

## Archival Salvage: History's Reef and the Wreck of the Historical Novel

AMANDA JOHNSON  
University of Melbourne

Richard Flanagan has periodically expressed anxiety that there is a 'collective loss of nerve' amongst novelists regarding the bold use of narrative techniques that gainfully reframe archival information:

The deployment of more playful forms, the use of fable or allegory or historical elements, is seen to be a creative failure, a retreat. The liberating possibilities, the political edges of story are denied. You sense a collective loss of nerve, a fear of using the full arsenal of fictional techniques to confront fully our experience. (Qtd in Cunningham 2003)

Such a statement presages disaster if it is true. For it suggests that novelists may be censoring themselves from fully experiencing the metaphorical fevers of creative process – that engagement with the archive of techniques and genres that permits them to make and re-make the social and political archive as story. Flanagan, however, may also be alluding to the mixed reception of his formally carnivalesque *Gould's Book of Fish: A Novel in Twelve Fish* (2001).

While lack of scope prevents a survey of recent narrative experiment found across novels dealing with Australian pasts, it is useful to reflect that many novelists are still feeling the quietening effects of recent high-profile debates from the mid-noughties where historians Inga Clendinnen, John Hirst and Mark McKenna sought to hang prominent novelists out to dry for making 'smash and grab' raids upon Australian history. This essay reconsiders postcolonial novelistic activity within the archives, offering a riposte to the troubling reception of novelistic research activity by the aforementioned group of white Australian historians.

In the Australian cultural setting, debates about the ethics of portraying Indigenous subjects and subject matter have dominated postcolonial discussions of identity since the 1970s. These debates were almost superseded by circular debates about 'true' Australian history and who has the right to tell it across 2004-08. This was disappointing in a context of the morally and formally imaginative speculations of historians such as Tom Griffiths (2006), Fiona Paisley (2004), Stephen Kinnane (2000) and Greg Denning (2004). But as this local debate became more heated, more public, the oddest spectacle of all was the lambasting of historical novelists.

Notable historians such as Mark McKenna (2005), John Hirst and Inga Clendinnen vociferously condemned dramatic accounts of the past as anachronistic, unethical and, most curious of all in relation to the fictioneer's job description, *untrue*. In the afternoon of these debates I think it timely to revisit the 'history wars' stoush, in order to argue that these historians overlooked the suasion of broader political battles to determine and culturally enshrine particular narratives of Australian pasts; I argue that they also eschewed the linguistic turn of postmodernism and the contributions made therein by prominent historical scholars in their own field such as Hayden White (1978, 1984, 1986, 1987) and Dominic LaCapra (1983).

Disproving the historians' assertions may pave the way to (re)affirm how novelists as diverse as Kate Grenville and Kim Scott have engaged with colonial archival materials, deploying particular narrative techniques that enable them to generate compelling postcolonial dramatisations of colonial pasts.

I write, therefore, in defence of historical novels dealing with 'Australian' themes, championing not only the 'logic of the novel' but also the idea of the novelist as a kind of resilient historiographic fool within the archive.

### **The Undisciplined Disciplinary Fevers of the Historians**

With the elegance of hindsight it can be seen that between 2004 and 2008, several prominent historians did themselves and their discipline more of a conceptual and critical disservice than those novelists they set out to castigate for their supposedly irreverent archival raids and subsequent fabrication of that which Mark McKenna called 'sloppy comfort history' (9), and that which Inga Clendinnen has named as 'failures of applied empathy' ('The History Question' 20).

These historians offered no cogent analysis of particular novelist's narrative techniques and how the deployment of these might serve or work against a particular conceptual and political agenda in evoking past time. While historians may not always be schooled in narrative analysis, it seems strange that they would turn their critical rifle-sights upon the Australian historical novel without alluding to different kinds of narrative histories and discussing how narrative techniques serve and construct meaning. In the absence of this analysis one might expect some acknowledgement that the creative writer, the literary scholar *and* the historian all draw upon a formidable archive of narrative techniques in order to express their ideas as text.

Hirst, Clendinnen and McKenna spoke little of their own poetic narrative techniques except in the broadest terms. For each writer, it was as if postmodernism and the linguistic turn had never been. The work of Hayden White and Dominic La Capra, historiographers and champions of history as poetic narrative, had been mothballed. Methodological adventures in Australian history writing seemed to have been forgotten entirely (though inspirational, under-publicised essays from Ian McCalman, Alan

Atkinson and Fiona Paisley appeared in the Stuart Macintyre edited *Historians Conscience* towards the end of 2005).

Kate Grenville's *The Secret River* (2005) can be appreciated for its poetic, teleologically driven narrative as Kim Scott's often hallucinogenically fragmented mode of storytelling can also be appreciated. It may nonetheless be true to say that Grenville did not incorporate the kind of narrative techniques that might expose how the novelist (in Christian Moraru's terms) might cleverly 'pillory the archive' (2).

Grenville's illusion of a working class world in the pre-Australian scenes set on the Thames, as with the antipodean scenes on the Hawkesbury, is 'seamless' imaginative myth in this instance: the novel's illusionistic 'fourth wall' is never punctured by a doubting, constructing contemporary omnipotent narrator, whose dramatic interpellations, metafictional or otherwise, produce a range of space/time leaps between past and present. Grenville clearly chose *not* to use narrative techniques that not only produce an inherent cinematic duelling between past and present, but which reveal the very ideas of past and present as a culturally bound, temporal artifice. In her early notes on her creative editorial process, Grenville interestingly remarks that what she called the 'White story' and the 'Aboriginal story' were not working together; indeed, she says, they 'bucked against each other like some clever bit of postmodernism' (*Searching for the Secret River* 178).

Grenville is clearly no fan of the disjunctive narrative techniques of postmodern narrative as is Kim Scott. Scott had approached the making of his novel *Benang* in quite a different way only a few years earlier. His onslaught upon Australian history was far bolder than Grenville's, and his resultant narrative more formally innovative, making more demands upon the reader.

However Scott luckily slipped through the net but any novelist writing the past in the mid-noughties seemed doomed to stay in after school and repeat: *I must not enter the archive, I must not enter the archive*. Kate Grenville was a particular target of attack, while Peter Carey and Roger Mc Donald and, farther afield, Margaret Atwood in *Alias Grace* historical novel mode, miraculously passed muster.

*The Secret River* was published and distributed around the height of the so-called 'history wars'. As noted, the novel's troubled reception occurred against a millennial confluence of ideologically driven debates and highly mediated cultural skirmishes about Australian history and the preservation of the past. Across 2005 and 2006, broader national debates about the teaching and revision of Australian history in schools were also fed by public wrangling between historians as to how the colonial archive was to be accessed and interpreted. Out of that highly factionalised fracas arose the additional spectre of a falling out between the heretofore-cousinly disciplines of history and literature. As early as 2005, political scientist David McKnight deftly characterised the legacy of the decades-long political 'cultural war' between national Labour and Liberal Party factions that in many respects laid the underpinning for recent public battles about the nature of history (27).

For Prime Minister John Howard, Labour's 'Big Picture' had left many Australians 'feeling that no common ground identity existed that might incorporate them [...] this vulnerability was precisely what John Howard had targeted in the year before he won the 1996 election' (McKnight 27). As McKnight notes, his vehicle on this chosen field of battle was a series of 'headland speeches' that articulated values and took the place of policies. Anxieties about national pride and identity had been a central issue in the culture wars since the 1988 Bicentenary, where tension centred on whether official support would extend to a re-enactment of the landing of the First Fleet:

The cultural Left's ongoing concern was that European settlements meant the destruction of indigenous societies and that this should not be glossed over by historical triumphalism of the inheritors of that settlement. In fact these concerns grew to have considerable weight in all kinds of official decisions about historical events, as well as having a growing research focus in the academy. (27)

In elegant summary, McKnight suggests that under Howard, a 'legitimate re-balancing' took place in a situation in which nearly all Australians desired some kind of national identity of which they could be proud or that held moral truths (27). His balanced analysis is compelling when he argues that to the extent that the so-called cultural Left (McKnight's capitalisation) had not foreseen such a re-balance in the offing, left-wing intellectuals and historians sowed the seeds of the Right's cultural resurgence:

Unadulterated criticism of European settlement was seen as sneering at ordinary people who simply wanted something to believe in. Howard later used this desire to engage in historical denial over the stolen generations report on the removal of Aboriginal children from their parents. The controversy around the report was a copybook example of the way New Right intellectuals could mobilise desire for national identity, mix it with attacks on elites and set an agenda for the Howard government. (27)

As historian Rebe Taylor points out in relation to the shifts of government from the Keating to Howard eras in her review of (the Robert Manne edited) *Whitewash*:

[...] there had been a noticeable shift in how white Australia has understood its past. Following publication of histories that recalled a violent frontier, Australia Day began to be called 'Invasion Day'; people danced to Yothu Yindi's call for a treaty; and hundreds of thousands marched for reconciliation, signed 'sorry books' and planted seas of hands. That a voice has appeared to debunk the historical justification for this populist sense of shame is perhaps on reflection, of little surprise in an increasingly conservative political environment. (4)

Taylor is alluding to Keith Windschuttle's controversial book *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History*, but she might equally be speaking about conservative Prime Minister John Howard. Labour's 'Big Picture' had left had left many Australians 'feeling that no common ground identity existed that might incorporate them [...] this vulnerability was

precisely what John Howard had targeted in the year before he won the 1996 election' (McKnight 27). As McKnight notes, his vehicle on this chosen field of battle was a series of 'headland speeches' that articulated values and took the place of policies. Anxieties about national pride and identity had been a central issue in the culture wars since the 1988 Bicentenary, where tension centred on whether official support would extend to a re-enactment of the landing of the First Fleet. In his 'headland speeches', then opposition leader Howard also began to reiterate a theme that would be repeated, ever more dogmatically, across the long decade of his leadership:

We learn from history and we build on it. But we should not deny it or misrepresent it. The current prime minister [Paul Keating served as PM 1991–96] must be one of the few leaders from anywhere in the world, who appears to have so little respect for his own country's history that he is attempting to re-write it. (27)

For John Howard, this 'black armband' view of the impact of settlement, had cast history, ever since the arrival of the First Fleet, as 'little more than a disgraceful story of imperialism, exploitation, racism, sexism and other forms of discrimination. I take a very different view' (27). In this context it is not hard to understand the stoush that greeted the reception of Kate Grenville's historical novel *The Secret River* after its publication in 2005.

Since the early 2000s, John Howard's Coalition Government had been anxiously attempting to nationalise a curriculum on the teaching of history. Tony Taylor wrote of his difficult experience as a participant in the controversial August 2006 History Summit, convened by politicians from the 'sensible centre' (13). Former Labor state premier Bob Carr, historian Greg Melleuish and conservative think-tanker Gerard Henderson, all from New South Wales, were participants.<sup>1</sup> Inga Clendinnen was also invited to participate at the last stages of the History Summit. In the postscript to her *Quarterly Essay*, 'The History Question: Who Owns the Past?' Clendinnen listed her several hopes for this summit, including a final perplexing wish that history's social utility ought to depend on it 'being treated as a social discipline, and not as a tempting source of gratifying tales' (69).

During the culturally prescriptive term of the Howard years, many historians wrote newspaper columns and articles rushing to defend the disciplinary purity of 'History' and its guardianship of official, empirical 'truths'. Most often this defence elided not only a discussion of how history might be defined and officially enshrined, but also resisted consideration of how the archive might be differently interpreted, formed or shown. This was the missing link within the entire public discussion of the so-called history wars; *evocation* or *dramatisation* of Australian had never been the novelist's exclusive purview. This crucial absence in discussions could not fail to limit discussion for both disciplinary camps.

It was one thing to encounter the sceptical claims of historian Keith Windschuttle, whose readings of official Tasmanian colonial archives provocatively downplayed the roles of Indigenous resistance, the numbers of Indigenous casualties in the settler 'war', and

retrospective pronouncements of a Tasmanian genocide (2002). It was another for a group of white historians to suddenly discard the interests that their own discipline had had in contemporary historiography and interdisciplinary forms of narrativisation via thinkers such as Hayden White and Dominic LaCapra.

Ian McCalman was one historian attracted to the burgeoning literary and critical theory of the 1970s and 1980s known as the 'linguistic turn'. He notes in hindsight that:

The contention that language creates rather than reflects meaning had seismic implications for historical practice. [...] In its extreme formulation, the linguistic turn seemed to elide the distinction between fiction and history altogether—at the very least it blurred the line between our products and those of good historical novelists such as Iain Pears, Susan Sontag and Barry Unsworth. (152)

McCalman also testifies to the enormous impact in Australia of influential studies by White and LaCapra. As early as 1978 Hayden White famously argued in 'The Historical Text as Literary Artefact' that most academic historians were unaware of the fact that they shaped their analyses according to a series of foundational literary plots and tropes, while LaCapra was more troubled about the unimaginative ways in which historians made these literary borrowings, often drawn from the idea of the nineteenth-century realist novel with their telling of events from the viewpoint of a single omniscient narrator (1983). LaCapra championed the idea of the historian as creative writer, and challenged historians to embrace the 'contested voices, the multiple viewpoints, the raids on the unconscious, the Rabelaisian dialogues that had been pioneered by modernist novelists like Joyce and Faulkner' (McCalman 152).

LaCapra's thought also aligns with Derrida's belief that historiography 'is always teleological; it imposes a meaning on the past and so too does fiction' (Hutcheon, 'Historicising the Postmodern' 97). LaCapra's emphasis upon the contested voices of historical narrative reveals his sympathy with the provisional voices of postmodern fiction. As Hutcheon has argued in a discussion of Michel de Certeau: '[...] history writing is a displacing operation upon the real past, a limited and limiting attempt to understand the relations between a place, a discipline, and the construction of a text (97).

McCalman points out that in recent decades, impulses to merge history and fiction have come from the literary world. He notes that late twentieth-century novelists such as Peter Carey have increasingly mimicked the language, methods, and materials of historians: 'It's not unusual these days for novels to reproduce realistic-looking fake documents in their texts, and some will go to the lengths of inventing an entire research apparatus of footnotes, references and bibliography [...] giving rise to the burgeoning new genre of historical faction' (153).

McCalman is only partly right for some other novelistic 'factions' incorporate research in genuine scholarly apparatus, establishing a kind of contract with the reader that 'these bits' are based on fact, despite the whole being a fiction.

At various fora, including the Canberra Press Club and The Brisbane Writers Festival, Peter Carey had his ‘true history’ held to account by journalists in relation to his ironically titled novel *The True History of the Kelly Gang* (2000). Earnest members of the Brisbane audience grilled the writer over the accuracy or otherwise of several points of reference in the Kelly story. His heated, oft-intoned reply was that ‘I made it up’. While this did not assuage his interlocutors’ wrath, his response won Clendinnen’s heart: ‘Peter Carey won my heart ...’ (‘The History Question’ 32).

McCalman goes out on a limb to support Carey’s right to mythic invention: he also asks a very important question, one largely posed to his own community of historical scholars: ‘Why should historians care that bestselling novelists get away with writing dubious history?’ (155). In the historians’ declamations, historical novels dealing with Australian pasts appear to have been defensively simplified as a homogeneous group lacking in complexity of approach, and as being ‘all too vulnerable to strategic reinvention for political purposes’ – this is Penny Russell in her largely excellent essay ‘Almost Believing: The Ethics of Historical Imagination’ (115). Yet surely any text may be vulnerable to strategic reinvention at any time, in any way.

A mad whiff of censorship is flagged by the anxious pronouncements of Russell, Clendinnen, Hirst and McKenna, a desire to police literature’s happily dark corners; the suggestion that historical themes, postcolonial or otherwise, ought not be taken up by novelists. Yet historical tracts and treatises too are also vulnerable to strategic reinvention for political purposes. Think Machiavelli, Marx, Windschuttle, Mosley, Rand.

Certainly no Australian historical novelist has gone on record to triumphally suggest resigning the building of the past to the imagination of writers of fiction and film *alone*. Kim Scott desires to dramatically manipulate historical archival sources for political *exposure* and subsequent critical reflection about race relations under colonialism; he aims to engage the affectivity of the reader, while tempering this, in the Brechtian sense, by activating the reader’s ethical and critical understanding. In this respect he has much in common with the historian Henry Reynolds who is differently but similarly interested to deconstruct the romance of the colonial frontier. Clendinnen quotes Reynolds towards the end of her section on historical morality in *The Quarterly Essay*:

The work of the historian cannot be sealed off from the community ... History should not only be relevant but politically utilitarian ... It should aim to right old injustices, to discriminate in favour of the oppressed, to actively rally to the cause of liberation. (Reynolds quoted in ‘The History Question’ 56)

This remark is thirty years old as is Hayden White’s observation that:

[...] A specifically *historical* enquiry is born less of the necessity to establish *that* certain events occurred than of the desire to determine what certain events might mean for a given group, a society, or culture’s conception of its present tasks and future prospects. (‘Historical Pluralism’ 487)

This has much in common with the historical novelist's desire to 'make the past new again' in the present (Falconer 108) and many of Kate Grenville's remarks on her creative research processes as will shown in the next section of this essay.

The ideas of White and LaCapra emphasised signification rather than validation, Spivakian positionality rather than monological voice. They also placed a new emphasis on present actuality within historical research. Both writers also emphasised the different ways in which texts could be made. Since the mid-seventies, the novels of E.L. Doctorow, David Foster Wallace, Christa Wolf and others began to favour cinematic riffs between space(s) and time(s), quest and non-quest, multiple voice as distinct from monological heroic voice, abandoning the illusion of a coherent world. Late twentieth-century Derridaen emphases upon deconstruction meant the idea of writing the past, whether as fiction or history, could still be championed, but done differently.

But these thinkers do more than open up writers to diversities of formal approach. Our recent (and even remote) past is something we share and the abundance of historical fiction and history being read today is perhaps a sign of a desire for 'an act of community' (Doctorow, quoted in Trenner 59). Doctorow's statement is cousinly kindred to Reynolds' objectives here, as it is to Benedict Andersen's notion of building an ethics of community through reading and writing (as discussed in Moraru 2).

It is then with some amazement that we observe how *literary* Clendinnen is finally prepared to 'sound' when she suddenly remarks at the end of her essay: 'If all this makes the writing of history sound like an advanced literary art, so, of course, it is' ('The History Question' 56). Here is some concession of the comparative aspects of narrativisation between the two disciplines. This reads as hard won, and the comment is found well away from the high-blood-pressure section of the essay devoted to the failings of particular historical novelists.

### **Clendinnen's Reef**

James Bradley recently stated that at the heart of Clendinnen's essay 'lay an extended and surprisingly savage critique of *The Secret River*, the claims Clendinnen believed Grenville had made for it, and for fiction's capacity to illuminate the past; and more deeply, of the very idea of historical fiction' (24). This analysis was further supported by Paul Salzman, who wrote of Clendinnen's essay's 'intemperate riposte' (86) and 'sense of anthropological certitude that contains the seeds of its own disciplinary arrogance' (89). Katherine Bode has spoken eloquently of Clendinnen's 'contradictory attitude to literary fiction' commenting that by insisting novelists should tell the truth about the past, Clendinnen was attempting to reassert the authority and expertise of historians by reclaiming history's reference to the real (94).

Looking back it is clear to see how Clendinnen's sporadically brilliant reflections upon historical novel writing are marred by recourse to unscholarly vehemence, and by several significant contradictions. Peter Carey is eulogised for his insistence upon fictioneering

rather than factioneering; in Clendinnen's eyes, Carey is a writer 'who aims at transformation, not replication of the past or reformation of the present' (32). And yet only a paragraph or two earlier she opines:

[...] should an historian protest, 'But he/she was not like that at all, and I can prove it,' the novelists, indeed a whole legion of litterateurs, will roar in chorus: 'Irrelevant! This is a novel stupid!' That practised slither between 'this is a serious work of history' and 'judge me only on my literary art' has always annoyed me. (31)

Neither Carey nor Grenville has made such a handsome claim for their art. In fact both have continually emphasised the fictional status of their fiction! This is not to deny that historical research has not played a considerable role in their imaginative evocations of past worlds. Neither Carey nor Grenville wishes to 'slither' between history and literature, hedging disciplinary bets in the scurrilous fashion imputed by Clendinnen.

It is instructive to look again here at an earlier, provocative quote from Grenville regarding her research for *The Secret River*: 'I'll be orderly and systematic. I'll find out everything there is to know about Solomon Wiseman [...] I'll research only until I find something juicy, and then I'll run off with it and turn it into something else' ('The Novelist as Barbarian').

Almost perversely, and with a tin ear for Grenville's playful note, Clendinnen condemns Grenville's case as unspeakably transgressive, while lauding Carey (and also Margaret Attwood) for doing the very same thing. Stella Clarke noted in 'Havoc in History House', that Mark McKenna was of like mind, scathingly casting 'the fictionist's truth as a second class, fuzzy "truth of the human heart"'. Novelists were only second to conservative politicians as peddlers of 'sloppy comfort history' (9). For Clarke, as for myself, McKenna's:

[...] caning of novelists with the stick of historical accuracy is surprising, coming from a contemporary intellectual attuned to the difficulties of accessing the past via the fragments and memories available to us, and the consequently constructed nature of truth. (8–9)

McKenna's 2005 article 'Writing the Past' contested 'the rise of the novelist as historian'—his great fear, notes Clarke again, was that 'a lawless literary rabble has opted to fill the vacuum left by bickering historians, and taken unsanctioned control of Australia's past', while 'Critics such as me are pumping up Australia's top historical novelists, leading them to think it's fine to colonise territory traditionally owned by professional historians, on the basis that it is a terra nullius of truth' (8).

In her 2005 *Quarterly Essay* Clendinnen wrote in support of both McKenna and Hirst, observing that Hirst 'forcefully rejects fiction writers' claim to write more penetrating history than historians' in relation to Grenville's putative claims about her novel (16). Perhaps Hirst was quite reasonably reflecting on the Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*

(2003) and other potboilers whose authors have made overconfident claims to historical veracity. Brown is one writer who has mashed genres, facts and histories in such unconsidered ways that Salman Rushdie was heard to inveigh, 'Do not start me on 'The Da Vinci Code', a novel so bad that it gives bad novels a bad name ... .. Even Dan Brown must live,' he said. 'Preferably not write, but live' (Qtd in Maines, 2005).

But Hirst is otherwise making some harsh generalisations about literary fiction. I cannot find evidence of Kim Scott and Peter Carey making grandiloquent claims for novelists as interpreters of history *par excellence*, though Roger McDonald, winner of the 2006 Miles Franklin Award for *The Ballad of Desmond Kale* (2005) and author of *Mr Darwin's Shooter* (1998), threw the cat amongst the pigeons:

I feel rapped on the knuckles by the media watch of the moment, whether it is a feature writer on cultural shortcomings or an academic historian defending his territory. [...] It must be grating for some historians, however, that the diaries, letters and documents uncovered by them in a lifetime's work can be the afternoon playthings of a novelist. ('Fictional Truth?')

Clendinnen, the most scrupulous minesweeper of sources, avoided McDonald's remarks, whole-heartedly praising him at the 2007 Sydney Writer's Festival panel in 2007 'Making a Fiction of History', despite the novel's 'elision of indigenous genocide and dispossession' (Bode 89), the perpetually difficult ethical question for white writers with which Grenville directly engages. The only evidence that novelists were aspiring to write better history than historians, came from a selective analysis of Grenville's 2006 Radio National interview as well as Grenville's conference paper 'The Novelist as Barbarian', presented at the National Library five years before *The Secret River* was published. In the latter, Grenville stated that:

[...] history, for a greedy novelist like me is just one more place to pillage [...] What we're after, of course is stories [...] Having found them, we proceed to fiddle with them to make them the way we want them to be, rather than the way we really were. We get it wrong, wilfully, knowingly [...].

Ironically, at that same conference, Clendinnen notes, Grenville humbly professed admiration for the work of Manning Clark:

My epiphany ... was reading Manning Clark. Here was an historian not hiding behind a mask of 'objectivity' but being shamelessly personal ... If I thought, in my ignorance, that I was going to put the 'story' back into 'history', I had to recognise that he had already done it, with a breadth of vision and depth of knowledge no novelist could match. (Qtd in 'The History Question' 17)

At the same conference she also stated:

I think all we as storytellers can do is to pay tribute to history and acknowledge it as the first great story. And when we start to get too big for our boots we can remind

ourselves that history, and the recounting of history, will go on after our novels are forgotten. ('The Novelist as Barbarian')

It is difficult now to see how these humble comments revealed Grenville as claiming to write more penetrating histories than historians. Her humorous, take-no-prisoners attitude to the archival raid (the identical archives, incidentally, which Clendinnen wrote out of for her history *Dancing with Strangers* (2003) and acknowledged on page 17 of 'The History Question') is weighted by her ability to research as diligently as Attwood and Carey. Equally, her comments about historians 'hiding behind the mask of objectivity' might be read less as a rejection of objective fact-gathering *per se* than as a certain disappointment in those histories that do not deduce or interpret, but simply dryly enumerate. In light of the Keith Windschuttle debate, where nearly every historian of note criticised Windschuttle for perilous inaccuracy in reading the colonial record, but mostly for a lack of moral empathy in his dogged accounting of colonial records, Grenville's comment might equally have been read as supportive of those historians who do more than simply rationally enumerate the facts.

The historical novelist's humanistic hope (and Atkinson's, Macintyre's and Greg Denning's) of achieving moral empathy is dismissed out of hand by Clendinnen as the aforementioned errors of 'Applied Empathy' ('The History Question' 20). While Grenville's radio pronouncements provoked the ire of Clendinnen, Hirst and others ('The historians are doing their thing, but let me as a novelist come to it in a different way, which is the way of empathising and imaginative understanding of those difficult events ...' (Grenville, interview with Ramona Koval)), such ire was never tempered by a desire to make light of her occasional on-air radio simplicities and consider the novelist's creative research practices in *novelistic* context.<sup>2</sup>

And yet interestingly, the formal modes of Grenville's work were never of particular issue even at the zenith of criticism from prominent historians such as Hirst, McKenna, Clendinnen and others.<sup>3</sup> Hirst loudly castigated Grenville for creating the anachronistic character of an eighteenth-century Thames Waterman who is, in Morag Fraser's words, a 'projection of Grenville herself' (26). In her review of Hirst's *Sense and Nonsense in Australian History*, Fraser says that:

By Hirst's own imperatives this is harsh on a novelist trying first to understand and embody complex human human impulses in tragic circumstances. The reiteration of the catch-all phrase 'the liberal fantasy' makes one uneasy—Hirst's hard realism sliding into sloganeering. (26)

The very fact that Hirst felt the need to devote a chapter critiquing a literary historical novel for inclusion in a compendium about Australian history is testimony to his and others' fears of professional disciplinary erosion (as distinct from a previously acceptable embrace of interdisciplinary engagement). For example, he sets Grenville and Clendinnen in perverse competition:

Kate Grenville thinks that novelists, better than historians, can get into the hearts and minds of past people. Depends on the novelist—and the historian. Between Kate Grenville and Inga Clendinnen there is no contest. In her study of the first years at Sydney Cove, Clendinnen is not projecting herself back into the past; she knows that these people, settlers and Aborigines, are very different from herself. (86)

Hirst makes valuable comments on cultural and social slides into liberal fantasies about the colonial encounter. His acerbic remarks suggest, however, that he would attribute such a worrying slide to all historical fiction dealing with Australian pasts. He offers no alternative discussion of other novels for consideration. As a result one cannot help but sense that he feels historical novels pose an incontrovertible threat. Taken objectively, his worry about Grenville is an extraordinary attribution of power to novelistic craft, albeit one that occurs with little discussion of what that craft entails.

But in the political context outlined above, one in which the historian's cradle, like that of the electorate, had been so deftly (but ultimately too vigorously) rocked by the Howard Government's own history police, Hirst's protestations about historical novelists inadvertently played into the hands of the ideological agendas of a government hungry to install a historical syllabus based on fact-finding, milestones and the elevation of a monological, nationalistic account of the Australian past. This was a government with a rabid hatred of the relativistic 'liberal fantasies' it had come to associate with the left side of politics. In this vision of the past, there could be no room for a critical imagination. The Howard Government's political rhetoric was ironically identical with the language Hirst was using to condemn Grenville's novel as a 'liberal fantasy'.

Hirst is far too clever to submit to the right's delimiting views of teaching history, yet his criticisms of Grenville reveal broad incomprehension about the scope of literary fiction. His cry that Grenville's character is anachronistic is absurd and fraught with paradox. Does it really matter that it was? Does it matter that it can never be an accurate or true account of a 'historical person' for the obvious reason that a writer is interpreting and evoking from the vantage point of the present? Surely this is an exercise in history 101 as much as historical fiction writing 102. Both disciplinary camps, literary fiction and history, concede that no full or true resurrection of historical pasts is possible. The parodic title of Peter Carey's *The True History of the Kelly Gang* is a witty case in point.

Neither did Hirst or Clendinnen foreground how their own writing had been enriched by engagements with the diverse possibilities of narrative. Suffice to say Clendinnen's marvellous historical works *Dancing with Strangers* (2003) and *Aztecs* (1991)<sup>4</sup> were conceived as historiographically canny projects that were not averse to incorporating metafictional and polyphonic techniques. It is hard therefore to understand the historians' collective need to diminish the imaginative, complex and always arduous nature of novelistic process:

Some engaged reading, some preliminary flexing of the imagination, a run, a vault, and hey presto! you are there. How do you know you are in the Past? Because in the

novelist's 'past' everyone behaves delightfully in 'character', and everyone submits to plot. ('The History Question' 21)

Such comments betray Clendinnen's ill preparedness to engage with complex ideas of characterisation. Contrast Grenville's 'rounded' realist character John Thornhill from *The Secret River* with Kim Scott's cipher-like Indigenous constables, Sandy One Mason and Sandy Two Mason from *Benang*, and these with the hieratic, mysterious Indigenous Kumingiri narrator in *Oscar and Lucinda* (1988). These are neither Heyeresque stories of allegorical bodice-ripping, nor tales of atmospherically smoke-machined pasts where everyone is 'delightfully in character'. We are not speaking about the commodification of Jane Austen's novels in film, biopics, ghostwritten spin-offs and the like. Scott's bitter postcolonial tale, in its efforts to unravel the racist underpinnings of the colonial archives, could not be further from such a stereotypical, mass-market nostalgia. As said, it is important to keep in mind that the postmodern return to history does *not only* constitute a return to popular nostalgia and revivalism, to the recycling of period illusion.

The paradox is that once we get away from the relentless excoriation of Grenville and into the *Quarterly Essay* section 'Morality in History: How Sorry Can We Be?', Clendinnen speaks with wonderful clarity on the 'preposterously ambitious enterprise' of history—an exercise in 'trying to make whole people, whole situations, whole other ways of being out of the dusty fragments left after real lives end [...]'. The historians':

[...] core narrative is always the struggle with recalcitrant, evasive sources. As they interrogate those sources before our very eyes, we have a fleeting sense of what it would have been like to have lived a different life, in a different place, at a different time. (56)

This does not sound so very different to some of Grenville's and Delia Falconer's reflective remarks on their research processes. Novelist Scott and Indigenous historian Stephen Kinnane have also dramatised out of the archival fragment, gleaning the important presences and absences that the fragment (or Barthesian *notation*) can sometimes yield.<sup>5</sup> Their works are also exercises in 'trying to make whole [...] other ways of being out of the dusty fragments left behind after real lives end' (Clendinnen, 'The History Question' 55–56).

Writers are *not* jostling for territory, for some elusive cultural authority. Both the historian and the novelist would accept the obvious fact that we as readers 'relate differently both aesthetically and morally to fiction than we do to what is declared to be non-fiction' – this is Clendinnen again (34).

Very different novelists such as Kim Scott, Kate Grenville and Peter Carey hardly fail to misread such obvious distinctions. To 'do it differently to the historians', as Grenville would have it, is not a lack of respect or of recognition of historical metiers, but a recognition of the close but very different research processes and outcomes that history and fiction serve.

For so many historians writing out of the history wars, it was as if the entities of history and literature had suddenly become as fixed and insoluble as the Howard Government's vision of the official colonial archive itself. There was no detailed analysis of Grenville's serial offences; ultimately no-one was the wiser about how her apparent representational transgressions had been 'crafted' and/or how the precise nature of such an offence could begin to be defined. There was no substantive counter-attack from literary circles with the exception of some endearingly bald comments from novelist Roger McDonald, who was completely unperturbed by 'the drudgery of the historians, craving neither approbation, nor dialogue' (Clarke 9).

As Clarke wittily has it, McDonald continues to be the sort of 'helmetless, bat-out-of-hell joy rider that the history cops should pull over, if they could catch him. He is uncompromisingly an artist' (9). But this ferocious hardening of disciplinary turf could not hold. The situation was ideologically and conceptually weak; the stoush had become a storm in the historians' teacup. Clarke concludes:

It seems to me that political assaults on academic methods and the academic distrust of politicians, the media, and creative artists both emerge from the same more distressing place. We are in a state about history because Australian national history (as opposed to indigenous history) is so extraordinary as to barely fit the name [...] being founded in the two-fold disgrace of indigenous dispossession and the out-of-control British criminality, perhaps it can never be satisfactorily spoken, never legitimised into a respectable entity, whether as an orthodox university discipline, or an officially mandated public narrative. That's hard to cope with. (9)

But do novelists wish to 'speak' history authoritatively or legitimise it as 'a respectable entity'? Many do not wish to neatly foreclose on what the 'voice of the past' might be and dispense with nuanced ambiguities in relation to character and story and portrayals of time itself (as distinct from stock, often nationalistic portrayals of 'olden times'). The novelist resists, strenuously if not always successfully, alignment with the monological voices of politics, the media and official histories. Neither does the impulse to write the past novelistically necessarily come from a sense of distress or shame as Murray Bail's parodic Federation tale *Eucalyptus* (2001) demonstrates.

Carey, Grenville and Scott can be considered as exponents of postcolonial polyphony, creating texts that differently evoke a discursive social, cultural and historical intertextuality. These writers seek to move beyond idealised, racist images of Aboriginality, but they also eschew submission to earlier endemic forms of political correctness that suppress portrayals of Indigeneity altogether in the name of ethical considerations of otherness. They are also writers who resist sentimentalising Australian pasts in relation to colonial settlement. At the heart of their novels is the issue of imaginatively interrogating all forms of archival evidence—rethinking 'what counts, what doesn't, where it is housed, who possesses it, and who lays claim to it as a political resource' (Burton 139). As Antoinette Burton suggests, 'this is not theory, but the very power of historical explanation itself' (139).

## Beyond the Dry Dock

The playing out of these debates is revealing. They are symptoms of a particular *Zeitgeist*, acutely fashioned by the impact of the culture wars. At the very least, they exposed how definitions of literature and history and the archive are permeable, open to change, subject to disciplinary ossification as much as dynamic intercultural allegiances, to disciplinary standoffs as much as interdisciplinary exchange. The laudatory reception of Kim Scott's *Benang*, in contrast to the reception of Grenville's *The Secret River* only a few years later, is indicative. *Benang* was described/approved by Inga Clendinnen as a 'great novel' ('The History Question' 41). But, dispiritingly, the political pressures have seemed so great in recent years that it may be simply a matter of luck as to how a historical novel will be received. Hence the punishing of Grenville can be accounted for by virtue of *The Secret River*'s publication at the very zenith of the history wars imbroglio.

We are sometimes slower than we would like to digest the subtext of these debates. With hindsight aspects of these debates have become clearer and less painful for some. As a result of the history and culture wars skirmishes, I think there may even be a heightened sense amongst novelists of what the novel of Australian history is capable of provoking and being. Grenville went on to pen *The Lieutenant* in 2008, which was favourably reviewed by James Bradley (89–95). Kim Scott's *That Deadman Dance* (2010) has garnered glowing reviews from Peter Pierce (23) and Patrick Allington (11–13), and also won the 2011 Miles Franklin Literary Award. We await another tome of fog-machined intertextuality from Peter Carey.

These debates also foregrounded new discussions about the nature of the archives, especially with the advent of a sorry-saying Labor government, a spectacle which already seems too much like remote 'history', a lone political image ready to be dramatically or parodically reinterpreted.<sup>6</sup> It may be a novelist or a poet who makes the political language of this archivally consigned event 'perceive what it doesn't want to say, provide it with its matter independently of the sign, and free it from denotation. For it is this *eminently parodic* gesture that changes the system' (Kristeva, 'The Ethics of Linguistics' 236).

Kristeva speaks of the ethics of linguistics as intricately bound up with the code-breaking functions of poetic language. In postcolonial historical novels, such code-breaking narrative techniques play a critical role.<sup>7</sup> In this respect I am reminded how cleverly Scott's novel *Benang* embodied polyphonic voice, or heteroglossic plurality. Fanny's mumbled singing, and the ruminations of the scholar Harley who is trying to make sense of his retrieved Nyoongar past, are composed of and represent particular enunciative signs. But within and against their distinct speaking styles or enunciative modes, Scott deliberately transposes other sign systems or fragments thereof—racist sloganeering, letters and instructions from the administrative colonial archive, fragments of song—all of which enable proliferations and confusions of semiotic meaning. As these sign systems rise and fall against one another, the 'abandonment' of former (colonial) sign systems occurs, namely those forming racist, romantic and anthropological discourses of Aboriginality. The protagonist/narrator Harley comments that:

I began where the paper starts, where the first white man comes [...]. [...] there it was, in that dry and hostile environment, in that litter of paper, cards, files and photographs that I began to settle and make myself substantial. A sterile landscape, but I have grown from that fraction of life *which fell*. (32)

The staging of multiple voices within the historical novel is one important political strategy that enables the writer to speak back to the monological 'truths' of colonial discourse. A range of additional narrative techniques—parody, montage, historiographic metafiction, allegory and fabulism—are at the novelist's disposal. Novelists (and some historians too—the late Greg Dening is a compelling example) have always been compelled to approach the wreck of history, opening it up in imaginative ways to retrieve other voices from the hold. In releasing a volley of voices in 'ceaseless reply' to one another' (Bakhtin, 'The problem of Speech Genres' 82) writers seek to do metaphorical violence to the myth of an orderly, thick-walled institutional archive, to the neatening of official histories. In this way they may evoke the heterogeneity of past time.<sup>8</sup>

The postcolonial novelist therefore builds a research process and, finally, a text that continuously and actively highlights the tensions between sourcing and making. Deploying code-breaking techniques, she or he draws attention to the dialogical relationships between different *kinds* of cultural and political archives, investing new meanings in archival 'signage'. If the historical novel, claimed as a site of 'ceaseless reply' and, as a genre 'that is ever questing and subjecting its established forms to review' (Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* 39), then Richard Flanagan may be worrying unduly about the future of the form. There will always be novelists who take on the provocative role of historiographical fool within the archive.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Taylor notes that this list of participants had caused alarm, leading many people 'to suspect a NSW-style, Tory-stitch-up' (13).

<sup>2</sup> Clendinnen later enumerates some historical fiction of which she approves (without, I hesitate to say, offering evidence as to how the writer's narrative techniques have managed to achieve her approval), but at many points she lambasts historical novelists as if they were all of one generic species. As noted, Ian McCalman finally does the same, but expresses critical appreciation for the diverse potentials of literary forms and techniques.

<sup>3</sup> See Mark McKenna, 'Writing the Past'.

<sup>4</sup> See my 2009 PhD dissertation, 'Re-landscaping the Historical Novel: Imagining the Colonial Archives as Postcolonial Heteroglossic Fiction', for further extrapolation on Clendinnen's literary techniques.

<sup>5</sup> For Barthes, both historian and novelist retrieve the talisman, the official record, the oblique fragment as symbols of the greater passing of time, as memorials to places populated by loved ones, enemies or strangers. Understanding *per se* can never be fulsome; it is only partial. But the retrieval of the fragment, or 'notation', as Roland Barthes defines it, may help us imagine the whole (84–90). Ankersmit notes that:

In his simultaneous championing of both the historian *and* the writer of the realist historical novel, Barthes radically emphasised that the reality of the past be linked to the writing of a so-called 'reality effect' (*un effet de réel*), which is created by irrelevant or inadvertent details mentioned in the historical text. (*History and Tropology* [online] 139–40)

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Ankersmit notes further:

These kinds of details are called *notations* by Barthes; he contrasts them with the main outline of the story, which he labels *predictive*, probably because on this level we can make certain predictions about the development of the story. Using Michelet's reference to certain details in the execution of Charlotte Corday, Barthes points out that a similar tension between prediction and notation can be demonstrated in the writing of history [...] we associate the reality of the past, he says, with notation rather than prediction. The predictive is for us a meaning conceived or created by the historian; in notation, ekphrasis, or hypotyposis, on the contrary, the past reveals itself as it really was. (139–40)

<sup>6</sup> The Rudd Labor Government offered a formal apology to the stolen generations as one of its first symbolic tasks of office. The apology was made to Australia's Indigenous peoples at Parliament House, Canberra, 13 February 2008.

<sup>7</sup> For Bakhtin, as for Kristeva, narrative polyphonics are less dogmatically connected to the idea of splitting the novel into discreet, stable character voices, than they are inevitably connected to the idea of intertextual samplings from a range of primary 'speech genres' ('The Problem of Speech Genres'). Each sample has a voice, but this may not necessarily be a linguistically stable, rounded or continuous voice in the classic characterological sense.

<sup>8</sup> As E. L. Doctorow has observed, and largely in relation to metafictional historical novels: [...] history is a kind of fiction in which we live and hope to survive, and fiction is a kind of speculative history [...] by which the available date for the composition is seen to be greater and more various in its sources than the historian supposes. ('False Documents' 25)

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