington, *The Crushing* while renting The Barn (built 1823), in Moss Vale, and some of *Bitter Bread* after moving to Bowral on 21 November 1977: ‘Writing *The Mango Tree* was an extraordinary experience, an outpouring of prose in a fashion that had not happened to him before. . . . “It worked inside my head for 30 years but didn’t come out. Then I decided one day that I must get down to the job of writing the thing and I bashed out about 40,000 words on the type-writer. They poured out. It was a strange compulsion. . . . The final drafts of the novel, reworked after the typescript had cooled in a drawer for several months, were written by hand”’ (Sayers 17); ‘Aspiring novelists will be comforted to know that it took McKie 20 years to work up to the point where he felt capable of writing *The Mango Tree*’ (Symons 53). McKie’s late reminiscences

and polemic, *We Have No Dreaming*, confirms that he began writing *The Mango Tree* 'late in 1971' (215). Chapter 12, 'The Novel That Waited Thirty Years,' describes the writing of all three novels in more detail, and reveals that 'gall bladder trouble' prevented McKie from carrying out a necessary rewriting of *Bitter Bread* (215–19). These publicised accounts are confirmed by McKie's extant private letters to John Fraser, dated 12 December 1972, 14 December 1976, and October 12, 1978. The same letters enable the tracing of Ronald and Anne McKie's changes of residence from 1951 to 1984.

⁸ Ronald and Anne McKie's son, Iain Lindsay Weedon McKie, was born in February 1947; their granddaughters, to whom McKie dedicated *We Have No Dreaming*, were born in 1976 (Claire) and 1980 (Anthea). On 26 November 1985 McKie wrote to John Fraser from Camberwell, Victoria, where he and Anne had moved in 1984: 'Claire, nine, and bright academically, is studying the cello, and Anthea, five, even brighter and built like a Sherman tank, draws brilliantly with a cartoonist's eye and argues furiously. . . . She will be an artist, an archbishop, or will end in jail.'

⁹ www.dva.gov.au/commems_oawg/commemorations/.../avw_topic4.pdf ; *We Have No Dreaming* 215. The last Australian contingent returned from Vietnam in December 1972.

¹⁰ *Broken Nation: Australians in the Great War* is the title of Joan Beaumont's recent revisionist history of World War I on the home front. The title is a tribute to Bill Gammage's classic published in the same year as *The Mango Tree*, which places individual soldiers at the centre of the story.

¹¹ 'Jim felt the ground tilting, as he had felt it that first day in Brisbane, to the place where the war was, and felt the drag upon him of all those deaths. The time would come when he wouldn't be able any longer to resist. He would slide with the rest. Down into the pit' (*Fly Away Peter* 56).

¹² *We Have No Dreaming* 64.

¹³ In another Indigenous-white conjoining, McKie describes cane-cutters as follows: 'Black from boots to hair after all day in burnt cane and streaked with sweat. Aborigines marked for a corroboree. Abos with scarlet eyes and licked lips' (194).

¹⁴ *We Have No Dreaming* 40; sound recording with Hazel de Burg.

¹⁵ 'Conceptions of Australia as a symbolic emptiness, which were prevalent in the 1950s, gave way to more precisely located fictions and a growth of regional awareness' (Bennett 434); 'Awareness of regional characteristics and differences increased during the 1970s and 1980s' (Bennett 445).

¹⁶ While drafting *The Mango Tree*, in a letter written on 14 February 1972 to his English cousin John Fraser, McKie referred to 'our communist-oriented new Labor Government ministers,' and predicted: 'Another few months of the new Government and we won't have any friends in the world, except perhaps the Antarctic penguins, and we will probably irritate them too.' Six months before his death he confided to Fraser similar views about the Hawke–Keating governments. In a letter dated 11 December 1990, McKie wrote: 'We've suffered nearly a decade of Labor rule, and the most conservative conservative could not have been more incompetent or more arrogant.'

¹⁷ In 1977 Noel Donnan exploited *The Mango Tree*'s appeal for young readers by preparing a Brodies Notes for high school students, and in 1980 Pauline Watson published an extract in *The Crossing. An Anthology of Australian Adolescence* (130–38).

¹⁸ Mudie and Roderick were sixty-three, Davis sixty-five, and Williams seventy-four. The New South Wales State Librarian, Russell Doust, participated in the judging *ex officio*, in accordance with Franklin's will.

¹⁹ Brian McFarlane recently described Fitzgerald's performance of Grandma's death speech as 'one of the most luminous performances by an actress in Australian film'; 'its potency derives in part from the way it is fed by our recalling the previous episodes in which Fitzgerald has commanded the screen, not by flamboyant technique but by the quiet fullness of her understanding of the generous-spirited woman' (*Senses of Cinema* No. 55, 2010).

²⁰ Don Groves: 'The Pates Conspire on Turgid Aussie Drama.' Rating 2 stars—'It may be unfair to suggest that Christopher Pate won the lead role in this plodding 1977 Australian melodrama purely due to nepotism.... Their small town is populated by clunky stereotypes the sickly, elderly drunkard known as the Professor (Robert Helpmann, excruciating) . . . a barking-mad lay preacher (Gerard Kennedy, eyes bulging), and a sadistic teacher . . . Young Pate looks out of place surrounded by his fresh-faced fellow students. The scene in which Jamie loses his virginity is simply awful, as is his attempt to appear heartbroken afterwards. His character starts out as shy and shallow and pretty much finishes in the same dreary state. The few moments of drama arise after the preacher and his niece go missing, and towards the end. A class act, Ms Fitzgerald is the only person who emerges from this inept film, dully directed by Kevin Dobson, with her grace and dignity intact . . .' accessed 14 March 2014 <http://www.sbs.com.au/movies/movie/mango-tree>; Aside from a report and comment by Des Partridge in the *Courier Mail*, contemporary reviews of the film were unenthusiastic

²¹ See lists of reviews in the 'Writing the Tropical North' community in AustLit:

The Mango Tree <http://www.austlit.edu.au/austlit/page/C509145?mainTabTemplate=workWorksAbout>;

The Crushing <http://www.austlit.edu.au/austlit/page/C32889?mainTabTemplate=workWorksAbout>;

Bitter Bread <http://www.austlit.edu.au/austlit/page/C251026?mainTabTemplate=workWorksAbout>

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<http://catalogue.nla.gov.au/Record/940512?lookfor=%22hazel%20de%20berg%22%20AND%20%28ron%20OR%20mckie%29&offset=1&max=11> and family tree:
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