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CONTESTING THE LAND: CONTEMPORARY AUSTRALIAN FICTION AND THE (DE)CONSTRUCTION OF THE NARRATIVE OF BELONGING

Martin Staniforth

For Australian settlers, as for colonists elsewhere, history and identity are profoundly entangled with their relationship to the land. The land is where “settlers sought new homes, fashioned new places of belonging out of the land they appropriated, and purposefully set about recreating its physical and ecological condition through domestic plantings or larger scale acclimatisation programmes” (Mar and Edmonds 4). In this essay I will outline briefly the Australian settler narrative of belonging, examine the ways in which that narrative has been challenged, and consider how recent fictional writings have responded to these debates. I will suggest that while some apparently revisionist texts reproduce rather than undermine the traditional settler narrative, others, particularly Rodney Hall’s *The Second Bridegroom* (1991) and Kim Scott’s *That Deadman Dance* (2010), present a more serious challenge to that narrative. In doing so they suggest alternative perspectives on what Richard White calls “a national obsession” (viii), the search for Australian identity. This is an issue given fresh saliency by the need for that identity to move away from its historic alignment to settler Australia and to encompass both the Aboriginal peoples and more recent migrants, with their increasing ethnic diversity.

In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon writes of the pervasive colonialist view that “the settler makes history. . . . He is the absolute beginning: ‘This land was created by us’” (39-40). The idea of the heroic role of the settler in establishing and civilising a new country is as prevalent in Australia as in other settler societies. Indeed, the foundational Australian settler myth is that the country came into being in 1788 when Captain Arthur Phillip declared British sovereignty over the country and took possession of it, claiming that the land was effectively vacant as the indigenous inhabitants had not cultivated or improved it, and so had lost any right to it, the concept of *terra nullius*. From this beginning, the

British proceeded to settle the land, clearing it both of its native ecology and its indigenous peoples with the aim of turning it into a place which both belonged to them and to which they belonged. In doing so, they propagated the settler narrative of Australian history as the struggle of a small group of white convict migrants to overcome a hostile environment and antagonistic natives and so create a flourishing society. This narrative exemplifies what Paul Carter terms “imperial history,” a story whose main purpose “is not to understand or interpret: it is to legitimate” (xvi). In the case of settler Australians, what the narrative seeks to legitimate is their colonisation of the country by conquering the land.

From the moment of invasion, the British colonists set out to reshape the land, chopping down trees and clearing vegetation in order to support European forms of agriculture and horticulture. Underlying this approach to the land was the desire to turn Australia into a new Britain. However, as Tim Flannery puts it in *The Future Eaters*, “the story of what was done to achieve this almost inconceivably arrogant goal is one of the saddest chapters in the history of our continent. For Australia’s ecology floundered in the attempt. People found that a second Britain could not be established, but that old Australia could be all too easily destroyed” (355). The assault on the land continued throughout the nineteenth century with the result that “the British intrusion and introduction of livestock precipitated an ecological revolution” (Beinart and Hughes 104), a revolution which destroyed native species and replaced them with alien intruders. At the same time, the pioneer and the bushworker¹ were increasingly celebrated for their role in taming the wilderness and making the land productive. Settling the land became central to the narrative of Australian history, and national identity and national mythology were heavily invested in it. The image of the bush as “a sunlit landscape of faded blue hills, cloudless skies and noble gum trees, peopled by idealised shearers and drovers” (White 85) came to represent the authentic picture of Australia, and the bushworker “became the national culture-hero on whose supposed characteristics many Australians tend . . . to model their attitude to life” (Ward 211).

Settler pressure to acquire and develop the land led to conflict with the indigenous population, who found themselves being driven off country which they had lived on and cultivated for generations. Sharon Morgan, writing about Tasmania but in terms more widely applicable to early colonial Australia, argues that while “Aborigines may well have been prepared to share the best land . . . the Europeans wanted no compromise” (154). Central to the clash between settlers and Aborigines over the land are what Jane Gleeson-White calls “differing conceptions of place” (1) and

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“conflicting claims to sovereignty” (5). For the Aborigines, “place is enmeshed with human life” while for the settlers “human life is placed above place and abstracted from it” (1). While for the Aborigines, sovereignty derives essentially from their relationship to a country in which they and their ancestors have lived for generations, for the settlers “sovereignty derives from ownership” (5). For the settlers, turning the land into their private property required them not only to argue that any Aboriginal property rights had been extinguished in 1788 but also to reject, forcibly if necessary, any subsequent Aboriginal claim to the land. To this end, Aboriginal resistance to their expulsion was reinterpreted as aggression, their walking of ancient tribal routes as trespass and their taking of animals as theft. The settler belief in their right to the land meant that “indigenous self-defence was itself seen as invasion” (Wolfe, *Settler Colonialism* 26). Dispossessing the Aborigines allowed the settlers to “forge racial myths of emplacement and belonging . . . by laying counter-claim to an emotional and spiritual possession of the land” (Huggan and Tiffin 86). They came to see themselves as, in effect, the original and rightful occupants of the country, for, as Stephen Turner has put it, “settlers do not think they are immigrants . . . and prefer to think they are indigenous, while distinguishing themselves from aboriginal people” (22).

White settlement not only removed the Aborigines from the land but also from the Australian past, since dating history from 1788 required 40,000 years of Aboriginal history to be written out of the record, to be redefined as no-story. The purposeful progress of settler Australia was contrasted with the apparent stasis of Aboriginal life, which was then effectively made to vanish, so that history started with the settler “discovery” of the country. As long ago as 1968, W. E. H. Stanner spoke of the “cult of disremembering” of the Aborigines and their history (25), and more recently Ann Curthoys has pointed to the way in which “in the twentieth century, Aboriginal existence almost disappeared from the national historical archive” (31). Nor was it only the archive from which the Aborigines disappeared. At the time of Australian Federation in 1901, indigenous Australians were eliminated from the nation, excluded from the Constitution and not even counted as part of the Australian population until 1967. This supported the Australian nationalist narrative in which the new country was “identified with purity, innocence, wholesomeness, sanity” (White 115), and where its rulers were vigilant to protect the nation from racial impurity and from people or ideas that might contaminate it.

The white settler narrative of entitlement, rightful possession and belonging, which underlay the historical construction of Australian

nationalism, has come under increasing challenge in the last fifty years. This was particularly obvious at the time of the 1988 Bicentenary of the British invasion, when, in the words of Stuart Macintyre, “national celebrations were troubled by ghosts of the past” (285). Prominent among those ghosts were the suppressed stories of the effects of settler conquest of the land on both the country itself and its Aboriginal inhabitants. The issue of land rights became a focus of the Aboriginal protests at the time of the Bicentenary, and subsequently two significant judgements in the Australian High Court, *Mabo* in 1992 and *Wik* in 1996, “recognised the existence in common law of Aboriginal property rights that preceded the European settlement and continued past it” (Macintyre 293). These judgements contributed to a growing counter-narrative that re-inserted Aborigines into a history from which they had largely been expelled, and brought back into focus “the conflict between settlers and indigenous people in the past” which, Curthoys suggests, had been “elided, suppressed, forgotten” (33). This counter-narrative led, among other things, to the so-called History Wars at the end of the last century.² While ostensibly an argument over the representation of the Australian past between those who saw Australian history as the story of the creation of a prosperous society from the unpromising beginnings of convictism, and those who challenged that narrative for its failure to address issues of the dispossession and slaughter of Aborigines, these heated debates were essentially arguments over national identity, over what sort of society Australia had been, was, and might become. By unsettling the settler view of their rights to the land, *Mabo* and *Wik* contributed to these arguments, and ensured that the past had to be addressed in the most fundamental way, in relation to the right to own land. It was no longer possible to pretend that history started in 1788.

Given the centrality of land, place and belonging to white Australian concepts of identity, and the growing challenges to these concepts from the Aboriginal land rights movement, it is unsurprising that in the period since the Bicentenary a number of novels have addressed these issues both in a contemporary and a historical context. As Ken Gelder and Paul Salzman put it, “the investment in ‘a concept of home’ . . . remained a key feature of much of the contemporary Australian fiction from the period under discussion [1989-2007]” with a series of novels which “dealt with themes of home and property and tied these things to an implied sense of nationhood” (19 and 20). Two novels in particular have been praised for rethinking the settler narrative of nation and belonging, but, as I argue, for all their alleged liberalism, they essentially refashion rather than fundamentally rewrite that narrative.

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The first is David Malouf's 1993 historical fiction, *Remembering Babylon*. Written shortly after the Mabo judgement and set in mid-nineteenth century Queensland, the novel tells the story of the disturbing effect of the arrival in a small settler township of Gemmy Fairley, a white man who has lived for many years among Aborigines. It is one of several novels in which Malouf interrogates key points in the Australian past which have been conscripted into service as part of the myth-making of Australian nationalism. The early colonial period of the novel is a crucial time in the process of establishing settler Australian national identity, with its celebration of the white pioneer and its almost visceral hostility to the Aboriginal population, people who ignore European property rights, "traipsing this way and that all over the map . . . forever encroaching on boundaries" (Malouf 9).

The sudden appearance of Gemmy, a "mixture of monstrous strangeness and unwelcome likeness" (43), unsettles the community. He challenges their simple dichotomy between white and Aborigine, good and bad, and, in Peter Otto's words, "implies the possibility of a future identity and culture that is not simply black or white, Australian or European but stands between these poles" (553). Gemmy's time with the Aborigines has given him a heightened relationship with the land, as a result of which he walks "through a world that was alive for him and dazzling . . . all of it crackling and creaking and swelling and bursting with growth" (Malouf 67-8). His perception of the land is contrasted with that of the majority of the settlers, for whom it is "a bit of country [that] had a name set against it on a numbered document, and a line drawn that was empowered with all the authority of the Law" (9). However, as Jo Jones argues, the McIvors, who shelter Gemmy when he first appears, "are transformed" by their contact with him and "perceive the evanescence and intricacies of the natural world in a way that is closely linked to Gemmy's own 'indigenised' perceptions" (75). Gemmy, then, appears as a figure with the potential to reconcile settler and Aborigine, to envision, in the wake of Mabo, "the possibility of a nation built on the re-membering, the forging into one, of different peoples and states" (Otto 556). However, Gemmy is unable to play such a unifying role in the novel. Instead, both rejecting and rejected by settler civilisation, he returns to his Aboriginal life before apparently being killed in an outbreak of frontier violence described as "too slight an affair to be called a massacre" (Malouf 196).

The end of the novel posits a very different form of unity, arising from the meeting, after a long separation, between Lachlan Beattie and Janet McIvor, the white cousins who first saw Gemmy when he emerged from "the no-man's-land of the swamp, that was the abode of everything savage

and fearsome” (3). Their memory of Gemmy leads to Janet’s final vision of a unified Australia, “all the outline of the vast continent appear[ing], in touch now with its other life” (200). However her vision of a nation in which “none [is] left in the dark or out of mind” (199-200) rests on a distorted memory of the past. When she and Lachlan first saw Gemmy, he leapt on to a fence from which he “came tumbling at their feet” (3), whereas in Janet’s memory he is “drawn by the power, all unconscious in them, of their gaze, their need to draw him into their lives . . . overbalanced but not yet falling” (199). Janet replaces the act of Aboriginal abjection with a recollection of Gemmy balancing between, and drawing together, white and Aboriginal lives. Similarly the redemption implied in Janet’s vision requires, as Otto suggests, the displacement of “the historical and political realities of colonization” (557) and the “transformation of a moment of violent dispossession into an anticipation of national unity” (556). While Malouf’s presentation of settler history may provoke pangs of guilt among contemporary Australians about the fate of the Aborigines, it does not fundamentally alter the settler narrative, in which their entitlement to the land requires the removal of the Aborigines.

The second is Kate Grenville’s very successful *The Secret River* (2005), the story of Will Thornhill’s transformation from London criminal to prosperous Australian settler, again set in the period of the early colonisation of Australia. At the centre of the story Grenville tells is the clash between the Thornhills, other white settlers on the Hawkesbury River, and the Aboriginal population, a clash which culminates in a massacre of Aborigines and their expulsion from their country “to the reserve that the Governor had set aside at Sackville” (341). At the heart of the conflict are the settlement of the land and the different ideas that Aborigines and settlers hold about what Gleeson-White terms “the relation of humans to place” which is “define[d] broadly as the non-human environment” (1). The Thornhills, like most other settlers, see the place where they have settled as their exclusive property and try to drive away the local Darug people, who have lived on the land for generations. They see the land in binary terms—ours or theirs—rather than as something which can be shared and does not, in truth, *belong* to any group or individual. Their attitude leads to a spiralling conflict, which starts with a dispute over the Aborigines’ growing of yam daisies on the land the Thornhills have settled, and leads, through the burning of the Thornhills’ corn, to Will’s participation in a massacre intended to reinforce settler property rights by exterminating the Aborigines, an event which is depicted as a horrific and shameful act of white violence.

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Grenville does offer an alternative to the traditional settler attitude to place as private property in the form of Tom Blackwood, who lives with an Aboriginal woman and constantly repeats his motto of “*give a little, take a little, that’s the only way*” (Grenville, *Secret River* 110). His land and hut form “a place where clearing and forest lived together on the same ground,” for, unlike the other settlers, “Blackwood had not cleared his place” in order to mark “where civilisation began and ended” (213). As a result, he and the Aborigines live in harmony with the country and do not seek to impose on it. However, this peaceful co-existence is presented as idealistic rather than realistic, and is largely destroyed by the massacre, which takes place on Blackwood’s land and leads to his being blinded. Blackwood’s vision of a shared future is shown to be ineffectual and is abruptly extinguished.

While fundamentally incompatible approaches to the land are central to Grenville’s novel, she does not present the clash between settlers and Aborigines in those terms. Rather she argues that misunderstanding and muddle lay at the heart of the early colonial encounter, emphasising that “one event came after another, no one understood what the other side was thinking, and at the end there was bad trouble. It was never a simple matter of right and wrong” (Grenville, *Searching* 132). Grenville’s casual use of the oppositional language of “sides,” her refusal to attribute blame, and her equation of settler and Aboriginal violence despite their very different causes and effects—the one driven by the desire to take exclusive possession of the land, the other seeking to maintain the right to live on it—all serve to undermine the force of her critique of settler violence. This is further undercut by her empathetic presentation of Will Thornhill as an Australian Everyman, “a man who wasn’t altogether bad, but who did bad things” (Grenville, *Searching* 188). The result is that colonial violence is presented as being local and accidental, whereas, as Patrick Wolfe argues, it “was neither gratuitous nor random but systemic to settler-colonization” (*Settler Colonialism* 27). In consequence, Grenville all too easily slips into presenting what Jodi Gallagher calls “an Australia that is acceptable to white Australia—not a history, but a justification” (239). As such, her work reinforces the settler narrative of nation-building as a heroic activity and violence as an unfortunate necessity if the country was to be tamed and improved. Like *Remembering Babylon*, Grenville’s novel may awake remorse but does not fundamentally challenge settler views of the past. It is, perhaps, this very comforting view that has helped to ensure her popularity compared with others who present a harsher picture of the past, and particularly of the culpability of white settlers.

In contrast to the work of Malouf and Grenville, two other recent fictions perform a more serious critique of settler attitudes to the land and suggest alternative national narratives. The first of these is Rodney Hall's 1991 novel *The Second Bridegroom*, the first book in his *Yandilli Trilogy*. Again set in the early days of colonisation, the novel tells the story of Felim John, a Manxman (a native of the Isle of Man) who is transported to Australia after being convicted of forgery. He manages to escape from captivity, joins an Aboriginal tribe, and is later involved in the destruction of a farm belonging to his former master, Atholl. He is subsequently recaptured but again manages to escape before vanishing, presumably back to the bush. Felim is in many ways figured as an anti-colonist. Because he is physically short-sighted, he is unable to engage in the traditional colonial mode of exploration which Simon Ryan describes as "an heroic practice furthering the frontier of empire, penetrating and conquering unknown and unowned lands," where "seeing is understood as a mode of appropriation" (1 and 9). Instead, he explores the land at close quarters, coming to understand it by touch and hearing as well as by sight, and so learning to appreciate its natural beauty. Felim hears a bird singing with "penetrating notes strange as the man I once heard sing alto in the *Messiah*" and marvels at a "burst of rosy light as it steadied and strengthened to brilliant gold and the whole top of the tree shone like a hood of jewels" (21). Rather than regarding the land as alien and inhospitable, a country which is fit only to be cleared and turned into pasture, he is, as Paul Genoni comments, "acutely interested in discovering the spiritual essence of the land and the landscapes he encounters" (15). While other explorers seek to turn the country into somewhere familiar, Felim's myopia, and the heightened awareness of his other senses, lead him to read it on its own terms.

The Aborigines with whom Felim travels respect the country through which they journey, living off the land where food is easy to find. Felim learns both to adapt to the Aboriginal way of life and to appreciate that their culture has its own values, rituals, concepts of territory, taboos and customs. In doing so he challenges the settler idea that they "had come to a primitive land possessed only by a childlike race" (Hall 74). By contrast, Atholl and his men, who claim to be civilising the country, despoil the land. To create their farm they have "taken a place, complete in itself, full of the food I [Felim] had been living on, smashed it to fragments, then slaved at the work of carving out something in its stead, something different" (33). Atholl also fences the land, ostensibly to keep livestock penned in but also to keep the Aborigines off what is now his property. When he first encounters a newly-built fence, Felim remarks perceptively

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that it “marked a boundary across changed land. Grass inside the fence, though it might look like grass outside, was not at all the same: that grass was Property, as this was Nature” (62). By fencing the land and declaring it to be private property, Atholl signals his commitment to the capitalist exploitation of the country. He regards the land “as a commodity” and “conceives of human relations with land in terms of ‘commerce’, ‘industry’, and ‘development’” (Gleeson-White 1). His attitude is sharply contrasted with the Aborigines’ more holistic approach to living on and with the land. Furthermore, the clearance and fencing of the land establish not only a new physical reality but also a new psychic reality, enabling Atholl to create a history for the country, one that starts with his arrival. Fences, buildings and clearances not only “communicate the settler’s presence” by physically declaring the intention to remain, but also act as markers which enable the settler to claim a historic link to the land by performing “the symbolic function of making a place that speaks, a place with a history” (Carter 155). The settler creates and legitimates the story of his relationship with the land by the very act of settling it, by creating boundaries between settled land and the world outside.

In the world of the novel, the farm represents what Mary Louise Pratt describes as a “contact zone,” a frontier area where “subjects previously separated by geography and history are co-present, the point at which their trajectories now intersect” (8). They are places which can easily become sites of conflict, and in the Australian context such conflicts frequently arise from different understandings of, and attitudes towards, the land. Here, Felim’s decision to cross the frontier created by the fence leads to the burning of the farm, and the deaths of Atholl and many of his men, as the Aborigines destroy a settlement which, as Greg Ratcliffe has argued, “transfigures the environment to conform with the capitalist discourse of reality” (25). Felim’s transgression of the established boundaries of property enables him to take revenge not only on those who have destroyed the land he has learnt to appreciate but also on the colonial power that has oppressed him throughout his life. He sees the flames of the Aborigines’ torches as “justice for my wrongs” (79) and says of the attack on the farm that “if this was vengeance, then I lusted for it” (80). Later, as he goes down the road to the farm, he sees himself as “on my way back to strike a blow . . . to cry, Down with the King!” (81). Felim’s sympathy with the Aborigines reflects his own experience of the loss of land and freedom as a result of colonisation. He foresees that they will lose their land to the settlers just as the Manxmen did.

Hall sees white settlement as the source of a counterfeit civilisation, caused by the attempt to create a new England in Australia. Felim

understands that the colonisers have created a fake England, containing “a hamlet perched on the shore, an outpost of stone and shingles like any little English port (forgery), its church a smaller copy of the very church you were baptized in (forgery), the citizens on the street respectable in full skirts and frock coats (forgery)” (73). As he says in one of his letters to Mrs Atholl, “your husband has had you in bondage to his cause of creating a counterfeit England by cutting down strange trees and digging out plants with no name” (136). Hall’s repeated emphasis on the forged nature of early Australian settlement reinforces the argument that it is impossible to recreate England in Australia, that, as Sigrun Meinig puts it, “the ‘original’ of English culture, transplanted to Australia, does not retain the unspoiled quality of ‘original’ but turns into false appearances” (312), something to which Felim, a forger himself, is particularly sensitive. By exposing the fraudulent nature of white Australian civilisation, which has rejected the authentically native in favour of an imported culture, Hall challenges the authenticity of the settlers’ relationship to the land. He suggests that when compared with Aboriginal ways of living in the country, their claim to belonging is as false as the civilisation they have sought to construct. In an interview with Susanne Braun-Bau, Hall said that he wants to show “that it is possible for the ‘invading people’—roughly speaking, that’s the European people—to be deeply part of this country” (99). However, his presentation of the falsity of early settlement, and its destructive impact on the environment, questions the extent and depth of their attachment to the land.

Finally, Hall presents the construction of Australian history as essentially false. Felim comes to realise that “there can be no such thing as the discovery of a land” and asks “what do discoverers do? They put names to landmarks unknown to them and not named by anybody they ever heard of. But do we imagine the Cape of Good Hope came into being just to be called that name?” (134-5). By dismissing exploration, discovery, naming and mapping as a form of invention, Hall challenges the idea that Australian history started with the settlement of the country in the late eighteenth century. His image of Cook’s arrival, where “you can watch the great man leap out . . . wading ashore to print the sand with the first boot mark ever made here. Well, aren’t a hundred other eyes also watching?” (136), shows up the absurdity of the concept of *terra nullius*, the idea that the country was an empty land waiting to be transformed into a productive society, and with it the settler claim to legitimate ownership.

The Second Bridegroom, a novel written in the wake of the commemoration of the Bicentenary of British settlement but before the Mabo and Wik judgements, is, for Genoni, “the journal of the explorer that

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colonial Australia never had; the explorer who tried to see the layered meanings beneath the surface of an alien environment, and who struggled to understand the land as it existed beyond those features which could be ‘discovered’ or possessed in the cause of the empire” (26). Hall uses Felim to challenge the national narratives of settlement and belonging, and to question the claim that it was the settlers who created the country. In his presentation of Felim’s response to Atholl’s settlement, Hall condemns the way in which settlement destroys the ecology of a place so as to impose order and convert it into a European capitalist paradise. He looks for an alternative national narrative which takes a more respectful and sensitive approach to the land, which is not built around white settler values, and which does not seek to eliminate the Aborigines from land, history and nation. However, at the end of the novel he despairs of achieving this. The Aborigines have vanished, Felim has disappeared, and Mrs Atholl prepares to repeat the pattern of violence and dispossession, calling for the Governor to “take *expeditious* action in the matter of establishing the Rule of Law to prevent and discourage mutiny in new districts such as ours” (Hall 153).

In his 2010 novel, *That Deadman Dance*, Kim Scott presents a similarly powerful critique of the settler narrative, but one which ends a little less bleakly. In this novel, Scott, himself of Aboriginal descent and a member of the Noongar people from the area round Albany, Western Australia, traces the changing pattern of Aboriginal/settler relations in that area between 1826 and 1844, and the way in which these are shaped by different approaches to land and the natural world. The text centres on the implications for the Noongar and the settlers of what Anne Brewster calls the “fundamental disjunction between the ways in which the settlers generally relate to the Noongar and the ways in which the Noongar react to the presence of the settlers” (61). The Noongar are presented as identifying with the land and its non-human inhabitants, and as being spiritually and physically attuned to the natural world that surrounds them. For instance, Bobby Wabalanginy, the central character in the book, is aware of how “his body hummed with the voices all around him, of bees, cicadas and crickets; of whispering wind and rustling leaves; of bird song and wingbeat” (Scott 334). The Noongar live in harmony with the land, taking what they need and sharing with others. They are protective of the local ecology, creating natural fishtraps and using fire to regenerate the bush, and, when a whale carcass comes ashore, Menak, one of the Noongar elders, expects to share it with other Noongars.

The Noongar initially welcome and share with the newly arriving settlers, an approach which the settlers reciprocate. This mutual co-existence is exemplified by the relationship between the Noongar Wunyeran and the early settler Dr Cross. They exchange knowledge and experiences, benefitting from each others' skills, for "Dr Cross was an enthusiastic tutor, Wunyeran a capable guide" (88). There is an element of strategic calculation in Cross's attitude, a recognition that, given that the settlers were outnumbered by the Noongar, "agricultural development . . . could only be achieved with the assistance of the natives" (35). However, more fundamentally, Cross appreciates the welcoming and hospitable approach of the Noongar, and responds to it through a process of "give and take" (62) reminiscent of Tom Blackwood in *The Secret River*. The positive relationship between the two men is symbolised by their burial in the same grave. Similarly, Bobby Wabalanginy, whose name means "something to do with 'all of us playing together'" (39), performs an important cross-cultural role. He is a trickster figure, a dancer and entertainer, a man who is deeply embedded in his Noongar inheritance but who also learns to read and write, to master the skills of the newcomers whom he welcomes to the land. He helps to bind the two communities together while maintaining the integrity of his Aboriginal inheritance.

This apparently harmonious co-existence is, however, threatened as the settlement expands, and men like Geordie Chaine arrive with their capitalist commitment to using the land for short-term profit. Chaine, described as a man "on the make" (16), sees the non-human world essentially in instrumental terms, and confirms Cross's fears that, as a result of the rapacity of Chaine and men like him, "the lives of the natives would be altered forever and their generosity and friendliness be betrayed" (62). Chaine is responsible for exhausting the whale stocks, for introducing sheep which damage the local ecology, and for exterminating other wildlife in the area, so that as an old man Bobby reflects that "there were no more of his people and no more kangaroo and emu and no more vegetable. After the white man's big fires and guns and greed there was nothing" (160). At the same time the increasing emphasis on the sanctity of private property, exemplified by the fencing of the land, also contributes to the Noongars' inability to maintain their way of life. The Noongar culture of welcoming and sharing is no longer reciprocated. As Menak, the Noongar elder, says angrily towards the novel's end, "we share the whales, you camp on our land and kill our kangaroos and tear up our trees and dirty our water and we forgive, but now you will not share your sheep" (342-43). The imposition of European agricultural methods is accompanied by the introduction of European cultural norms and settler

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standards and codes. Whereas in the early days of settlement “the difference in their skin colour had seemed just one among so many other things,” later it seems that “maybe it was the most important, after all. No one said Noongar no more; it was all *blackfellas* and *whitefellas*” (353). Dr Cross’s body is exhumed and reburied separately from Wunyeran’s, and “laws were being enforced” so that “Natives must be clothed and without spears if they were to enter town” (367).

The differing attitudes of settler and Aboriginal communities to the land, combined with the enforcement of settler values, result in a rapid decline in relations between the two groups and the replacement of a form of effective co-existence and sharing by a ruthless, winner-takes-all approach to the land which leads to the dispossession of the indigenous population. This change happens quickly, in less than twenty years, reflecting the wider story of Australian colonisation, for, as William Beinart and Lotte Hughes comment, “there were few other places in the British Empire where the indigenous population was so quickly dehumanized, and so systematically dispossessed and displaced” (95). While Bobby continues to play an inter-cultural role, mediating between the two communities, he is increasingly ineffective against the reality of inter-communal hostility. At the end of the novel he seeks to reassert the cultural values of his community, dancing “the spirit of this place” (390) and saying that “this is my land, given me by *Kongk* [uncle] Menak. We will share it with you, and share what you bring” (394), but he is interrupted by the sound of gunshots as suppressed violence breaks out.

In his novel, Scott seeks to recuperate the Aboriginal voice and to give it equal weight to that of the white settlers, to use it to “speak back to the monological ‘truths’ of colonial discourse” (Johnson 16). He uses that voice to reinstate the primacy of the Aboriginal relationship with the land, a relationship which is in tune with contemporary ecological concerns. Furthermore, as Brewster argues, Scott’s account of the failure of the model of Aboriginal/settler relations based on “a recognition of indigenous sovereignty which promulgates intercultural exchange and reciprocity” effectively “shifts the loss paradigm—which is so often used to characterise Aboriginal polities and communities—onto the white Australian constituency” (69). In other words, the inability of the settlers to embrace Aboriginal culture and ways of life, and their violent imposition of white standards, have diminished the Australian nation. Through his reframing of the story of early contact between settlers and Aborigines, Scott challenges the national narrative which sees Australian history as a triumphal story of white settler progress and suggests an alternative way of looking at the past, one which, as Brewster puts it, “eschews the

conventional postcolonial narrative of indigenous defeat in its creation of a countervailing narrative of the enduring sovereignty of the Noongar” (63). It is an approach which, albeit tentatively, carries hope for the creation of a less monocultural view of both the past and the future.

Hall and Scott, then, contest the national narrative that sees the settler conquest of the land, and the associated Aboriginal dispossession, as wholly progressive and beneficial, arguing that the destruction which it brought degraded both the land and the nation. They reject the approach of the settlers who see the country in purely instrumental terms, and stress that belonging to the land involves more than possessing or owning it. Rather, it requires an attentiveness both to its ecology and to its history, what Lawrence Buell calls “place-attachment,” an understanding of the country which “involve[s] not just orientation in space but temporal orientation also” (72). For Hall and Scott, the rootedness of Aboriginal attachment to place is qualitatively different from the settler claims of belonging through possession, for the latter carries with it the potential for a “class-based or even racially tinged politics of exclusion that seeks to preserve it for the benefit of a specific social group against the interests of others” (Heise 47). By emphasising the original and continuing Aboriginal connectedness to the land, and contesting the settler claims of belonging, they deconstruct one of the central tenets of white Australians’ sense of national identity, that which derives from their belief that they have, as Lorenzo Veracini puts it, “an *original* and *exclusive* relationship with the land” (274). Furthermore, Hall, in particular, contests the settler narrative of history as something which started with their arrival by stressing the artificial, constructed, and indeed forged, sense of history which this involves. By doing so, he suggests that the accepted story of the national past is built on similar forgeries and forgettings, what Patrick Wolfe calls the “kind of selective amnesia [that] would seem to be particularly congenial to settler-colonial nationalism” (*Islam* 235).

If Hall and Scott deconstruct the national identity which flows from the historic settler belief that they belong on the land, what do they seek to put it in its place? What might a new relationship between settlers, Aborigines and the land look like, and what might that mean for Australian concepts of belonging and nation? Both fictions can be seen as pleas for the settlers not merely to recognise the mistakes of the past but also to respond by embracing the transformative potential of other ways of living on and with the land. They present what Bill Ashcroft, Frances Devlin-Glass and Lyn McCredden call “a poignant and disturbing vision of an Australia as it might have been . . . a place capable of transforming a people rather than a site for ecological destruction wreaked by a population’s failure of

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imagination” (305). By summoning up a picture of a different relationship between settlers and Aborigines, Scott in particular proposes a different model of the nation, one that is based on preserving rather than wantonly destroying the environment, and sharing the land with others rather than dispossessing them. To achieve this in contemporary Australia would involve an imaginative leap away from the current exploitative relationship to the land and towards a relationship based on “the protection of the environment and the sustainable management of natural resources” (Huggan and Tiffin 88). It would also require a recognition that the claim to exclusive possession of the land which underpins settler ideas of national identity is unrealistic.

Such an approach necessarily questions the concept of an Australian identity based on an historical narrative of settler triumph over the land and its original inhabitants. It requires a recognition that the Australian past contains a complex network of (hi)stories and memories, written and oral, white and Aboriginal, and that a nation which defines itself solely in terms of a single story of its past impoverishes itself. In recent years there has been considerable emphasis on the importance of achieving reconciliation between Aboriginal and settler Australians through a shared recognition of past wrongs and a joint commitment to working together for the future. Unfortunately, reconciliation has too often been seen by white Australians as requiring the indigenous peoples to accept a single, settled, narrative of history. For instance, in his 2008 *Apology to Australia's Indigenous Peoples*, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd talked of how “we have come together to deal with the past so that we might fully embrace the future” (170) without apparently recognising that the past cannot be neatly tidied away in this fashion. Bain Attwood argues that the emphasis on creating a shared, unitary, history “forecloses on reconciliation by insisting that all parties should adopt the conflicted past that actually divides them” (255). Richard Mulgan looks instead for an approach that “recognise[s], and legitimate[s], the existence of conflicting values and interests, though within a framework of peaceful mutual adjustment” (193), an approach that resonates with both Hall and Scott. This would require settler Australians to move beyond the binary of either/or—either our land or theirs, our history or theirs, our nation or theirs—to the creation of a country based on the recognition and acceptance of mutual rights and responsibilities in a multi-cultural nation. It also requires writers to take a lead by leaving behind what Graham Huggan has called the “nostalgia-ridden narratives” of the past and committing to the process of “creative revisioning” (65) which is needed to embrace the cultural complexity of contemporary Australia.

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Notes

1. In *The Australian Legend*, Russel Ward defines bushworkers as “the semi-nomadic drovers, shepherds, shearers, bullock-drivers, stockmen, boundary-riders, station-hands and others of the pastoral industry” (2).

2. For a fuller account of these arguments see Stuart Macintyre and Anna Clark’s *The History Wars*.

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