

Robert Dixon. *Alex Miller: The Ruin of Time*. NSW: Sydney UP, 2014. 229 pp.

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In *Alex Miller: Ruin of Time*, Robert Dixon continues the work of his edited collection *The Novels of Alex Miller* (2012), which emerged from a symposium dedicated to the author in 2011. I've read all of Miller's novels, and Dixon's book elevates their achievement, giving them a far greater coherence. While chapters are usually dedicated to a single work (sometimes two), making it easy to find his commentary on a particular novel, Dixon rewards the reader of the *oeuvre* as a whole, particularly as he progresses: details and connections back to previous novels begin to spring from every one of Miller's characters or themes. Dixon writes: 'The relationship between Alex Miller's novels often suggest to me the techniques of relief and intaglio, as if the material that is removed by incising to make the positive image of one novel later provides the substance for another' (155). Dixon's ability to find productive lines of connection between *all* of Miller's novels is perhaps the most valuable aspect of this work. The chapters on the more recent novels *Lovesong* (2009), *Autumn Laing* (2011), and *Coal Creek* (2013) also fill-out a critical picture that has, in recent years, made Miller the subject of considerable critical interest.

The contextual details supplied by Dixon range from ancient hunting manuals to the intriguing nature of the relationship between a great Australian visual artist and his benefactors. One of the salient aspects of *The Ruin of Time* is the way Dixon places Miller's work within the cosmos of world literature, at different stages linking his novels to fiction writers as diverse as Sebald, Rimbaud, Dante, Hardy, Lawson and Patrick White. Dixon's discussion encompasses the diverse influences and references used by Miller, such as Edward, Duke of York's *Master of Game* (background to the hunting traditions described in *The Tivington Nott* (1989)), Samuel Smiles's *The Lives of Engineers* (the historical context of *Conditions of Faith* (2000)) and artist Walker Sickert's Camden Town series (the conceptual influence behind the dynamics of looking in *The Sitters* (1995)). Such an orientation at once locates Miller as a writer of world literature, while at the same time emphasising his contribution to and development of uniquely Australian themes and concerns.

The many resonances between real life and fiction emphasized by Dixon greatly enrich his thoughtful critical readings of Miller's work. Many of these links are unexpected, almost delightful, whether they involve fictional characters having the same name as people from Miller's life, or characters in different novels sharing some thematic or historical relation, or intertextual links to other writers, works, or ideas. There are many instances to choose from but my favourite is the link between the 'rediscovery' of Patrick White's papers in 2006 and *Autumn Laing*, where the title character claims, like White, to have burned biographical papers in an effort to efface and control. Despite this, in an 'Editor's Note' at the end of the novel, Adeli, Autumn's biographer, says that Autumn in fact helped her with the papers, almost collaborating with her in the writing of the fictional biography of Autumn and her bohemian group. Perhaps more importantly than these 'interesting facts,' Dixon continually recalls and compares similar events in previous novels, such as the lessons in reading the bush that occur in both *Journey to the Stone Country* (2002) and Miller's final novel *Coal Creek*. This comparative method becomes more pronounced as the book progresses, creating the sense of an immense, large-scale achievement by Miller.

Discussions of theory firmly establish Dixon's book as a work of literary criticism, although the density and register of this discourse will still appeal to readers at an undergraduate level. Among several others, the pivotal theories used include Jacques Derrida's concept of friendship and Walter Benjamin's ideas on history. These discussions are suitably detailed, but they never outweigh or swamp the novels. Miller's most challenging novel, *The Ancestor Game* (1992), elicits one of the most detailed readings of any in the book, with Dixon's deployment of the concept of 'multiple modernities' amplifying the reoccurrence, most obvious in *Conditions of Faith*, *Lovesong* and *Autumn Laing*, of this postcolonial impulse to decenter.

The concept of 'the ruin of time,' Dixon's overarching thematic and critical approach, is woven into his analysis of all eleven novels. His ability to extract different resonances from this idea, particularly in his discussion of some of Miller's most memorable images or scenes, such as the decaying homestead in *Journey to the Stone Country*, is a testament to Dixon's precise and detailed knowledge of the writer. Discussing one of Miller's art-themed novels, *The Sitters*, Dixon writes that the 'ruin of time' is 'concerned with being-in-time, with longing, absence and silence, and with the intimate connections between art, memory and death' (54). Another important conceptual theme running through Dixon's analysis is the 'portal'—a window, doorway or passage linking disparate times and places—that he links to Miller's friendship and collaboration with the Australian artist Rick Amor, and which manifests throughout the eleven novels. The theme of friendship and collaboration is also central, and the novelist's friendship with Barada elder Frank Budby—the inspiration for the character Douglad Gnapun from two central Queensland novels—is one of many instances where Miller's examination of the ethics of storytelling is highlighted by Dixon. Dixon's use of Miller's essays and articles, such as 'The Mask of Fiction: A Memoir' (2012), adds another measure of complexity to the analysis, while also underscoring the conceptual depth beneath the surface of the prose.

Summing up the experience of working on *The Ruin of Time*, Dixon writes, 'In my reading, re-reading and writing about Miller's eleven novels, he and I have become collaborators of a kind' (211). This collaboration is surely behind many of the small details, such as what Miller was reading at the time of writing a particular novel, that lend Dixon's book that extra shine.

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