

**Christopher Lee. *Postcolonial Heritage and Settler Well-Being: The Historical Fictions of Roger McDonald*. New York: Cambria Press, 2018. 246 pages**

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Reading Christopher Lee's fine study prompted a re-reading of McDonald's earlier fiction. What a pleasure to rediscover such a cast of quixotic, extreme characters who inhabit those pages. Apart from scripts, essays, a fictional memoir, and two volumes of poetry, McDonald is the author of ten novels and the winner of the Miles Franklin Award in 2006, for *The Ballad of Desmond Kale*. He has been shortlisted for this award on three other occasions.

Lee's expansive and insightful survey is underpinned by an analysis of what he sees as 'the common narrative problem' in McDonald's work: 'the elusiveness of a condition of settled well-being in a society that struggles to maintain social, cultural and environmental connection.' At the root of the problem is the questionable assertion of sovereignty by the 'Settler Invader' society.

In terms of a writing tradition, McDonald is seen as an inheritor of the high modernism of Patrick White, with greater emphasis on the lives of more grounded, non-urban, working class males. These characters are invariably alienated from society and struggling to find meaning—which goes beyond any satisfaction available to them in the material world, however competent they are within it. McDonald frequently learnt the trade of his protagonists—riding, butchering, wool classing, boat building and so on. It tells in the writing. He presents an array of characters whose lives he captures from the inside. In moving from poetry to prose, McDonald said that he'd run out of space and that he wanted a broader canvas: 'I felt a craving for direct speech and character interaction.' For him, plot—and a wide readership—were important: 'A novel needs a story like music needs notes: it's what sweeps people up and carries them along and everything else—the beauty of the words, the ideas, the psychological insights—exist only because of the storytelling.'

Lee points to a number of distinctive features in McDonald's writing, one of which is the authorial voice, described as a 'wry, knowing, enquiring persona [which] conveys just how closely the profound might sit alongside the ridiculous.' It is a voice that can embrace the transcendent and the mundane, and moves across time and space in leaps and bounds that frequently take the reader by surprise.

Following the lengthy introductory chapter, Lee devotes separate chapters to the historical novels, beginning with *1915* (1979) and ending with *When Colts Ran* (2010). He presents a complex argument concerning the former, signaled by the chapter title: The Limits of 'Late Colonial Transcendentalism': *1915*. While in the tradition of White's modernism, *1915* resists the transcendent as a solution to the conflicted status of the settler bound up with an 'exploitative attitude to the land and a dismissive and violent relationship with Aboriginal Australia.' This coming-of-age novel—which won the *Age* Book of the Year Award in 1979—focuses on the lives of Walter and Billy, two men who grew up in the bush and signed up with the AIF to fight at Gallipoli. McDonald wrote the scripts for the seven-part popular TV series based on the novel, broadcast on the ABC in 1982.

*Slipstream* (1982) is loosely based on the life of Charles Kingsford Smith (1897–1935), however it is not a celebration of his achievements, nor does it see the character, Roy Hilman, as a hero. It is more concerned with the complexities of relationships, the forces at work in molding human nature—and, most particularly, the role of technology in shaping modernity and ‘a technological mode of Being.’ For this analysis, Lee draws on the work of Martin Heidegger.

*Shearers’ Motel* (1992) is a fictionalised account of McDonald’s life, focusing on a midlife crisis. In reality, he left his family behind in regional NSW and became an itinerant worker, frequently as a shearer’s cook in country that was familiar to him as a boy, travelling with his father. In analysing this crisis, Lee draws effectively on the insights of Freud, Jung and Bataille. He sees Jung as an important influence in both McDonald’s private life, and in his writing.

*Mr Darwin’s Shooter* (1998) recreates an imagined relationship between Charles Darwin and his manservant, Syms Covington. Covington is a familiar figure in McDonald’s fiction: not well educated, a boy (and man) whose insights into self—and life—owe much to his contact with the natural world. A self-made man who is a ‘doer,’ he is also deeply troubled by the implications of Darwin’s work for the (non) existence of a traditional God who made the world in seven days. Lee points out that the troubled friendship between the naturalist and his assistant ‘charts some of the tensions which characterised the shift from a religious to a scientific cosmology.’ For this adventurous and compelling novel, which examines closely the relationship between the two men, and the power imbalance, McDonald draws on extensive auto/biographical material for Darwin; for Covington, he has little more than a flimsy diary.

*The Ballad of Desmond Kale* (2005) is a ‘bricolage of conventions’ drawn from popular genres—notably the convict romance and the pastoral romance. It is, once again, a curious mix of immanence and transcendence—and is vigorously anti-establishment. The melodramatic Parson Magistrate Matthew Stanton—in a war of attrition with the heroic Desmond Kale and Tom Rankine—is loosely based on Samuel Marsden (1765–1838) who was known as ‘the flogging parson.’ The array of colourful, mostly male, characters is linked by a common interest: wool. Most especially, merino wool, which is worth living, and dying, for. The women characters are susceptible to seduction and manipulation, however there are numerous occasions in which they outsmart the men. In the end Tom Rankine and the heroine, Meg Inchcape, both somewhat tarnished, do get together for an uncertain future.

The novel is about settlement and possession and, at least implicitly, Aboriginal dispossession. It is here that the work is found, by some, to be wanting in its failure to adequately address the ‘coercion, displacement and slaughter of the native population,’ although Lee questions this reading. Elsewhere, Lee notes that ‘McDonald recognizes indigenous dispossession in his work, but rarely pursues its wider implications.’

*When Colts Ran* (2010) is seen by Lee as bringing together the concerns of the historical fiction with the Jungian-inspired work. He points out, astutely, that the interiority of the main character, Kingsley Colts, is established through his actions, rather than his consciousness. And also in the minds of those whose lives he has touched. Colts is raised by the eccentric, and complex, Major Dunc Buckler who is a familiar type: the quintessential hard man, utterly pragmatic in matters to do with the land—and women—yet capable of highly speculative, philosophical observations in the midst of the mundane. Lee sees him as raising Colts ‘according to his own aggressive,

authoritarian, sexist and racist version of toxic Australian masculinity.’ If there are answers to the Bucklers, Lee suggests they lie in ‘the need to realize the anima within the masculine psyche’—a key motif in *When Colts Ran*.

*Postcolonial Heritage and Settler Well-Being* is thoughtful, well researched, insightful, rewarding. And, for the most part, well written. Occasionally the invocation of postcolonial theory felt forced, and in the final chapter, ‘toxic,’ ‘numinous’ and ‘proximal’ seemed to get a heavy workout. These are quibbles. Overall, this book, part of the Cambria Australian Literature Series, under the general editorship of Susan Lever, is an excellent contribution to the field.

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