

# When Nature Strips for Battle: Andrew McGahan's *The Rich Man's House*— an Eco-epic of the Anthropocene

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Andrew McGahan's novel *The Rich Man's House* (2019) is prefaced by an author's note stating that it is his last book. In his final work, racing against death in the final stages of pancreatic cancer, McGahan chose to write about two things he had always loved. In his interview with the *Sydney Morning Herald* he admitted his love of the kind of mystery with 'people trapped in a haunted house and what happens to them' (Steger), and he revealed his addiction to 'stories about people climbing mountains. So [he] wanted to write in some way a book that involved a mountain and [he] wanted to write a ghost story' (Steger). McGahan was also composing a deathless tract which is not only 'twice as long as most of [his] books' (Steger) but, as I would like to suggest, amplifies to epic proportions major narrative motifs and interests from his earlier works, notably the opposition between elemental forces of the natural world and humans with the constructions of their modern, industrialised world. According to Georg Lukács, the 'estrangement' from the natural world or 'the first nature' and a move towards 'man-made structures' or 'the second nature' characterises the transition from the epic to the novelistic genre, resulting in 'a projection of man's experience of his self-made environment as a prison instead of as a parental home' (62–63). In order to portray the clash of two environments and two formidable forces: the force of nature which has shaped planet Earth since the dawn of time and the force of humanity which has come to rival the power of nature in the last 12000 years—dubbed 'present' and 'a butterfly kiss of geological time' by Timothy Morton (2)—McGahan reaches for the epic roots of the novelistic genre, adopting conventions and structural devices of the epic and giving them a contemporary twist. In particular, McGahan's adaptation and reconfiguration of the figure of the epic hero and his quest, and the presence of the supernatural, reflect an earnest aim of undermining the legitimacy of anthropocentric narrative.

McGahan's oeuvre, which consists of seven adult and four young-adult novels, is as remarkable for its generic diversity as it is for the literary awards it has won. As Rosemary Sorensen puts it succinctly: 'we got the (anti)bildungsroman *Praise*, the road-trip-cum-marooned novel *1988*, crime story *Last Drinks*, Gothic tragedy *The White Earth*, political satire *Underground*, then that Eco-esque fantasy, *Wonders of a Godless World*.' The *Ship Kings* series for young adults comprises four fantasy novels about seafaring adventures. Within this generic diversity James Ley perceives 'an accessible style of issues-based fiction' ('Underground') and Salhia Ben-Messahel similarly claims that '[s]ince his very first and much celebrated novel *Praise* ... Andrew McGahan's writing has been preoccupied with social, cultural and political issues from the last phase of the twentieth century onwards' (93). These issues, as noted by both Ley and Ben-Messahel, concern Australian history—for example Australian colonial history in *1988*; the Fitzgerald corruption inquiry in *Last Drinks*; land rights and reconciliation with the Indigenous past in *White Earth*; and the war on terror and multiculturalism in Australia in *Underground*. In *Wonders of a Godless World* and *The Rich Man's House*, however, the focus shifts to the global rather than specifically Australian issue of environmental crisis. A corresponding shift of setting occurs and directs the reader away from known geographical locations and towards the universal implications of changes in the environment driven by the

progress of human civilisation. The story of *Wonders of a Godless World* unfolds on an unnamed tropical island while the setting of *The Rich Man's House* is a fictional island in the Tasman Sea.

Another common denominator underpinning the smorgasbord of genres in McGahan's writing is his 'lifelong fascination' (Steger) with extreme weather: 'I've always liked describing weather in books, storms if I get the chance' (McGahan, 'Conversation'). Not only does 'this connection to weather, to the natural world, bind ... his writing into a coherent whole' (Charles), but his novels, with their assortment of genres and themes, all depict the way nature and the sea play against man-made structures, which are often 'grandiose ... monuments to hubris and folly' (Ley, 'Vanity'). The clash of the environment and modern humanity embodied in its engineering achievements usually takes place at a remote, isolated location. Thus, a lighthouse on a secluded peninsula where Gordon, the protagonist of *1988*, has a job as a meteorologist is battered by a ferocious storm; in *The White Earth*, secrets of a decaying squatter mansion imposed on a timeless landscape are revealed through the agency of earth, air, water and fire, with fire finally consuming both the house and its owner John McIvor; *Underground* opens with the narrator, Leo James, sheltering in a newly built coastal resort during a category five cyclone; and raging storms, crashing waves and volcanic eruptions are featured in *Wonders of a Godless World* whose protagonists are confined to a psychiatric ward on a secluded island in the unidentified tropics. Both the impersonal natural forces that generate the extreme weather and the material expression of human arrogance are extraordinarily magnified in McGahan's final take on the topic, *The Rich Man's House*.

### **The Storyworld and Genre of *The Rich Man's House***

The house to which the title of *The Rich Man's House* refers, called the Observatory, is 'the most expensive private residence in recent world history' (McGahan, *House* 77). It is built within the solid rock of Theodolite Isle and faces the Wheel, the highest mountain on Earth, which rises more than 25 kilometres into the sky, 'defying comprehension' (87), piercing the stratosphere and generating its own extreme weather. Only one man has ever stood on top of the Wheel—Walter Richman, the owner of the extravagant house.

The world which McGahan creates in *The Rich Man's House* is one we can easily recognise as our own, but it is not quite the same. With the plot revolving around the conquest of the world's tallest mountain, the novel features well-known mountaineers from history. However, one of the most notable mountaineers, Sir Edmund Hillary, who was the first to reach the summit of Mount Everest, tragically dies in McGahan's novel in an attempt to reach a mark half-way up the Wheel. The Sherpa mountaineer Tenzing Norgay, who climbed Mount Everest together with Hillary, refuses to climb the Wheel, saying it 'is not a mountain as we know other mountains. It is something else' (148). Furthermore, pioneering lunar explorers Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin make appearances in McGahan's novel in order to serve as points of comparison to emphasise that mankind stepped on the Moon before any human being set foot on the Hand of God, which is how the pinnacle of the Wheel is known. It is not only historical figures that we recognise. Perhaps more importantly, the world McGahan creates is plagued by the same social injustices and environmental issues. Just as in the world we know, 'billionaires make their own rules' (72) and 'the intrusion of humanity' destroys the natural landscape which 'bow[s] to the inevitable, and die[s]' (389). The difference is that for narrative purposes McGahan augments the familiar world and infuses it with the supernatural thereby setting up an epic stage where a conflict of global significance can play out.

The antagonism between the two dominant forces that shape the planet is framed by McGahan as a tale of crime and punishment of one man. Indeed, on its website, the publisher Allen & Unwin advertises the novel as one of ‘crime and mystery.’ The first death that we learn about is that of Richard Gause, a world-renowned architect who designed Richman’s ‘controversial multi-hundred-million-dollar residence’ (22). As the ‘great invigorator’ (21), the death of a character acts as an incentive moment in the narrative. Gause’s estranged daughter Rita is invited by Richman as an exclusive guest in her father’s stead to celebrate the completion of the Observatory. Rita is a Melbourne vet with a past of substance abuse she would rather forget, together with the book she wrote at the time. After an elevator ride up a two and a half kilometres-long shaft to reach the lofty destination, Rita emerges from the super-sized rabbit hole and steps into ‘a fantasy palace’ (152). There she is joined by four of Richman’s closest associates and the host himself. At this point *The Rich Man’s House* starts to resemble Agatha Christie’s *And Then There Were None*. Once these characters meet and are cut off from the rest of the world, it is not long before, one by one, they start meeting their horrible and mysterious deaths: ‘A body frozen in a pool ... a body flayed to death by the wind ... one fallen and lost in an underground labyrinth ... one blasted apart by lightning’ (505). While Richman tries to hide, Rita plots her own escape from the house which seems to be haunted by a mysterious force.

In his reimagining of the ghost story genre and haunted house scenario, however, McGahan points out that he ‘didn’t want human ghosts’ because ‘[t]he human ghost stories have been done and there was nothing new to add on that’ (Steger). Judging from the way the characters die, the ghost of the destroyed environment or the elements of water, air, earth and fire seem to have joined forces to take revenge on the people who have gathered to marvel at the triumph of man over the mountain. For the Observatory is a place of ‘secular worship’ (86) and the monument commemorating Richman’s ‘defeat’ (483, 350) of the Wheel. An earthquake strikes, triggering an ‘unprecedented’ (301) avalanche and causing Richman to exclaim in disbelief, ‘look at that mountain, will you! ... It’s like it’s stripped itself for battle’ (302). As the avalanche tumbles into the sea, it causes a tsunami. Against the background of these natural disasters Rita uncovers the real reason behind the invitation to Richman’s house—her unique ability to detect and communicate with non-human forms of consciousness found in ‘stone and earth and water’ or ‘presences’ (391) as she calls them in her book. Through Rita, the majestic mountain is given a voice to tell its side of the story:

The Wheel sought no understanding or atonement or placation from humanity; it sought only destruction. And who better to inflict that destruction upon than the man who had defiled the mountain’s undefiled peak, the man who stood as symbol of all humankind’s contempt for any awareness other than its own. (474)

The sentiment here is that of a revenge tragedy. Indeed, the novel ends like one, with a corpse-strewn stage and the death of all principal characters. What I suggest here is an alternative interpretation: that *The Rich Man’s House* can be read as an eco-epic. In his last book, McGahan recontextualises the conventions of epic genre, moving from its ‘absolute past’ (Bakhtin 15) into the novel’s ‘inconclusive present’ (Bakhtin 27) in order to point toward a precarious future for the very rock of the Earth.

### ***The Rich Man’s House as Epic***

McGahan’s last novel deploys some general characteristics of the epic genre that refer to a particular type of hero, setting and action, and the presence of supernatural forces. In addition,

it uses some common devices and conventions found in epics such as episodes and digressions. By incorporating epic subjects and conventions into the novelistic form, McGahan might have been searching for ways of amplifying the significance of *The Rich Man's House* and signalling to his readers that the actions therein described surpass the novel's narrow stage where only human dramas play out. From 'religious and political epics' (Neth 413) of the British Romantic era, usually with 'the aim of helping effect reform' (Neth 396), the time has now come for an ecological epic, which looks closely at heroes of our times and their actions within that prism.

In European literature, described by Samuel Johnson as 'a series of footnotes to Homer' (Childs and Fowler 68), the epic hero is at the centre of the epic poem, and the narrative follows him—invariably 'him'—as he journeys across a vast geographical setting to complete a quest. This hero embodies the ideals of his time and his nation or entire humanity. He is a leader of men, a man of superior social and moral standing, who possesses special weapons of great size and power which help him stand up to gods or superhuman forces (Abrams 76–77; Gregory et al. 439). For example, of the eponymous hero of the well-known Anglo-Saxon epic poem *Beowulf*, we read:

... of heroes then living  
He was stoutest and strongest, sturdy and noble. (IV, ll. 9–10)

... Never a greater one  
Of earls o'er the earth have I had a sight of  
Than is one of your number, a hero in armor;  
No low-ranking fellow adorned with his weapons,  
But launching them little, unless looks are deceiving,  
And striking appearance. (IV, ll. 58–63)

In McGahan's narrative, Walter Richman is established as a figure who is perceived by the general public as a hero and as being above the ordinary run of humanity. When Rita meets him for the first time she sees 'a figure familiar from a thousand newspaper photographs and video clips: Walter Richman, billionaire, conqueror of the Wheel, man of history' (121). Longing for glory, he has been a leader of many mountaineering expeditions. However, in McGahan's inversion of epic conventions, instead of being able to display wisdom, humility and self-sacrifice, Richman has earned a reputation for being 'arrogant and selfish and ambitious to the point of recklessness' (64) and has become known in mountaineering circles for his 'dishonesty,' 'grandstanding' and 'self-aggrandising' (65). During his mountaineering career, Richman journeyed around the globe, 'bagging peak after peak' and '[b]y the age of twenty-five, from Everest on down, he had knocked off six of the ten highest mountains in the world (the Wheel aside)' (64). His lifelong quest was to conquer the Wheel. To emphasise the epic proportions of the quest as the major quest of the age, McGahan has Arthur C. Clarke write a science fiction novel entitled *2001: An Odyssey of the Wheel* and has Stanley Kubrick make it into an Oscar-winning film (106). Walter Richman is the hero who completes the quest, turns dreams into reality and conquers the Wheel with the help of weapons especially designed for that purpose.

The hut—a stout, pressurised, prefabricated structure roughly the size and shape of a small caravan, and known formally as a HAEV, a High Altitude Environment—was doing its job, protecting the men from the stratospheric night.  
... the men slept, or did not sleep, upon a padded, electrically heated floor,

breathing at ease in the oxygen-enriched air, surrounded by ample supplies of food and water. (9)

Indeed, the climbers' suits—HTF11 (High Terrain Function) suits—were the more advanced models. (10)

Two hours of preparations began. ... Then, the painstaking checking of equipment ... Finally ... came the donning of the suits, each man taking at least fifteen minutes ... One by one, the men lowered and latched their visors and switched on the environmental functions of their suits; air pockets inflated and pressed against skin in imitation of air pressure, other fabrics contracted to the same effect; heating and cooling systems kicked in, and breathing systems too. They were ready for the outside. (9–11)

For his battle with the mountain, modern technology equips Walter Richman with special High Altitude Environment huts and High Terrain Function suits. The long and detailed description of these weapons of conquest, which runs across four pages (8–11), is not unlike those found in traditional epics in what are called digressions (Lat. *digression*—moving away from the subject). For instance, as Beowulf is about to engage in battle with Grendel's mother, before the action moves forward, we have to patiently admire his 'battle-equipments ... inlaid and most ample ... the hand-woven corslet ... the light-flashing helmet ... encircled with jewels' (XXII, ll. 57–65), but most of all his 'hilted hand-sword' (XXII, l. 71) called Hrunting:

Old and most excellent 'mong all of the treasures;  
Its blade was of iron, blotted with poison,  
Hardened with gore; it failed not in battle  
Any hero under heaven in hand who it brandished. (XXII, ll. 72–75)

In both the epic and McGahan's novel the extraordinary equipment befits the grand hero and his epic task:

It soon became apparent that rather than embarking on a folly, Richman was instead engaged in what was becoming the great project of the age. After all, space had been broached and the Moon reached, the deepest trenches in the ocean had been visited, the wilds of every continent explored. What was left for man now to achieve but to set foot upon that last untrodden spot of his own planet? (124)

As the main financier and the leader of 'the great project of the age,' Richman embodies ideals of his time, nation and race, and as such he is an expression of will-to-power and dominance over the natural environment. As articulated by Rita, channelling the Wheel, Richman is a 'symbol of all humankind's contempt for any awareness other than its own' (124). Thus, what McGahan's novel, in a parody of the traditional epic seems to suggest, is that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century 'Westerners seem so determined to destroy [their gods]' (395), and the hero turns out to be an unscrupulous ruthless individual with a 'towering ego' (483) and little respect for the life of other people. Rather than a noble quest, his is a selfish conquest. Indeed, it turns out to be a con-quest, a quest accomplished through trickery and dishonesty. After enlisting the help of hundreds of climbers in a concerted assault on the Wheel and promising everyone 'their moment on the summit ... Walter Richman had stolen the Wheel for himself, and gotten away clean' (131). Rather than displaying the generosity of the epic hero who rewards his faithful companions for their loyalty and valour in battle by giving them their share of riches and glory, Richman is more like an epic villain and Beowulf's fatal adversary—the dragon, sitting on a

heap of gold deep within the cave and jealously guarding his riches. From his abode deep in the mountain, Richman jealously keeps everyone out of reach of the Wheel. By evoking a collective sense of ethical identity embodied in the epic hero, McGahan seems to suggest that the ethical framework of our age has been inverted; the epic hero of our age, Walter Richman, is a hubris-driven conqueror whereas his adversary, the Wheel, is a defender and protector of its kind. This inversion of roles in McGahan's epic gesture serves to chronicle the ignoble and violent deeds committed by humanity against the environment. Moreover, the fact that McGahan makes Richman an American could align *The Rich Man's House* with 'epics of the global American age' (Hansen 31) or 'new global epics' (Hansen 34). To the 'geopolitical, economic, and spatial condition of our present age' (Hansen 34), which is the focus of the new global epic, McGahan in his eco-epic adds environmental concerns to storytelling.

Turning to the composition of the novel, it can be observed that it follows the epic formula, using some of its common structural devices. Prologue 1 functions as an introductory passage or proem (Lat. proemium, 'preface' or 'introduction'), which states the subject, major themes and emphases (Gregory et al. 440). Prologue 1 of *The Rich Man's House* states the theme of the Wheel's elusiveness as well as ironies and errors of history. It tells the story of Gerrit Jansz, Dutch master-seaman on Abel Tasman's 1642 expedition, 'one of those unfortunates whom history overlooks' and who are robbed of the 'honours usually granted to mariners who make great discoveries' (1) because 'a combination of self-doubt, politics and bad luck conspired to keep his discovery a secret for another three hundred years' (2). Describing the final ascent to the summit of the Wheel, 'three hundred and thirty-two years' after Geritt Jansz had glimpsed 'the growing fire on the horizon' (13), Prologue 2 introduces characters and the main quest, so that the action can begin *in medias res*—the death of Rita's father and Richman's invitation to Rita to attend the grand opening of the Observatory. Like the action of an epic, the narrative of *The Rich Man's House* is localised, confined to the Observatory on Theodolite Isle, but flashbacks and inset narratives are used to widen the geographical and chronological scope to include the entire globe and its geological history since the formation of Earth's tectonic plates. Furthermore, newspaper clippings, excerpts from journals and magazines, chapters from history books, transcripts of lectures are woven into the narrative in the manner of episodes inserted into the epic for the purpose of providing characters' backgrounds or offering interpretative frameworks. The 'Elegy of the Last Survivor' in *Beowulf*, for example, explains where the dragon's treasure came from while at the same time it offers an interpretation of important connections of the warrior with his kinsmen, tribe and the king. Similarly, excerpts from Rita's book explain her 'Theory of Presences' (229) which is crucial for the interpretation of the central conflict of the book, that of mankind and nature. The 'Ubi sunt?' (Where are they?) motif of Anglo-Saxon elegies ponders the people, the structures, and civilisations that are no more while in her book Rita 'laments the fate of species' (389). She ponders the demise of the landscape in its encounter with humans, whose proximity is 'toxic *fatally*' (234). By organising his novel around structural principles of the epic, McGahan moves away from what Lukács (81) calls the 'biographical form' of the novel. Rather than having 'the development of a man' as 'the thread upon which the whole world of the novel is strung and along which it unrolls' (Lukács 81), McGahan seems to have an epic intention of arriving at a world beyond individual destiny.

In the taxonomy of genres in the Western literary context, the novel 'has proven the most resilient and productive descendant of the epic tradition' (Gregory et al. 447). The novel as an extended fictional prose narrative took over from the epic as a long narrative poem. However, the novel is not only the successor of the epic poem, it is the genre that rose simultaneously with bourgeois society (or capitalism) (Watt 62). It emerged as a dominant literary form of the

individualist era and as such it focuses on the human individual as ‘the ultimate arbiter of reality’ (Watt 14). Consequently, as an embodiment of human self-centeredness, it has been ‘ostentatiously anthropocentric’ (Rooney 57). In other words, it can be viewed as an expression of Walter Richman, an egotistical, self-seeking billionaire who thinks that it is only his story that is worth recording. That is why it is significant that McGahan’s novel incorporates elements and conventions of the epic, providing a suitably dignified stage on which the conflict of historical, global and national importance can play out between a self-aggrandising mankind and nature or gods on the brink of survival. Harking back to the epic genre in which the cast of heroes were closely connected with and depended on gods and the supernatural, McGahan writes a novel which decentres humans as sole agents in the world.

If ‘[w]orld destiny is what gives the events their epic content’ (Lukács 67), then McGahan’s novel can be read as an epic where ‘world destiny’ is taken to refer not only to a global community of men and women embodied in their hero but to their natural environment as well. In incorporating both human and non-human life in ‘world destiny,’ McGahan adds another layer to the ‘totality of life’ which characterises the epic but is no longer found in the age of the novel (Lukács 56). However, McGahan’s eco-epic does not share, as Bakhtin (13) puts it, ‘an absolute epic distance [which] separates the epic world from contemporary reality, that is, from the time in which the singer (the author and his audience) lives.’ Whereas Richman wants to cast himself as a hero or, in Bakhtin’s words ‘founder,’ ‘ancestor’ (15), and create an unassailable heroic past which is to be accepted with reverence by future generations, it is crucial that the world of *The Rich Man’s House* is decidedly not one set in ‘an absolute past’ (Bakhtin 15) and ‘beyond the realm of human activity’ (Bakhtin 17). It is the world of the present where a battle is taking place between Richman, a quintessential example of the hubris and apotheosis of the narcissistic world of humans, and the Wheel, an ultimate expression of the endangered non-human world.

### ***The Rich Man’s House* as Environmental Literature**

Relocation of the nonhuman environment from the background to the centre stage where it becomes ‘a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history’ is, according to Lawrence Buell (7–8), the number one ‘ingredient’ of ‘an environmentally oriented work.’ The history of the Wheel can no longer be told without telling human history nor can the story of Walter Richman be told without telling the history of the Wheel. The other three ingredients of an ecocentric text listed by Buell can also be found in McGahan’s text as there is a strong sense that the human interest is not the only legitimate interest and that within the novel’s ethical framework, humans are held accountable to the environment which is depicted as a dynamic entity rather than a given constant.

It is tempting, therefore, to read *The Rich Man’s House* through the prism of ecocriticism. Depicting detrimental effects of the human presence on the planet, the book comes at a time of growing concern that human-induced climate change has reached a tipping point (Pearce; Lenton et al.). McGahan’s previous novel, *Wonders of a Godless World*, was similarly read as ‘an ecological parable’ or ‘ecological fantasy’ (Webby 129) even though he stressed that ‘there was not meant to be any ecological statement at all’ (McGahan, ‘Wonders’). However, he did say that he wanted to make a story where storms and earthquakes were actual characters. In *Wonders of the Godless World* he ended up using the characters of the orphan and the foreigner to give voice to elemental forces; in *The Rich Man’s House* it is the character of Rita who voices the anguish and anger of the natural world. The mysterious presences which reside in rock, water and air are silent victims of human progress as suggested by the meaning of the Greek

word at the root of the word mystery—‘muein,’ meaning to close the mouth (Morton 110). While ‘suspicious of giving consciousness to the planet’ (McGahan, ‘Wonders’) in *Wonders of the Godless World*, McGahan makes that additional step in *The Rich Man’s House*, endowing the landscape with its own consciousness and pitting it against human consciousness. It is important, however, not to fall into the trap of anthropomorphising the presences. As Rita explains in her book:

In short, there are invisible non-human presences, nonhuman forms of consciousness, all around us in the landscape.

Let me stress the term *non-human*. They are not ghosts of humans departed; they [are] not human-related spirits of any kind. ... they are not even of organic origin. They are not in any way related to animals or plants. They are *inorganic*. They are born only of stone, or of the atmosphere, or of water. (229)

With its antagonism between human society and the environment, McGahan’s novel differs from nature writing or the American transcendentalism of Henry Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson, whose writing worships the forests as a place of spiritual growth. In British Romanticism, it is William Wordsworth in his ‘Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey’ who speaks of nature as ‘a presence’:

... And I have felt  
 A presence that disturbs me with the joy  
 Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime  
 Of something far more deeply interfused,  
 Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,  
 And the round ocean, and the living air,  
 And the blue sky, and in the mind of man,  
 A motion and a spirit, that impels  
 All thinking things, all objects of all thought,  
 And rolls through all things. (ll. 95–104)

However, rather than worshipping nature as a fellow philosopher, nurse or guide, ‘the mind of man’ in McGahan’s novel is the mind of ‘rich man’ bent on self-serving exploitation and the accompanying destruction of natural landscapes. As an expression of the anthropocentric novelistic genre, Walter Richman adopts ‘the novel’s figuration of nature’ which ‘often relies on the traditional, Kantian sublime’ (Rooney 57) as a place where he is ‘able to measure [himself] against the seeming omnipotence of nature’ (qtd. in Rooney 56). According to Deborah Bird Rose (209–10), nature is a mirror and ‘the image it is giving of human agency is grotesque.’ Richman’s pretensions to mastery and control of the Wheel are as grotesque as the laser show he arranges for his guests. Laser beams projected from Theodolite Isle onto the Wheel first mark the route by which Richman and his expedition ascended the Wheel, but then ‘a new pattern of lines coalesced on the mountain, forming ... a figure in outline, drawn across the entire West Face, a giant standing twenty kilometres tall. It was Walter Richman’ (223). Rita is repulsed by the vanity of it because ‘he had turned the mighty Wheel ... into a screen on which to glorify himself’ (225).

Most of all, in McGahan’s novel human presence proves to be toxic to geological formations of the Earth, especially when humans populate the landscape in great numbers.

It is this consciousness, so alien to our own, that mankind senses when confronted with dramatic scenery in some lonely place. And alone or in small numbers, passing by, our own consciousness is no threat to the presence in the landscape. But when we come in greater numbers, and settle permanently, and build over the landscape, then our mass consciousness is lethal to the presence that preceded us. Poisoned, suffocated by us, it withers and dies. (391)

It proves lethal for the greatest of all geological formations, the most powerful of all presences—the Wheel. In that sense McGahan’s novel adds another turn of the screw to Dipesh Chakrabarty’s idea of the Anthropocene. Chakrabarty’s ‘Thesis 2’ from ‘The Climate of History: Four Theses’ explains the Anthropocene as ‘the new geological epoch when humans exist as a geological force’ (207), the age when mankind becomes a geological agent on the planet. Significantly, in ‘Thesis 3’ he adds that the anthropogenic climate change does not threaten ‘the geological planet itself but the very conditions, both biological and geological, on which the survival of human life ... depends’ (Chakrabarty 213). In other words, the current climate crisis is inconsequential for the inorganic planet. In McGahan’s version of ‘dark ecology’ (Morton), however, it *is* a crisis for the inorganic planet. Rather than referring to only organic life forms different from humans, the nonhuman in McGahan’s novel extends to incorporate the inorganic, and no ‘logic of future coexistence’ (Morton) seems to be possible. To the mass extinction of plants and animals, McGahan adds the extinction of geological formations:

[T]he presence of the Wheel had looked beyond itself to the wider world ... and had discovered the existence of all the lesser presences about the globe, in their thousands and millions. Only little entities of little landscapes, but alive and aware, bright sparks in the darkness, and the only companionship the Wheel could find.

But in the millennia since, no more than an eye-blink by the eon-long standards by which it judged time, the Wheel had been forced to watch as one by one those same presences were killed, a constellation of candle flames being doused long before they were due to fail, as human consciousness ravaged across the planet, erasing all other thought.

Until even the Wheel’s own turn had come. (471)

Access to the Wheel’s ‘thought’ is given through Rita, who becomes the voice of geological as well as ‘ecological awareness’ and delivers the message that man is ‘the tragic criminal’ (Morton 9). The darkness of this awareness is the ‘darkness of noir’ (Morton 9). McGahan’s crime and mystery novel features ‘complications of agency’ (Rose 213) and moral ambiguity associated with the noir genre. Identifying the victim, the criminal and even the crime in *The Rich Man’s House* is not straightforward. The role of the detective is equally ambiguous. Richman and his guests die one by one while attempting to uncover who is responsible for their entrapment and the deaths that occur. Rita has found herself on the list of Richman’s exclusive guests owing to her unique ability to detect mysterious presences. However, the crime that is finally uncovered is the one that has been going on for thousands of years and in which all of humanity is implicated. Everyone in the Observatory is part criminal, part detective, part victim; all of them are guilty because they are embroiled, together with the rest of mankind, in political, cultural and economic systems that damage the Earth. This is the condition of ‘Anthropocene noir’ (Rose 206), the Dark Age of Man in which people play a triple role. They are ‘perpetrators

of crime against our Earth' (Rigby 173), detectives trying to figure out what is happening as well as victims suffering the effects of the damage they have caused.

## Conclusion

The damage which McGahan focuses on in *The Rich Man's House* is not the damage of climate change as he does not speculate on the dire economic and social consequences of global warming. As Rita explains: 'Presences have nothing—*nothing*—to do with environmentalism' (233). McGahan's critique of humanity's insensitivity to difference, otherness and the agency of anything that is non-human has been expanded to encompass the elements, and most significantly the very rock of the Earth. The destruction inflicted by man who has become a geophysical force on a planetary scale goes well beyond the impact on organic life; it has an impact on inorganic Earth, the geological planet itself. The egotistical mindset and megalomaniacal tendencies of humanity, reflected in Richman's insatiable thirst for power and dominance, and his fantasies of omnipotence, clash with the magnificent landscape, composed of 'stone and earth and water' (McGahan, *House* 391), which is crushed to death by the march of humanity.

McGahan chooses the word 'presences' for his character Rita to use in her book and she explains that 'humans have called these awarenesses *gods* or demons, spirits or elementals' but she does not want to 'borrow divine titles from a hundred different mythologies' because 'our gods and demons are essentially just pumped-up versions of ourselves' (McGahan, *House* 232). It seems that the same reason of decentring humans as the sole source of authority, meaning and agency, might have prompted McGahan to reach into the literary past in search of literary genres that tell stories in which mankind is connected to, dependent upon and accountable to forces greater than itself. In *The Rich Man's House*, the novel—the genre which originated as an expression of human desire to tell stories of man's success in the world, is complemented by the epic—the genre in which the hero owes his success to the gods. Moreover, the epic provides a stage befitting the critical theme of the rivalry between the two geological forces of today which is likely to determine the global tomorrow. According to Indigenous interpretations of time and space, as explained by Deborah Bird Rose (216), the future is 'in the ground' and 'taking care of the future' means 'taking care of the country,' where country includes 'the soils, water, underground water, plants, animals, landforms' (217). McGahan also turns to Australia's precolonial past to contemplate a possible model of 'coexistence':

It's an interesting thing, actually: the fact that Indigenous peoples never chose to *live* in an area that they declared sacred. Such zones might be visited at certain times and as part of certain rituals, but human contact was kept very limited ... What if they kept away from their sacred sites to ensure that the presences there endured? (394–95)

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