

# HISTORY AS 'PRECARIOUS GIFT': *HARLAND'S HALF-ACRE AND THE GREAT WORLD AS MALOUF'S NOT-SO-HISTORICAL NOVELS*

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## Malouf, History, and Temporality

In *The Happy Life* (2011) Malouf sees the Enlightenment thinker Condorcet's belief in progress as Faustian (28). But does looking to history offer any more certainty than looking to the future? Although Ken Gelder and Paul Salzman say Malouf is the author of 'a number of historical novels' (66), Malouf's fiction suggests that, though looking at history may yield wisdom and insight, the past itself can offer no more inherent satisfaction than can the future. In other words, his fiction concludes that placing our large-scale hopes in the past rather than the future is likely to be no less disappointing. It is my argument that *Harland's Half-Acre* (1984) and *The Great World* (1990), though set in the past, end up being not-so-historical in that they do not see the past as a solution the way fiction simply or naively predicated on history might.

In the 1990s, the historical novel attained a new canonicity. Was history what we should turn to in the wake of the failed idea of progress, which Malouf warns led to the Gulag? Was history the new redeemer? The historical novel emerged as a central node of literary discussion and debate across the Anglophone world. This was particularly true in Australia. The situation was not without its paradoxes. Australia was a nation with a tradition which it celebrated but which came from another continent, and with other traditions that came from Australia itself but which, until after the *Mabo* decision of 1992, were under-celebrated. The historical novel became a burning issue. Disputes raged over whether the novelist's mission was to describe the past or to limn the present, over whether the historian should wear a black armband or a white blindfold. For such a writer as Malouf—a gay male of partially Lebanese ancestry—we should not expect to see a view of history that is simply, unqualifiedly Euro-Australian. This is especially so as Malouf had been talking about Indigenous issues and had been concerned with the Aboriginal presence in the land as far back as *Fly Away Peter* (1982), as well as in the overt allegory of *An Imaginary Life* (1978) and the full-fledged evocation of an at least para-Aboriginal experience in the life-events of Gemmy Fairley in *Remembering Babylon* (1993).

Even if the subjects of Australian historical fiction were often manifestly Australian, they partook in a global demand for historical novels. This demand was largely born out of a sense that, with the collapse of Soviet Communism and a general sense of modernity as unhindered progress, people were ready to turn to reaches of history they had ignored. For Malouf, though, the very question of history in Australia is interwoven with the acknowledgment of Indigenous rights, concerns, and implications. It is fairly obvious how a Malouf novel like *Remembering Babylon*, with its portrait of a white child raised among Aborigines, connects the issue of Aboriginality and history. But Malouf's two previous novels, *Harland's Half-Acre* and *The Great World*, also comment on history and Australia's relationship to it, as filtered by the writer. Unlike

*Remembering Babylon*, though, these novels, although steeped in history, in the end evade a reliance on history for meaning. They are, finally, not-so-historical.

*Harland's Half Acre* and *The Great World* have been undertreated novels in the Malouf oeuvre; set in the early twentieth century rather than the colonial or ancient settings of Malouf's more famous works, they tell of ordinary Australians' coming into contact with the delight and rapacity of the wider world. These 'late middle' works of Malouf are very different in tone. *The Great World* revolves upon two men's experiences in the brutal Changi prison camp in Singapore in the Second World War, and *Harland's Half Acre* is about the artistic development of an Australian painter against the backdrop of a time when the country's cultural and aesthetic awareness expands to a point where it can accommodate and foster a truly thoughtful creativity. In both, though, history, though elicited, is also lyricised. In *The Great World*, this occurs through the alphabetised casualty lists that are a rhetorical leitmotif of the book. In *Harland's Half Acre*, lyricisation, as per G. E. Lessing in *Laocöon*, occurs through the capacity of painting to spatialise (at least to a point) temporality. These books do not presume history as a substrate. They fracture it, dissipate it. History has both to be there and *not* be there. Malouf's exploration of the historical preserves the lyric integrity and the epistemological complexity of his vision. In a 2013 ABC Radio interview pursuant on the revision and reissue of *Harland's Half Acre*—the very fact of this showing the increasing role *Harland's Half Acre* is assuming in the author's consciousness of his own oeuvre—Malouf spoke of the poverty and marginality in the Australia into which he was born in the 1930s. Malouf went on to see today's prosperity and materialism, while in some ways valuable, as potentially fracturing social solidarity. As seen in the concluding story of Malouf's collection *Dream Stuff*, 'The Great Day,' in which the burning-down of an historical museum is a prerequisite for disclosing a full temporal awareness, sometimes loss has to be the prerequisite for a sustainable historical meaning. Through memories of war and sacrifices of art, these two novels portraying a middle stage of Australian society leave us with the scintilla of history we need to remember, shorn of any ideological surfeit which would delude us into taking history itself more seriously than artistic or moral integrity would permit.

Malouf is of the generation of Australian writers after Patrick White. It is productive to contextualise his place in 'the Patrick White succession.' Here this phrase does not refer merely to any Australian writer after White chronologically, but rather to writers who had a concrete relation to White's work and explored analogous themes in analogous styles. White himself, in different ways, anointed as his successors Geoffrey Dutton—half-court jester, half-Dauphin—and Elizabeth Harrower, whose introspective yet socially detailed works came close to White's in excellence. But Dutton stretched his talents too thin (and famously broke with White) while Harrower, after producing a superb series of several novels, fell silent until the 2014 publication of a novel completed some forty years before. Randolph Stow and Thomas Keneally present a similar dyad, magnified. Stow started off brilliantly but did not publish any fiction after the early 1980s. Keneally concentrated more on the national and historical than White, clearly opting to be a very different sort of author. Peter Carey assumed White's mantle on the world stage, and *Oscar and Lucinda* owes a fairly direct debt to *Voss*. However, whereas White resided in Australia after his mid-thirties and deliberately if unenthusiastically took up the burden of being a national writer who, of necessity, few in Australia appreciated or understood, Carey removed to America as if to escape that burden, so potentially devastating to an author's creativity. Carey's removal is not to be castigated, as the Australian-but-in-between perspective his works broadcast is part of the grain of their originality. Two other Australian writers of the same generation and of

similarly titanic talent and reputation might also be said not to have literally left the country like Carey, but to have gone into internal exile: Les Murray in returning to rural New South Wales and distancing himself from many of the views and assumptions of the Australian establishment, and Gerald Murnane in withdrawing from the literary scene and further and more intensely steeping himself in his own imaginative territory. Malouf stands in contrast to these writers. Though for many years he spent a good portion of his time in Tuscany, Malouf remained very much in the middle of the Australian literary scene. And in this way, Malouf became the effective successor to Patrick White as a public presence—something made literal in his work on the libretto of the operatic adaptation of *Voss*, but also in many other ways. This is above all manifest in the way he represented the public face of an essentially private endeavour, and made available and negotiable the inner journeys of a writer's imagination. Malouf is a figure who demonstrated his aesthetic and ethical awareness freely in the public sphere.

Malouf's books also parallel White's in their braiding of the rhetorical and the secret, the personally plangent and nationally relevant. But there is a significant formal difference. White wrote long novels, Victorian in length and conception, if not procedure or subject matter. Malouf has produced concise, concentrated, lyrical novels, books with only a few characters in them, with those characters having immeasurably complex and intricate and intertwined relationships. Many critics have spoken of the number of doubles in Malouf's fiction, dualities that might in the end be only two disparate halves of one character. This duality solicits the anchored personal sensibility that is at the ground of lyric poetry. Yet Malouf's books also have an embodied quality. Some of the finest pages of *The Happy Life* are devoted to the body. Malouf cogently remarks how bodies have become healthier, freer from disease; how one's physical body can offer more confidence and succour than its vulnerable counterpart in previous generations. In a series of novels where these male dyads exist, often without explicit or even tacit sexual involvement, the issue of embodiment and historicising embodiment becomes paramount. By locating history so close to the body, Malouf jettisons any sense that we might simply replace a heedless belief in progress with a heedless affirmation of, or literary packaging of, history.

### *Harland's Half-Acre*

Of the writers mentioned before in apposition to White, some (Harrower, Stow) are less historical, others (Keneally, arguably Dutton, and in a very different and more complicated way Carey) are more so. Malouf, one might say, is as historical as White, historical to the same degree but not in the same way. What is notable regarding *Harland's Half-Acre* and *The Great World* in particular is how relatively nationalist they are. This is something which fits in relatively well with the thrust of the Australian cultural-critical project at the time, but which would, just a decade later become distinctly unfashionable. Though Malouf has frequently depicted Australian subjects, we do not see him as a nationalist writer. But there are aspects of *Harland's Half-Acre* that adopt a nationalist focus. By this I mean not so much *Bulletin*-era boisterousness as something analogous to a sense of creating a new, non-colonial aesthetic. The painterly vision that Frank Harland achieves is a sort of coming into the country, claiming an artistic idiom that solicits a national identity as an aesthetic one that figures the land's difference from European images. As a 2013 post on Emma M. Weston's EMpression blog concerning a Malouf appearance with respect to the reissue of *Harland's Half-Acre* put it, 'The title is derived *not* from the pittance of land left to the Harlands before Frank Harland decisively and romantically starts to rebuild the Harland holding (as I thought) but from the total spatial area of Frank's true legacy, his artwork.' There is

a thematic-philosophical nationalist ground here, much as there is in Alice Munro's depictions of southwest Ontario as a state of *being*, though in both cases the writers do not wear nationalism on their sleeve in a tub-thumping way. This nationalist residue to *Harland* may be why Malouf did not give the book a high place in his oeuvre in his conversation with me on 17 September 2001 in Sydney. Certainly, his later work negotiates national identity in a far more gossamer, less direct way.

But *Harland's Half-Acre*, in particular, has some rampantly nationalistic aspects. Harland is a landscape painter, even if in his work landscape becomes 'the merest abstract shapes and colours' (52). There is something in him of the charismatic Australian eccentric rendered stereotypically by the depiction of Norman Lindsay in the 1993 film *Sirens*, although Harland lacks Lindsay's sexual bravado and love of personal power. But, considered purely as a self-made aesthete Lindsay does not seem too far off, especially when Frank makes utterances like 'We're the ones who have made the world' which are redolent of Lindsay's eschewal of any divine creative agency (*Harland* 103). Harland is neither as pictorial as the Heidelberg school nor as deliberately nationalist, nor in a different way as formally modernist in ambition as Sidney Nolan. Yet Harland is not an abstractionist in the sense that his works are ever totally disconnected from the representation of landscape. Harland is arguably less abstract than Ian Fairweather, his fellow maverick Queenslander, or the West Australian Robert Juniper, whose bold use of color parallels Harland's. And he is significantly less modernist than the painters portrayed by Alex Miller, the Australian author who has most continued the Malouf/White tradition of Australian writers representing visual artists, in works such as *Prochownik's Dream* (2005) and *Autumn Laing* (2011), of which the latter literally features Nolan. Frank Harland, as a painter, is not someone for whom Australian landscape is accidental; landscape is even more central to his work, perhaps, than an otherwise comparable painter such as the South Australian, John Olsen. The name 'Harland' contains the word 'land'. Frank's vision is indeed indissolubly associated with the land. Yet one is made to feel that the importance of his artistry is in his creative feeling. This is not the mere registering of the landscape in a topographical sense. It is, concerted, an achievement of an Australian way of seeing. This Australian way of seeing is perhaps not far from the phenomenological perspective Paul Carter unfolded in the nearly contemporaneous *The Road to Botany Bay*. The fact that Frank draws on his father Clem's ingenious oral tales, and that the beauty of the son's work is a rendition of the garrulousness of the father's conversation, is further evidence of the ties between Clem's visionary art and the Australian vernacular. Finally that Clem actually survives Frank, that he is cracking wise and pithy sayings even as his son is buried, indicates not just the premature death often associated with at least a Romantic vision of artistic creativity (it was hardly true of, say, Titian) but how the father symbolically remains resilient, as the ground of all his son's imaginative affirmations and loyalties. That Clem is able to watch himself weep on TV for his son's fate signifies a recursiveness, as the ground surrounds and envelops the artistic representation that is nonetheless necessary to bring it to fruition. Art does not exist entirely outside of history. But it is not the product of a one-dimensional vision of historical time. It is not a plane where art would simply succeed and dialectically further the imaginative but not artistically manifest mentalities of men such as Frank's father. In other words, even though nationalism, as a mode of ideology, is contingent on historicity and historical meaningfulness, *Harland's Half-Acre* posits an aesthetic nationalism, one not seeking to quell or evade history but perhaps to sidestep it.

Yet Frank Harland is not just artistically fulfilled. He is also a tragic, limited and self-limited

figure. Frank's fate is perhaps emblematic of the inability of genius and Australian society or perhaps even landscape to be fully congruent. A later rendition might have had Frank undone by the inescapable fact of Indigenous priority, and it is relevant that one of Patrick White's most memorable painter-figures is himself Aboriginal, Alf Dubbo in *Riders in the Chariot*, and that he might inform the portrait of Frank Harland as much as the far more cerebral Hurtle Duffield in White's other painting-novel, *The Vivisector*. This is especially suggestive in that Dubbo is often said to be based on Albert Namatjira, and although, as we have seen, Harland is not based on any specific painter, his portrait seems to call for an anterior character model, much as Dubbo does for White. Furthermore, Harland's art is overtly linked to resistance to capitalist and mercantile impingements on the land. Towards the end of *Harland*, it is mentioned that, in the 1970s, mineral companies are becoming interested in parts of Queensland that 'few men except abos had ever seen' (194) and Frank's painting is concomitantly symbolised as a kind of hinterland at least metonymic to the idea of indigeneity. It is only a step from this kind of painting as both refuge and standpoint to *Remembering Babylon*, where, in what James Tulip rightly calls 'a bold, deconstructive and provocative move' (69), London, the capital city of the coloniser, is pictured as the Babylon from which redemption is needed, and the Indigenous outback is the only possible Jerusalem where land and spirituality can coincide.

Phil Vernon, Frank's younger admirer and friend, near the end of the book mentions that Frank had never really travelled much, an interesting juxtaposition to the Malouf whose every book jacket once spoke of his spending half the year in Tuscany. Yet Frank's nativism, his territoriality, is not rejected by the novel, even though it clearly requires supplementary perspectives. Frank is not the solitary point-of-view of the novel, which is divided into two separate strands. One is narrated by the onlooker-attorney Phil, in some ways a Malouf stand-in. The other is a more omniscient voice recounting Frank's life and career. It is as if we need two angles to understand the enigma that is Frank Harland, and that Frank Harland is too much of an enigma to permit the novelist to represent him from within his own subjectivity. Narratively, there is one remove between representing author and representing artist. Frank is perhaps between Digger and Malouf himself on the level of awareness: brilliant, visionary, but also quirkily homegrown, slightly naïf, but only to the extent necessary to insulate his vision from the worldliness of the merely mediocre. That Malouf puts up with a certain aestheticisation of history here—as Phil Vernon puts it of the Queensland seacoast 'that high free feeling . . . beyond the limits, beyond flesh' (220)—and also that he does not adopt the mentality of the early 20th century where to be global was automatically in both evaluative and ethical terms to be good, is telling. That Frank's aesthetic position is perhaps slightly more romantic and Australian-nationalist than Malouf's own gives the book something of the air of a case-study: Malouf is not asking us to identify with the artist as an aesthetic exemplar, but rather to see into his point of view, a task perhaps not as demanding as with the inner worlds of some of Malouf's other protagonists but indicative of a measurable distance between author and subject. Yet *Harland* does ultimately endorse an affirmative vision of art. Concomitantly, it fosters a sense that those anterior grounds, although subtended by history and landscape, cannot simply define an aesthetic vision. Frank Harland's wrestling of his artistic vocation from a Queensland dairy farm is not an escape from history, but an unfolding of history on a more declarative and significant aesthetic level. But Malouf does not package Frank's life as a simple allegory of Australian cultural development; there is too much that is tragic and costly about it, and too much that is one man's journey which would be reduced by making it an analogue to a more predictable, and applicable, historical frame.

Throughout his oeuvre Malouf eschews a naïve faith in the meaning-bestowing properties of time. His poem, ‘The Music Lesson,’ begins with the speaker’s music instructor imploring him to ‘Keep time! keep time!’ (*Year of the Foxes* 15). In music ‘time’ is metronomic rigidity, order, the antipode of the flow of history, or a more gossamer memory. ‘Keep time!’ as Malouf uses it in the poem implies we must choose one version of time. We cannot have both, must choose between relying on time in its regularity or savoring it in its slipperiness. *Harland’s Half-Acre* discloses an image of art set within historical time but unanchored and unregulated by it.

### ***The Great World***

*The Great World* opens from the viewpoint of the mentally slow Jenny, Digger’s elder sister, for whom time is always synchronic. Yet Jenny’s trusting love for Digger parallels the unshakeable if complex bond between the two wartime prison-camp mates, Digger Keen and Vic Curran—the bond of trust that leads Digger to consent to Vic’s financial scheme that he knows, despite his claimed ignorance of the markets, in his heart of hearts to be unethical. Both the loyalty and—there is no other word for it—the idiocy are manifest. Vic’s economic success does not diminish the bond he shares with Digger in the way the reader expects it would—that wartime solidarity and prison camp camaraderie would fade in the wake of the comforts of capitalist security and power. In our day—as shown in a story like Malouf’s own ‘Elsewhere’ in *Every Move You Make* (2006)—economic success would in a sense have been its own solution, placing so wide a gap between the two men as to make any continued linkage implausible. Nevertheless, the context of the two men’s friendship creates a ground of values that is immune to the callous and casual way in which people simply drift apart. It is a relationship based on values more than affinity: Digger and Vic are not truly friends, and popular representations of ‘war buddies’ do not describe their bond.

Ellie and Digger have a separate, covert relationship, non-sexual but unknown to Vic. It centres on her father’s poems, one of whose lines, ‘The precarious gift in our hands again, the mixed blessing,’ (237), is read at her wedding to Vic and reiterated later in the text. Just as the text defies stereotypes in making Vic, though a successful businessman, not totally hollow and amoral, so does it evade our expectation that Hugh Warrender will be a failed, ineffectual literary man. Instead, we are convinced he is a worthy poet. Warrender is someone who has in a sense fought for a vibrant Australian literary culture just as his son-in-law fought for Australia’s freedom against Japan. The internal role of lyric poetry in *The Great World* suggests that Malouf’s own lyrics—as is well known, he started out as a poet and has continued to write poetry—might play a role here. Indeed, in the *Year of the Foxes*, his most heralded book of poetry, there are several poems that are not-so-historical in much the same way as *The Great World* and *Harland’s Half Acre*. Although Gelder and Salzman are accurate when they describe *The Great World* as ‘an account of twentieth-century Australia focused on war experiences’ (66), a reader looking to *The Great World* for epic sweep, for a vision of wartime Australia entering the world as depicted in the 2008 Baz Luhrmann movie *Australia*, is bound to be disappointed. In his review of *The Great World* in *The New York Times Book Review*, Vince Passaro comments of Malouf, ‘He undermines the conventions of historical narrative in favor of distinct episodes of emotional significance and clarity. Despite his large canvas and grand schemes, he never sacrifices the intensity of his characters’ interior worlds.’ Passaro, though, reads the references to *War and Peace* as if Malouf were trying to continue the Tolstoyan idea of the total novel in more modern packaging. Tolstoy, whatever his skepticism about historical generalities, was in novelistic terms

trying to give the big picture from an omniscient perspective. This is a canvas that *The Great World*, with its fragmentariness and prismatic filtering, eschews.

Digger's uncanny memory makes him aware of the past and leads him to list names without drawing any overt slogans or meanings out of them: 'Anson. He came early in the list. After Amos. Reginald James. He could have gone on if Vic had required it. To Aspic, Ball, Barclay, Baynes, Beeston . . .' (41). In cognitive terms, Digger's annalistic aptitude stands halfway between the canny shrewdness of the entrepreneurial Vic and the limited percipience of the disabled Jenny. But Digger's is not just an autistic, uninflected sense of the past. It acknowledges the association of the past with death, as the only ascertainable historical data in his rendition are casualty-lists. Malouf's poem, 'A Classroom In The Fifties' pictures stasis as a respite from an accidental reaffirmation of history: 'And the stopped watch is not wrong / exactly, but dead / right, on two occasions / at least in every day' (*Year of the Foxes* 17). The key here is not the enunciation of a commonplace but the line-break between dead and right, as if accuracy and death were concomitant in negating a larger, more purposive vision of history. The lists in *The Great World* operate like this as well: scrupulously, morbidly accurate, their tally registering with the only precision possible the trauma of wartime loss, but failing to cohere into, or to subvert, the crystallisation of any sweeping or more authoritative meaning for history.

Digger's memory also renders him alert to other dimensions. In his magniloquent epiphany at the beginning of chapter thirteen he soaks himself in the multiplicity of history as a subspecies of perception itself. 'Even the least event had lines, all tangled, going back into the past, and beyond that into the *unknown* past, and other lines leading out, also tangled, into the future' (296). Memory makes the merely historical seem too linear, rather than the historical making memory seem too personal. Digger's memory is thus a more homegrown and intuitive, perhaps more plural, version of Pa Warrender's lyricism. The point is not just that they are the aesthetic or imaginative counterpoints to Vic's success in business. The novel is too complicated to stand pat on these easy antinomies. It is that the historical predication we might expect from a novel covering both world wars, called *The Great World*, and having as its lead character someone with the emblematically Australian sobriquet of Digger ends up *not being there*. Despite Carolyn See's assertion that the novel presents 'chewed-over stuff,' Malouf takes care to distance his presentation from how history, particularly the world wars, is generally treated in the realistic psychological novel. The novel interrogates history but does not propose a solution within its mesh. And even though the lyric poetry of Warrender (a name interestingly if obviously connoting 'war-ender') may pause or lend perspective on this trauma, it does not heal it. It would be easy for Malouf, especially at this point in his career with at least some international recognition (to quote Melleuish's phrase), to use Digger and Vic's relationship as the pivot of a sprawling Australian saga directed towards the international reader, but he meticulously indraws and incises the story rather than enlarges it. Malouf renders it more intimate than epic.

This is not to say that Malouf's stance is anti-historical. Nor does Malouf categorically ironise history. Had Malouf lived a generation earlier, the book might easily have partaken in a high-modernist dichotomy of a dyad where one aspect is active, one aspect passive, and the passive is privileged, as in Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier*. But Malouf has distanced himself from high modernism (Pierce 500). In particular Malouf tends to make oppositions fluid and precarious rather than fixed and severe. The incipient mercy of Adair in *The Conversations at Curlow Creek* is just one example of this. Thus one cannot assume an ironic binary here. Digger

is not simply the foil or corrective to Vic. His romantic pursuit in mid-life of Iris, the sister-in-law of his old wartime mate Mac, shows a good deal of assertiveness and 'go.' This achieves, in a personal mode, the same sort of forthrightness and bravura that must have characterised Vic's buccaneering corporate activities.

Digger is potentially among the class of people Guy Standing calls 'the precariat.' These are people whose very existence is characterised by risk. They may not be 'the proletariat' in the old-fashioned Marxist sense. But they are living perpetually on the margin. Digger, though, is endowed with a bit more of a safety net, both in belonging to a generation where social welfare was more widely seen as an economic solution for non-élites *and* by possessing an inner sense of wisdom and balance. Digger can both agree to be used as a dummy for Vic's financial schemes and laugh ironically at the folly of it all when he sees how he has allegedly vaulted from wealth to poverty in one trading session. This illustrates the precariousness of his life and the blessings he nonetheless reaps from it.

Vic Keen's large-scale financial manoeuvrings reminiscent of real-life 1980s Australian tycoons such as Alan Bond (though Vic would be nearly a generation older, closer to the datespan of Lang Hancock) can be seen as Malouf's response to the resurgence of corporate capitalism in the later twentieth century. In *The Happy Life*, Malouf speaks eloquently of the rise of an economic discourse and mentality in his own lifetime, of the global economy as a 'power with its own mystique and the authority to demand instant obedience and absolute belief' (44). Often, the renunciation of a Condorcet-like belief in progress led to a wholesale embrace of market forces as society's only guiding logic. Vic's financial wizardry-gone-wrong is a portent of this new age. That such a figure is actually presented by Malouf within *The Great World* insures against any tendency to fetishise history itself within a book to be marketed to the economic matrix outside it.

But Vic is not simply demonised because he is a winner, Digger because he seems a loser. Although Don Randall is correct when he calls Vic's sensibility 'willful, instrumental' (113) as opposed to Digger's more layered and caring posture, Vic is not simply a cardboard villain. Malouf understands the problematic nature of all binaries. Pa Warrender, who goes from factory proprietor to poet, is as much the obverse of Vic, who goes from factory proprietor to tycoon, as is Digger. Thus the book becomes what Randall calls 'a novel of transactions' (109), rhetorical and aesthetic as well as financial. Moreover, the remarkable quality of the Vic-Digger relationship is how much their bond endures, that wartime friendship prevailing over every flaw in themselves and in the world that might lead to its fracturing. Other novels set across this time span might have chunks or nuggets of history rolling by in the narrative, news headlines, kaleidoscopic references to outside events, but this novel has in its perspective a bit of the flatness, and therefore fairness, of Jenny's perspective. Vic and Digger might grow older, but, as people, they remain who they are in an inner sense.

The irruptions of the great world, the world outside the private, surround the novel's characters. But they do not dominate them. Much like Shirley Hazzard's similarly titled *The Great Fire*, also set amid war and its aftermath, the adjective 'great' indicates that the small world of Australia can no longer be self-sufficient, that it is inflected and scarred by larger realities. But the title is also ironic, as no world can be greater than the bond of suffering and compassion that Vic and Digger have shared, and that Digger witnesses and memorialises through his recitations of the casualty list. To list history may be to simply make it annalistic and deprive it of overarching

meanings. But this not-so-historical approach is how Malouf enables art, history and personal memory to coexist within the same narrative. The past is filtered through aesthetic perception in *Harland's Half-Acre*, or lists as in *The Great World*, in such a way as to preclude the past from being a simple substrate. Thus these books' historical aspects do not go past a certain point. In both, Malouf avoids the naïve hopes in the historical that followed on from the collapse of belief in teleological progress. In these two not-so-historical novels, *Harland's Half Acre* and *The Great World*, Malouf derives no more hope from history than he does from progress. But he believes we can yet learn from history as, indeed, a precarious gift, a mixed blessing.

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