

**HISTORY IN FICTION, HISTORY AS FICTION:
TWO CONTEMPORARY NOVELS AND THE PROBLEMS OF THE
AUSTRALIAN PAST**

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Abstract

In 2008 two high profile mid-career Australian novelists published works of historical fiction. Kate Grenville's *The Lieutenant* and Richard Flanagan's *Wanting* both fictionalise events and characters from Australia's actual colonial past. In addition to their shared genre and subject matter the novels have other similarities. Both novels are concerned with ideas about writing and reading, sharing an interest in the creation of written texts. In fictionalising the creation of actual historical texts they destabilise the authority of written texts. This destabilisation creates a tension with the novels own use of the historical record as source material. Both novels engage with the history of white representations of indigenous peoples while also creating new representations themselves.

The Lieutenant and *Wanting* have received significant critical attention from the popular media. This critical attention places the novels within current debates about Australia's past and present. The novels arise from a specific context in post-colonising Australia and reflect current white liberal anxieties about the facts of the Australian past. Fiction is positioned as providing a new angle for tackling the "problem" of Australian history. Their fictional engagement with the actual past appears to provide a new method for examining Australia's traumatic past, by offering an alternative for those readers fatigued by the heated political debates of the so-called History Wars. However, the novels do not ultimately suggest a hopeful new direction or resolution to these debates, instead they reflect back the stalled nature of the Australia's public discourse around the facts and meanings of its contested past.

Introduction

The rise of historical fiction

In 2008, Kate Grenville and Richard Flanagan, both successful mid-career Australian writers, published novels that were popularly received as “historical fiction”. The novels, Grenville’s *The Lieutenant* and Flanagan’s *Wanting*, focussed on interactions between white colonists and indigenous people in Australia. They were published in an literary marketplace that had an appetite for writing that addressed the big questions about the Australian past, chief among these: how could the unpalatable facts of the national past best be understood by white Australia?

While the Australian interest in historical fiction has been influenced by an appetite for discussion around that country’s national past, there has also been a perceived increase in the popularity of historical fiction in other countries. This is evidenced by the media coverage of the shortlist for the 2009 Man Booker Prize for Fiction.

The Booker Prize is a rich annual source of material for media outlets, particularly in its administrative base, the United Kingdom. With most British newspapers hosting book blogs on their websites, the speculation, nomination announcements, and final awards-night provide ideal content for the blog posts that must be published several times a day. Invariably, comment on the shortlist and longlist selections consists of criticism for the lack of range in the books that the panel has selected or of a perceived bias on the part of the judges. In recent years the shortlist has been accused of populism and avoiding “difficult”

novels (Robins), while novelist Louise Doughty (a member of the 2008 judging panel) accused previous shortlists of ignoring the “best reads” in favour of obscure novels chosen by “male academics” who “have a vested interest to pick someone as literary and obscure as possible” (Akbar “Why Do Book Prizes Ignore the Best Reads?”). Author Robert Harris was even more scathing when, in 2007, he described the prize as “a monstrous boil” (Cavendish) and expressed his doubt that “anyone who is non-PC or doesn't deal with the concerns of the sexual minority or colonial guilt” could ever make the longlist. Various other accusations levelled at the Booker lists have been that its judges snobbishly refuse to recognise science fiction as a legitimate literary genre (Stanley Robinson), or have selected inferior novels at the expense of better ones as an attempt to broaden the prize’s appeal (Weinman).

The 2009 shortlist faced a new accusation. As judge Michael Prodger¹ explained: “The appearance of the shortlist has led to another charge against us. The fact that all six novels are set in the past means that we judges must therefore have a fear of the modern world and be comfortable only in the hallowed halls of distant times” (Prodger “Judge's Blog 16.09.09”). Although the 2009 shortlist was also accused of anglo-centrism, the proliferation of historical fiction on the longlist certainly provided the most popular angle for journalists and book bloggers looking to frame coverage of the list in an interesting way.²

¹ Prior to his 2009 appearance on the judging panel, Prodger had suggested that the poor choices of previous panels had been bringing the prize to the brink of irrelevancy: Michael Prodger, “Booker Prize Must Prove It Hasn't Lost the Plot,” *The Telegraph* (2008), 29 January 2010 <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/4730704/Booker-Prize-must-prove-it-hasnt-lost-the-plot.html>>.

² For example: Arifa Akbar, “J. M. Coetzee in Line for Man Booker Hat-Trick,” *The Independent* (2009), <<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/news/historical-novel-favourite-for-man-booker-prize-1783655.html>>.

Alexander Chancellor, “Why Are We Suddenly So Fascinated by Our History?,” *The Guardian* (2009), <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2009/sep/10/man-booker-prize-history-obsession>>.

Identifying all the novels on the 2009 Man Booker Prize shortlist as historical fiction required a broad definition of the term. The six novels covered subject matter as chronologically disparate as Tudor England, the Arts and Crafts Movement at the end of the nineteenth century/dawn of the twentieth century, post- semi-rural Warwickshire, and the 1970s Cape Town of J. M. Coetzee's fictionalised memoir *Summertime*. Although all of the novels were set in the past they had significant differences. Eventual winner Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall* dealt with the real historical figures of Thomas Cromwell, Thomas More and Henry VIII while Adam Fould's novel *The Quickening Maze* depicted the incarceration in a Victorian asylum of the actual poet John Clare. Two novelists invented characters that closely mirrored actual historical personages; A. S. Byatt's *The Children's Book* took inspiration from the lives of artists and writers such as E. Nesbit and Eric Gill (McGrath) while the titular building in Simon Mawer's *The Glass Room* is recognisable as architect Mies Van der Rohe's famous Villa Tugendhat. Coetzee's *Summertime* presents several people recounting their memories of the late novelist John Coetzee, who may or may not be an accurate reflection of the actual author. The characters in Sarah Water's *The Little Stranger* are apparently without specific historical precedent.

Concerned commentators suggested that the proliferation of historical fiction reflected an unseemly and cowardly nostalgia on the part of the judges, and a corresponding fear of the modern world. Historical fiction was associated with old-fashioned traditional forms of narrative, cast as the "comfort food" of

Jerome De Groot, "The Power of the Past: How Historical Fiction Has Regained Its Gravitas," *The Guardian* (2009), <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/booksblog/2009/sep/28/historical-fiction-booker-prize-hilary-mantel>>.

Ben Hoyle, "Hilary Mantel's Cromwell Novel Is Hottest Ever Booker Favourite," *The Times* (2009), <http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/article6825871.ece>.

literary fiction. Predictably and understandably, the judges sprang to the defence of their choices. Writing in *The Times*, Booker judge Lucasta Miller defended the quality of the shortlisted novels and suggested the reputation of historical fiction had been unfairly besmirched for some time. Miller also pointed toward “an identifiable shift in literary taste” to works of historical fiction that “transmute the past into fiction in radically different, and innovative, ways” (Miller). Eventual winner Hilary Mantel expressed her frustration with the critical commentary on the prevalence of historical fiction:

The boundaries of the term "historical fiction" are now so wide that it's almost meaningless, so use of the term is beginning to look like an accusation, a stick to beat writers with: you're historical, you weaselly good-for-nothing, you luxury, you parasite. The accusation is that authors are ducking the tough issues in favour of writing about frocks. (Mantel)

Although the 2009 Booker shortlist provided a focus for commentary on the perceived rise in the popularity of historical fiction, some of this discussion was centred on the rise of “info-tainment” and the popularity of celebrity historians. However, some of the most heated debate was concerned with the implications that an increase in readership for historical fiction has for non-fiction works, particularly traditional history and biography. In her article defending the 2009 shortlist choices Lucasta Miller related the rise of historical fiction to a decline in quality biography, a field which she saw as becoming associated with “bargain-basement misery memoirs” while “‘serious’ biography has been increasingly corralled into universities as a subject to be taught”. She

gives biographers a warning: “it seems as if literary fiction, newly confident, is attempting to colonise the space between. Biographers beware: novelists seem determined to steal your thunder - and your material.” Miller also noted that these discussions and observations were not particular to Britain. Indeed, Australia (one of the countries Miller identifies in her column) has in recent years seen fierce critical debate over the role of historical fiction in both the cultural and political life of the country.

The Lieutenant and Wanting

The publication of Kate Grenville’s 2005 novel *The Secret River* has provided the most dramatic flashpoint in the current history/fiction/truth debate in Australia. *The Secret River* tells the story of convict William Thornhill who, along with his family, is transported to early 1800s New South Wales. *The Secret River* was a critical and popular success, selling 65,000 copies in Australia and 120,000 in Britain in the year following its publication (Grenville “From Panadol Packets to the Booker Shortlist”). The novel won the Commonwealth Writers’ Prize, the NSW Premier’s Award, and was shortlisted for both the Miles Franklin Award and the 2006 Man Booker Prize. Grenville has been explicit about the novel’s roots in her research into her own convict ancestor. In 2006 she published *Searching for the Secret River* a writing memoir that documents the process of writing a historical novel.

In 2008 Grenville published a follow up of sorts to *The Secret River*. Set thirty years before the events of *The Secret River*, *The Lieutenant* is the second book in what Grenville describes on her website as “a loose trilogy” set in colonial Australia. *The Lieutenant*, which deals with the 1788 landing of the

First Fleet in New South Wales, focuses on the relationship between British Marine Daniel Rooke and an Aboriginal girl, Tagaran. Rooke, Tagaran and several other characters in the book have actual historical counterparts.

Tasmanian Richard Flanagan is another high profile writer who chose to revisit the early years of white settlement in Australia in his recent fiction. In *Wanting*, also published in 2008, Flanagan takes colonial Tasmania (then Van Diemen's Land) as his subject matter. Flanagan specifically concentrates on the years 1836 through to 1843, during which time British explorer Sir John Franklin was installed as Lieutenant-Governor. The Tasmanian chapters are alternated with a parallel narrative largely set in 1854 London and centred on novelist Charles Dickens.

In addition to the shared focus on colonial Australia, Grenville's *The Lieutenant* and Flanagan's *Wanting* both fictionalise actual historical people. Their methodology differs; Grenville gives her fictional creations different names from their historical counterparts, although she acknowledges them in the dedication. Flanagan does not obscure the relationship between his characters and their historical inspirations as he uses their actual names. Both novels feature a character based on a real Aboriginal adolescent girl; Flanagan's Mathinna and Grenville's Tagaran (based on the real Patyegarang).

Defining "historical fiction"

Can both novels be discussed as "historical novels" then? Certainly, the historical or "actual world" basis of these novels is relevant in discussing the reception of them in both the popular and critical marketplace. The use of real

events or contexts has had a bearing on both readers' responses to the novels and their expectations of historical accuracy. Defining the novels as "historical" helps to place them in the context of recent discussions about the merits and dangers of historical fiction, both in Australasia and the wider world. In order to discuss the novels in terms of debate about historical fiction it is perhaps necessary to attempt to establish a definition.

Attempts to define historical fiction have been the source of much critical debate. The narratologist Dorrit Cohn takes a practical and specific approach in her attempt to form a definition. Cohn, using her own translation of Alfred Döblin, defines historical novels simply as fiction that has a significant historical dimension:

This way of coming to terms with the term historical novel actually takes it quite literally: its noun indicated (to use Döblin's words) that it "is, in the first place, a novel"; its adjective points to the fact that, although "it isn't history," the historical dimension is (or may be considered to be) more importantly involved in certain novels than in others. What is more, conceiving the genre in this broad and elastic way ties the works one assigns to it more solidly to the fiction side of the great divide. (Cohn 162)

Even this clear and literal definition relies on subjective judgements being made about the importance of "the historical dimension" within any given novel. Labelling a novel as a "historical novel" emphasises and prioritises the importance of the "historical dimension" as the central theme of the novel. As Cohn states, novels can have many thematic concerns: a novel can easily be

called a “family novel” or a “feminist novel” and still retain the label of “historical novel” (161). This places the act of definition on the shoulders of the reader. Recognising a work of fiction as “historical fiction” depends hugely on the context and experiences of the individual reader. If a reader identifies a work of fiction as belonging to the genre of “historical fiction” then they will have certain expectations of accuracy and adherence to the known historical “facts”. Cohn realises that the reader’s historical expectations depend entirely on the reader’s own context and knowledge:

What is certain is that an individual reader’s reaction to them [historical novels] is conditioned by the degree to which the historical material concerned touches on his or her values and sensitivities Though distortions of known facts in a historical novel may only occasionally detract from our value judgment, we do tend to approach this genre differently from other novelistic genres. (158-59)

The Lieutenant and *Wanting* are “historical fiction” in Cohn’s broad sense; they are fictional works that portray a recognisable version of our actual world but are set in a time earlier than they were written. The reference they make to “real” historical events has significantly informed the way they have been marketed, read, discussed, and reviewed. The authors’ decisions to base their realist novels in a recognisable, local and specific past has brought certain pressures to bear upon their works.

Both authors have spoken about the identification of their novels as historical fiction by readers and critics. Grenville seems content with her most

recent novels; *The Lieutenant* and *The Secret River*, being catalogued as historical fiction. On her website she addresses questions about writing historical fiction without challenging or commenting on the label. Flanagan is more uneasy with the label. In an online video interview in 2008 Flanagan rejected the suggestion that *Wanting* was a historical novel:

to me it is a contemporary novel, it's not a historical novel. I'm not trying to be cute about it. Always in the past when writers took historical figures like Shakespeare took Antony and Cleopatra everyone understood it wasn't about Roman history it was a about love and power ... and my interests were about passion and desire. (Warhaft)

Flanagan seems to suggest that the historical aspect to *Wanting* is secondary to its emotional and psychological themes. However, applying Cohn's ideas about the definition of historical fiction both elements can be easily accommodated. In any case, whether or not readers understand *Wanting* as "historical fiction" and therefore have particular expectations of it is largely beyond Flanagan's control.

Analysing the two novels

As well as the fact that both novels have a basis in a historical or "actual" past, they share other similarities, both inside and outside the texts themselves. Flanagan and Grenville are both high profile Australian novelists that have achieved significant critical and commercial recognition in recent years. Both novels were reasonably high profile publications by established mid-career

writers who had earned relatively high levels of literary celebrity in their writing homelands, and both were published in the same year. Both were widely reviewed in major periodicals in their home countries and received foreign critical attention. Both novelists are white writers who live in a settler society that, in the present day, could be described as “post-colonial”. Of course, “post-colonial” is a highly contested term. Aileen Moreton-Robinson objects to the application of the term to present-day Australia, arguing that Australia “is not postcolonial in the same way as India, Malaysia and Algeria can be said to be In Australia the colonials did not go home and “post-colonial” remains based on whiteness. ... There may well be spaces in Australia that could be described as postcolonial but these are not spaces inhabited by Indigenous people.” Instead, Moreton-Robinson offers “postcolonising” as a more appropriate term, suggesting as it does the ongoing process at work (Moreton-Robinson “I Still Call Australia Home”).

Both novels feature at the core of their narratives a relationship between an indigenous adolescent female and a white adult male. Beyond their immediate historical subject matter and the relationships between the individual characters, these novels are about being white in a “post-colonial” or postcolonising society. These novels explore this by focussing on the relationship between the written word, history, fiction and objective truth. They both make reference to other texts and are concerned with the relationship between readers and writers of texts. Both have ideas about the role of storytelling and text creation at their core.

The white writer and the “dusky maiden”: white literary representations of indigenous women

It is useful to first consider the novels within the history of white writing about Oceania and Australasia. From the first contact between white explorers and indigenous peoples, white portrayals of indigenous people have been produced for the consumption of a white reading public. These portrayals have been the subject of various studies, for example Terry Goldie’s 1989 book-length comparative study *Fear and Temptation: The Image of the Indigene in Canadian, Australian, and New Zealand Literatures*. Goldie uses Edward Said’s term “standard commodities” (Said *Orientalism* 190) to describe and identify the limited tropes that are used in white portrayals of indigenous people. Goldie identifies the commodities of “sex, violence, orality, mysticism, the prehistoric” as being the tropes most relevant to and repeated in the portrayal of indigenous peoples in New Zealand, Australia and Canada (17). The commodities he identifies are a useful starting point to examine the portrayal of indigenous people in the two novels examined here.

The most immediately relevant of Goldie’s commodities to this study is sex. Both novels centre relationships on of varying sorts between an indigenous adolescent girl or young woman and a white man. Placing these relationships and characters at the emotional core of the narratives means that the representation of indigenous characters in the novels must be discussed not just in the context of historical representations of indigenous peoples in Australasia and Oceania but placed in the more specific context of the long genealogy of representation of indigenous *women* in these regions. The weight

of over a century's worth of white representations of indigenous women is brought to bear upon the novels. The image of the compliant and sexually available "dusky maiden" is one that is still exceptionally close to the surface of Australasian culture. Perhaps the most obvious example is the image "South Seas Maiden". Michael Sturma gives a concise description of her in his 2002 study *South Seas Maidens: Western fantasy and sexual politics in the South Pacific*: "She has thick long hair decorated with a fragrant floral garland, or perhaps a hibiscus behind the ear. She wears a grass skirt on occasion, although more often a hip-hugging floral print *pareu*. At least in male fantasy or in *National Geographic*, she is likely to be bare breasted" (1). This "male fantasy"³ has had a wide reach both geographically and temporally, Sturma acknowledges that his interest in the South Pacific is in part spurred by his own "adolescent fantasies" and suggests that the actor Marlon Brando's predilection for "pursuing one exotic woman after another" is a direct inheritance of a childhood obsession with Tahiti born in the pages of *National Geographic* (1). The Western Samoan critic Tamasailau M. Suaalii also acknowledges the ubiquity of the "exotic" image of the Pacific Island woman: "[h]er beautiful body appears in tourist posters and guides, in the pages of such major international journals as the *National Geographic*, in academic texts, on music album covers, on postcards, and in works of fine art, to entice and entrance, to captivate and fascinate" (Suaalii 93). The image is a pervasive and persistent one, despite perhaps more often now being used in an ironic light as part of the deliberately kitsch décor in

³ Sturma also acknowledges that the fantasy of the "South Seas Maiden" is not exclusively male: Michael Sturma, *South Sea Maidens: Western Fantasy and Sexual Politics in the South Pacific* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2002) 1.

a hip “tiki” bar,⁴ the Pacific maiden is still an important commercial tool. This is most clearly seen in advertisements for island holidays (where the maiden often appears alongside smiling children and ceremonial male warriors).⁵ Of course it is not just the women of the Pacific who are eroticised and fetishised by and for Western audiences and Sturma rightfully acknowledges this: “[w]omen of far-off lands have always been romanticized and eroticized in the Western imagination. The American Indian maiden, the black Venus of Africa, and the slave girl of the Turkish harem are all stereotypes embedded in Western thought” (Sturma 1).

Before going any further some attention must be paid to the terms that have been used so far. I have begun the discussion of the portrayal of the female indigenous characters in *The Lieutenant*, and *Wanting* by referring to the archetype of the “South Seas Maiden” or the “exotic” Pacific woman. Neither of the characters in the novels fit exactly in this category; Tagaran from Grenville’s *The Lieutenant*, and Mathinna from Flanagan’s *Wanting* are Aboriginal not Polynesian. The image of the “dusky South Sea maiden” is most often associated with Polynesian women. The popularity and cultural dominance of the “maiden” image is sufficiently influential as to flatten the cultural diversity and specificity of the Pacific and Australasia. Teresia Teaiwa has spoken of the way in which the female Polynesian body, and more specifically the female Polynesian body as represented by the hula dancer, has come to stand as the prevailing myth of

⁴ Although the “maiden” image may be becoming the territory of ‘kitsch’, it is important to note that it is an image still projected onto contemporary Pacific women. The poet Karlo Mila addresses this in her excellent sequence of poems “Four Poems and Sione’s Wedding”, which can be found in the recent anthology: Selina Tusitala Marsh, ed., *Niu Voices: Contemporary Pacific Fiction* (Wellington: Huia, 2006).

⁵ It only takes a brief Google search to reveal dozens of sites like this one: <<http://www.southpacific-vacations.com/links.php>>

the South Seas. I quote Teaiwa at some length here as to remove the names of any of the places she lists would be to repeat the flattening of specificity she is criticising:

The cultural, historical, and political complexity of Polynesia – which comprises the Cook Islands, Easter Island, the Hawaiian archipelago, the Marquesas, New Zealand, Niue, Norfolk, and Pitcairn, Rotuma, the Samoas, the Society Islands, Tonga, the Tuamotus, Tuvalu, liminal places like Fiji and Kiribati, and outliers like Pukapuka and Tikopia – is often sacrificed at the feet of the “hula dancer”. Although because of history and demographics it is formidably rivalled by Samoan, Maori, and some Tongan icons, the hula or *tamoure* figure, which is closely identified with the Cook Islands and Hawai’i but more closely identified with Tahiti, still dominates the exoticist and tourist imaginary of the Pacific. (Teaiwa 253)

However, historically Melanesia and Australia (and by extension the Melanesian and indigenous Australian people) has been depicted differently by the white writers who, until relatively recently, have largely controlled and created the most widely consumed images of indigenous peoples from the Pacific and Australasia. As Vilsoni Hereniko has explained:

[the] general trend ... had been for fiction writers such as Somerset Maugham, Jack London, Herman Melville, and James A. Michener to portray Polynesia as a paradise where simplicity, beauty, and innocence reigned and Melanesia as a dangerous

jungle where death and evil lurked. Polynesians were usually depicted as light skinned and beautiful, Melanesians as black and inferior specimens. (Hereniko 144)

Sturma also recognises the disparity in the historical portrayal of Australian Aboriginal and Melanesian women and the descriptions of other Pacific women: “Like the Aboriginal women of Australia, the island women of that area known as Melanesia were often depicted as beasts of burden and located lower down in the racial hierarchy” (Sturma 87). However, despite some white writers denigrating the appearance (and often by extension the character) of Melanesian and Aboriginal women, this did not mean that they escaped the fetishisation that Polynesian women experienced. Sturma points to the rise of photography as central to the production of erotic images of Melanesian and Aboriginal women for Western consumption (91-92).⁶

Like the bodies of Polynesian women, Aboriginal women’s bodies have been used to sell Australia as a tourist destination. A recent example is the 2006 advertising campaign from Tourism Australia, best known for its slogan “So where the bloody hell are you?”. Along with other recognisably Australian images (beaches, kangaroos, the Sydney Opera House) a group of male Aboriginal dancers shown dancing in a desert setting while a woman in the foreground tells us that they have been rehearsing for “over 40,000 years”.

⁶ Two of the photographers Sturma identifies by name are Charles Walter for his photography of “bare-breasted Aboriginal women in classical poses” and Rudolphe de Tolna for his “erotic” portraits of Melanesian women: Sturma, *South Sea Maidens* 91.



Fig. 1. Screenshot from a 2006 advertising campaign from Tourism Australia.

When discussing white representations of indigenous women of Oceania, critics invariably make reference to the idea of a hierarchy of attractiveness based on Western beauty ideals. This hierarchy of beauty seems to be connected to imperialist Enlightenment quasi-scientific ideas about the cataloguing and ordering of indigenous fauna, flora and people. As Sturma has stated, despite the South Sea maiden's appeal being "based in part on an exotic beauty, it is evident that her appearance as largely judged by European standards. Generally speaking, the closer Pacific women approximated European facial features and skin colour, the more likely they were to be considered attractive" (Sturma 73). These points are made not to insist on some essentialist view of restricting the representation of Aboriginal people to those who look sufficiently "Aboriginal" but rather to point out that the acceptable face of indigenous people, and women specifically, presented for Western consumption is still very limited. The Australian equivalent to the fetishising of Polynesian women as "dusky maidens" is perhaps the representation of indigenous women as "black velvet". The term is discussed further in Chapter Two, page 93.

To return to Terry Goldie's commodities, specifically sex, it is clear that indigenous women in Australia have been continually sexualised in Western representations, whether exulted for their beauty or disparaged for their perceived degradation. For a white writer to represent an indigenous woman or girl, particularly in the context of a relationship with a white man, is to immediately invoke this history of representation. Goldie sees the commodity of sex as having several applications to white writing about indigenous peoples. He aligns it with the trope or commodity of violence, claiming that sex and violence are "poles of attraction and repulsion, temptation by the dusky maiden and fear of the demonic violence of the fiendish warrior" (Goldie 15).

The commodity of sex or sexuality brings to bear upon the novels the pressures and expectations of genre. The presence of a relationship between an indigenous girl and white man in a text can be seen as invoking two different expectations of trope or genre. The most frequently occurring or documented is that of romance. The romance between a white man and indigenous woman or girl as represented in white writing is a familiar one, perhaps most easily recognisable when it occurs in what Edward Said calls the familiar "fables" that are told and retold about the "New World". The "fable" of Inkle and Yarico⁷ is

⁷ Frank Felsenstein provides a synopsis of Richard Steele's "seminal version" of the story: "Mr. Thomas Inkle, an ambitious young English trader cast ashore in the Americas, is saved from violent death at the hands of savages by the endearments of Yarico, a beautiful Indian maiden. Their romantic intimacy in the forest moves Inkle to pledge that, were his life to be preserved, he would return with her to England supposedly as his wife. The lovers' tender liaison progresses over several months until she succeeds in signalling a passing English ship. They are rescued by the crew, and with vows to each other intact, they embark for Barbados. Yet when they reach the island Inkle's former mercantile instincts are callously revived, for he sells her into slavery, at once raising the price he demands when he learns that Yarico is carrying his child." Steele's story was published in *The Spectator* in 1711: Frank Felsenstein, English Trader, Indian Maid: Representing Gender, Race, and Slavery in New World (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1999) 2.

one important and influential model for narratives that describe relationships between white males and indigenous females. Said sees the Inkle and Yarico story as a core influence upon Western thought about the “New World” when he lists it (along with the stories of Columbus, Robinson Crusoe, *The Tempest*, and John Smith and Pocahontas) as one of the “fables” that “stand guard over the imagination of the New World” (Said *Culture and Imperialism* 212). Narrative models such as the Inkle and Yarico story influence both the creation of new narratives and affect the ways in which narratives about the “new world”, and indigenous people are read and received. Frank Felsenstein calls the Inkle and Yarico story “a defining myth of the Enlightenment” and has produced a book-length study examining the various ways in which the story has been retold and recreated over its lifetime.

The stories of Inkle and Yarico, and John Smith and Pocahontas, are examples of the ways in which indigenous women have been and continue to be represented in Western literature and thought. The idea of the “maiden” as representative as the softer side of the savage, what Sturma neatly terms the “nubile savage” (3), has been mentioned previously. The image of the “nubile savage” exists alongside its fellows, the “noble savage” and the “savage savage”. The indigenous woman can be seen as representing “soft primitivism” in opposition to the “hard primitivism” of the warrior male, the woman identified with the commodity of sex, the male with violence. The welcoming, attractive, sexualised, indigenous woman can be seen as representing the opportunities and optimism of colonisation/imperialism. In the “maiden” the white colonising man finds comfort, resources and the possibility of indigenisation for himself

(and by extension the entire colonising race). The indigenous women in white writing is often equated with her physical environment, the coloniser conquers and comes to possess not just the maiden herself but the “maiden as restorative pastoral, this new, available land” (Goldie 11). The relationship between maiden and coloniser also suggests a method of conquest through hybridity, the maiden’s fertility and the potential of her bearing the white man’s child suggesting that the indigenous people may be overcome by the apparently peaceful conquest of romance and marriage.

Of course the Inkle and Yarico trope does not normally lead to a happy ending, at least not for Yarico the “Indian maiden”. Indeed, while romance may be the idealised motif for the relationship between the white man and the indigenous woman in literature perhaps the more frequent motif is that of rape. The image of the indigenous female can function in much the same way in a narrative of rape as in one of romance; it is the judgement implicit on the coloniser and the processes of colonisation that change. Vilsoni Hereniko has described the trope of “a forced and unequal marriage” as the “most powerful metaphor for the effects of the colonial experience on the indigenous Pacific peoples” (145). Terry Goldie also notes the prevalence of rape as a motif in literature about colonisation: “the normative sexual relations of the white male with the indigene female is rape, violent penetration of the indigenous, ... particularly in recent texts concerned with white guilt, rape is a common motif” (76).

Overview of thesis chapters

This thesis shows that *The Lieutenant* and *Wanting* are novels that, despite their historical source material, seek to engage in and add to current Australian debates about the Australian past and present. The novels arise from a specific context and reflect the often publicly expressed anxieties that the white, liberal middle-classes have regarding the British colonisation of Australia and the dispossession of Aboriginal people from their land. They appear to offer diversity of perspective on the debate about the level of injustice perpetrated against Aboriginal Australians and the responsibility that contemporary white Australians bear for that injustice. In this highly charged and political debate, historical fiction is being offered as an alternative to history as a way of understanding and coming to terms with the actual past. However, in their failure to suggest a future direction for this debate or resolve the problem of Australia's relationship with its indigenous people, they demonstrate the stalled nature of the current national conversation.

The first two chapters of the thesis entitled "Inside the book" examine the way in which these novels engage with these national debates. Through close reading, these chapters identify the concern these novels have with the creation of written texts and the representation of indigenous peoples. These chapters also locate the novels within a genealogy of previous white colonial representations of the indigenous.

Chapter One of this thesis is a close reading of both novels focussing on the way that reading and writing are represented within the novels. This chapter examines the role of written texts *within* the novels and discuss the

ways in which writers and readers are represented in the novels. It considers the ways in which the treatment of readers and writers within the novels are part of the ongoing discussions about truth in written history and fiction, and how this affects the reading of these particular novels. The close reading in Chapter Two examines the different ways in which the white writers of these novels represent indigenous characters and examines the ways in which these representations do and do not conform to recurring historical and literary tropes. The novels are also considered in the context of Australian critical whiteness studies, as represented by the influential work of Aileen Moreton-Robinson.

Chapter Three of the thesis, “Outside the book”, addresses the reception of the texts as *books*; that is, as the published objects that are marketed to and received by actual readers. This chapter focuses on the public reception of both novels and pays some attention to the so-called Australian History Wars. The chapter also considers the reception of these novels in the popular and critical marketplace, particularly the ways in which these novels and the discussion around them become a space for discussion about Australian national and cultural identity. The work in this chapter is influenced by the approaches of Australian critics David Carter and Brigid Rooney in the consideration of the way written texts and their authors are publicly seen and responded to by readers and critics. Throughout the thesis I make reference to blog posts, interviews and online articles, as these are important indicators of the public reception of the novels.

The conclusion considers the ways in which *The Lieutenant* and *Wanting* can be read as reflecting and responding to the current state of white, liberal Australian's thinking about whiteness and indigeneity, and whether or not they make suggestions for the future of the debate about the effects of colonisation. It suggests that the novels are not successful in providing diversity of opinion on the debates of the "History Wars". It also suggests that the novels are examples of "ethically serious fiction" and therefore act as a form of status symbol for the white, liberal, middle-class reader who wishes to engage with, or be seen to be engaging with, the trauma of the Australian past.

Chapter One

Inside the Book I:

Who reads? Who writes?: Representations of Reading and Writing in *The Lieutenant* and *Wanting*

Both *The Lieutenant* and *Wanting* focus heavily on writing and writers. Both novels are interested in ideas of authorship and the creation of texts. They show characters in the process of creating written texts, thereby revealing the way in which even supposedly objective texts are mediated and manipulated. This focus on text creation leads to an undermining of the authority of the written text which, in turn, creates a tension between the way that the novels themselves borrow authority from their own reference to historical texts. This chapter examines the way that *The Lieutenant*, alongside its destabilising of the authority of the historical record, interrogates the Enlightenment attitudes of its white characters. The chapter also considers *Wanting's* questioning of writing as a marker of civilisation, and the differences between the ways that white and indigenous characters are represented as readers and authors in the novel.

A central concern of *The Lieutenant* is the creation of texts, the motivations of those who create them, and the effect those texts have on the world beyond them. Daniel Rooke, the eponymous lieutenant of Grenville's novel, is a scientist and soldier. However, his scientific interest shifts from astronomy to linguistics during the course of the novel. His attempts to learn and record the language of the local indigenous people provide the justification for his relationship with the Aboriginal girl Tagaran. Throughout the novel his

scientific approach to language and his creation of texts from his scholarship (his language notebooks) is shown to be honourable and pure, especially when contrasted with the spurious literary motivations of his friend Lieutenant Silk. However, the morality and accuracy of Rooke's work *is* called into question by the novel's end. The intense focus on language and text creation within the novel encourage the real reader of *The Lieutenant* to consider the ways in which the novel has itself been created by an author with her own personal motivations for writing. Writing is also shown to be inextricably linked with imperialism and the white Enlightenment ideals that are eventually shown to be morally suspect.

Wanting has a similar focus on authorship and the role of written texts in the world. The most obvious writer in *Wanting* is Flanagan's fictionalised Charles Dickens. The famous novelist is used as the focus for an examination of the border between journalism and propaganda, truth and fiction. Although his status as a famous writer of *fiction* is of course relevant to Flanagan's portrayal of Dickens, the piece of writing that Dickens is directly shown working on in *Wanting* is an editorial essay. The essay "The Lost Arctic Voyagers" was published in two parts in two successive issues of his journal *Household Words*. *Wanting's* interest in ideas of savagery and civility is inextricably tied to its interest in fiction and the power of the written text. Like *The Lieutenant*, this concern with, and examination of, the methods and motives of authors draws the actual reader's attention to the status of the novel itself as a text created by an author with his own motivations.

Enlightenment men: readers and reading, writers and writing in *The Lieutenant*

“Who will say what it really was? Tell the truth about it?” (Grenville *The Lieutenant* 112)

The Lieutenant is explicitly concerned with writing. The central relationship of the novel, the platonic friendship of Lieutenant Rooke and Tagaran, is founded on writing. Rooke’s attempts to create, with the help Tagaran, a Cadigal-English⁸ dictionary allows Grenville to focus on writing at the level of the word. Rooke is a man of science and his writing of the dictionary is consistently painted as a scientific endeavour, a noble and pure quest when compared to the writing of his friend Lieutenant Silk. Lieutenant Silk’s quasi-journalistic chronicling of the settlement at Botany Bay is shown as shifty and dishonest as he sacrifices dogged attachment to the truth in favour of literary flair. Despite the difference between the modes of writing depicted (scientific recording and enquiry versus journalism or journaling) writing is shown to be primarily created as a public service, to add to the store of (white, Western) human knowledge.

Throughout the novel, Rooke the soldier-astronomer has faith in language as a tool of science. However, he continually struggles with language as a practical tool and his faith in words as even individual units of meaning is eroded by the novel’s completion. From childhood his inability to communicate is shown to reinforce or even cause his outsider status. His communication

⁸ The Cadigal are the indigenous people that Rooke befriends. *The Lieutenant* also identifies their language as Cadigal.

difficulties coupled with extreme intelligence and a rigorous moral compass are shown to be his defining features. His lack of communication skills lead other characters to underestimate him but the reader, in their privileged position, understands those other characters to be morally and intellectually inferior. Notable exceptions are his sister Anne and Tagaran, who without the burden of shared language relates to Rooke without judgement. Rooke is somewhat removed from his society at all stages throughout the book, whether that society be his school, his marine unit or the British settlement at Sydney Cove.

The novel begins in 1767 on Rooke's fifth birthday. Rooke is defined by his use of language from the first sentence of the novel where he is introduced as "quiet, moody, a man of few words" and as an "outsider" (3). The first interaction that the reader witnesses is between Rooke and his teacher, and is a misunderstanding over reading and the interpretation of texts: "Mrs Bartholomew showed him a badly executed engraving with the word "cat" underneath. His mother had taught him his letters and he had been reading for a year. He could not work out what Mrs Bartholomew wanted" (3). Rooke withdraws from language into a world of numbers, taking the greatest pleasure in those at their most irreducible; prime numbers. His obsession with mathematics does not help him to communicate with other students, conversation being, in his mathematical mind, "a problem he could not solve" (7). It is only when he begins to learn Latin grammar that Rooke takes pleasure in language, seeing it as able to be "reduced to units as reliable and interchangeable as numbers" and as "not so much ways of speaking as machines for thinking" (10). Rooke's affectionate view of prime numbers is transferred to

his view of language by his Latin courses – the indivisible prime numbers being analogous to the mathematical simplicity of Latin vocabulary. His view of language as a matter of science and logic is, at this point in the novel, mirrored by his moral position. When a privileged classmate makes claims for the advantages of the slave trade Rooke is troubled by something in the argument but, unable to find a “a path around Lancelot Percival’s logic” (9), he makes no objections known. This is the first instance in the novel in which the morality of Rooke’s Enlightenment values of science, logic and learning are called into question.

Despite his revelation about the science and machinery of language, language as a tool for communication and a way to successfully navigate society is still inaccessible to Rooke. Once enlisted with the Marines, Rooke befriends another lieutenant, Lieutenant Silk. Silk, a loose fictionalisation of the historical Watkin Tench,⁹ is very different to Rooke, all irony and quickness against Rooke’s plodding literalism. Where Rooke’s father is a clerk at the Office of Ordnance there is a “malicious” rumour that Silk’s is a dancing master. The professions of the lieutenants’ fathers roughly reflect their approaches and uses of language: indeed, it is said of Silk that he “was light on his feet in a conversation”. Like the clerk industriously plotting his records in a ledger, Rooke is interested in recording and understanding the mechanics of language while Silk has the more light-footed approach of the dance master; using language to delight, entertain and occasionally to manipulate. Silk’s ability with language is signposted immediately: he is described as “a storyteller who could

⁹ The famous British Marine best known for his works *Narrative of the Expedition to Botany Bay* and *Complete Account of the Settlement at Port Jackson*, both accounts of his experiences with the First Fleet.

turn the most commonplace event into something entertaining" (22). Here the observation is complimentary but still hints at the morally suspect side of the entertaining storyteller – the ability to skew the truth and manipulate the audience. Rooke recognises Silk's literary impulses as springing from more than just the desire to entertain: "the making of the tale – the elegance of its phrases, the flexing of its shape – was the point of the exercise. The instinct to rework an event, so that the telling became almost more real than the thing itself – that had been born in Silk" (39-40). Again, the observation seems to be complimentary but it comes after Silk and Rooke have witnessed the hanging of a fellow lieutenant marine for mutiny. The episode is strongly associated with language as Rooke reflects on the oaths he and the mutineers have made: "It was easy to raise his right hand and swear that he would serve and obey. It was nothing but words." The hanging brings home to him the consequence of making the oaths: "he learned where those splendid words might lead ... it was brought home to Rooke that mere words could have the power of life and death" (27).

It is from the second part of the novel ("The Astronomer") that *The Lieutenant's* focus on writing and reading intensifies. By this stage in the narrative, Lieutenant Silk, now a Captain-Lieutenant is not just a young marine with a way with words but the chronicler of the First Fleet, the publisher Debretts having offered to publish his record of the settlement in New South Wales. Rooke's admiration of Silk's skill as a wordsmith begins to be undermined by a sense of unease about his disregard for the truth. A gap begins to widen between the scientific, empirical Rooke and the literary Silk: "It was

foreign to Rooke, the idea of taking the real world as nothing more than raw material. His gift lay in measuring, calculating, deducing. Silk's was to cut and embellish until a pebble was transformed into a gem" (47). The reader, experiencing the world of the narrative through Rooke's perspective via the limited third person, knows Lieutenant Rooke to be a deeply moral person. Lieutenant Silk's motives are less clear and although Rooke realises that Silk's literary ambitions are in some ways akin to his scientific aims - "Silk was no more a soldier than he was himself" (39) - there is a sense that they are suspect, both in methodology and ultimate purpose. Rooke's suspicion in turn draws the suspicion of the reader to the novel itself. Grenville has already alerted the reader to the historical inspiration for her novel, dedicating it "to Patyegarang and the Cadigal people and William Dawes" and stating that their story "inspired this work of fiction." This dedication and use of historical reality as the inspiration for a fiction seems to put Grenville in the same dubious authorial category as her creation Lieutenant Silk. However, the obvious difference between the two is Grenville's clear classification of her work as fiction as opposed to Silk's breezy admission of his deliberate presentation of fiction as fact. On hearing a particularly flowery excerpt from Silk's journal Rooke questions his friend's accuracy in recording: "'Very clever, very deft of phrasing,' Rooke said. 'But have you really walked there every evening?'" Silk replies: "Ah, Rooke the man of science! Let us call it poetic licence, my friend" (47).

Within the first few weeks following the arrival of the First Fleet, Silk asks for Rooke's assistance in the creation of his account: "Will you help me make my narrative a sparkling gem of a thing ... ?" (66). Silk's words recall

Rooke's earlier comment that Silk's approach to "the real world" was to "cut and embellish until a pebble was transformed into a gem" (47). This time there is little ambivalence in Rooke's response to Silk's philosophy, he sees it as evidence of a kind of moral lack: "He had never seen anything matter to Silk. Nothing – except perhaps, Private Truby on the deck of Resolution - was more than material for an anecdote" (66). Rooke's mention of Private Truby refers to the traumatic death in battle of a fellow marine, witnessed by Rooke and Silk in the Caribbean earlier in the novel. Although clearly disapproving of Silk's ruthless raiding of experience for anecdote, Rooke again sees a similarity between his own hopes for scientific success in this new environment and Silk's literary aims: "For Silk, as for himself, the place promised more riches. New South Wales was part of a man's destiny" (66). Here, literary and scientific endeavour are tied to imperialism: New South Wales is a land that can be mined not just for its mineral riches but also for its scientific and literary potential. By this comparison, Grenville seems to suggest that the writer and the scientist are just as culpable as other colonists; their supposedly pure Enlightenment aims of collecting and redistributing knowledge become suspect.

From the beginning of the novel Rooke is seen to embody Enlightenment values. He prioritises reason and logic, although this is coupled with an underlying general tolerance. In his scientific work he is informed by his Enlightenment sensibility which values order and classification and seeks to add to a body of human knowledge. Despite the increasing secularism of the Enlightenment, John Gascoigne has noted that, in the earlier years of the scientific revolution at least, "most scientists continued to regard their work as

illuminating the nature of God as revealed through creation” (Gascoigne 2). The young Rooke seems to reflect this when reflecting on astronomy and mathematics in the first chapter of the novel:

As the chaplain had his Gospels, Rooke had his own sacred text in which his God made Himself plain: mathematics. ... To understand any aspect of the cosmos was to look on the face of God: not directly, but by a species of triangulation, because to think mathematically was to feel the actions of God in oneself.
(Grenville *The Lieutenant* 14)

The young Rooke is shown to be a natural Enlightenment man, inherently inclined toward seeking out underlying order and rationality. This sense of cosmic order and connectedness is also shown to have a moral value. Rooke is comforted by the idea that “as an individual he did not matter. Whatever he was, he was part of a whole.” This philosophy is presented as preferable to a morality that depends on religious texts: “That [his sense of connectedness] imposed a morality beyond a terse handful of commands in the chaplain’s book. It was to acknowledge the unity of all things. To injure any was to damage all” (14).

The thirteen-year-old Rooke spends two weeks at Greenwich with the Astronomer Royal, Dr. Vickery (a character based on the historical Nevil Maskelyne).¹⁰ On Vickery’s recommendation he reads widely. Two of the works singled out for special mention are “the journal of the great Captain Cook”

¹⁰ The English Astronomer Royal from 1765 to 1811.

which is “gulped down” by Rooke and “Mr Banks’ account of New South Wales”. Rooke only has time to “skim the contents” of Banks’ journal. The mention of the two journals is the first reference in the novel to Australia or exploration. The listed contents of Banks’ account “*Quadrupeds – ants and their habitations – scarcity of people – implements for catching fish – canoes – language*” (18) are excerpted from Banks’ actual Endeavour journal as edited by Sir John Dalton Hooker.¹¹ Grenville has only listed six of the thirty-seven subjects that are found in the contents list for Banks’ chapter “Some account of that part of New Holland now called New South Wales”. As in Banks’ journal the last subject listed is *language*. The emphasising of language as an area for scientific study and recording foreshadows Rooke’s efforts to record the Cadigal language in the narrative core of *The Lieutenant*, Part Three “The Names of Things” and Part Four “To Be of the Party”.

If the reference to Banks’ journal suggests Rooke’s future as a scientist in New South Wales then the reference to “the great Captain Cook” seems to present Cook as a model of the Enlightenment scientist, explorer and marine. Rod Edmond describes the three views of Cook that had gained currency by the late 1790s:

One of these was the comparison with figures from classical or Christian myth, sacrificial gods or religious martyrs such as Orpheus and Christ. Cook, this parallel implies, was a modern European martyr-hero of comparable stature. Another was to

¹¹ John Dalton Hooker, ed., Journal of the Right Hon. Sir Joseph Banks, During Captain Cook’s First Voyage in H.M.S. Endeavour in 1768-71 to Terra Del Fuego, Otahite, New Zealand, Australia, the Dutch East Indies, Etc. (London: Macmillan, 1896) xix.

define Cook against the violence and cruelty of the explorers of the early modern period. Columbus and Cortes were the anti-types of this British, almost feminized heroes of patience, sympathy and self-control. A third element was the representation of Cook as an embodiment of the liberal, humane values of the Enlightenment, a defender of the rights of man and an enemy of slavery. (Edmond 40)

Michelle Elleray contrasts this image of Cook with the stereotype of the dissolute, promiscuous beach-comber as a model for the typical European man in colonial Australasia and the Pacific, noting that “the figure of the British beach-comber had emerged in the South Pacific as a counterweight to the construction of Captain James Cook's legacy as one of benevolent imperialism, legitimized knowledges, sexual continence, and upright middle-class masculinity” (Elleray 164). There are echoes of all of these views of Cook in Grenville's characterisation of Daniel Rooke in addition to the aural echo of the names Cook and Rooke. Cook and Rooke share a similar background, schooling experience and both come to science through serving in the navy.

Edmond and Elleray both list the generally positive values that the image of Cook exemplifies, those “liberal, human values of the Enlightenment”. At the beginning of the novel, Rooke also represents and holds those values and seems confident in their morality. He shares with Cook a modest background which is overcome through scholarship and joining the Royal Marines. In the beginning sections of the novel, Rooke seems set to become an Enlightenment hero in the vein of Cook; liberal, humane, relatively secular, a scholar and a scientist. O.H.K

Spate's account of the actual Cook's youth has obvious parallels to the fictional Rooke's. Like Rooke, Cook's education was sponsored by a wealthier man because of his early evident intelligence and relatively modest birth. Cook also joined the Royal Navy and it was through his naval service that he was taught cartography and astronomy (Spate 133). Both men are mapmakers and Grenville's early characterisations of Rooke seem to fit Spate's description of Cook the explorer: "impersonal, unimaginative, totally objective, passionless except in the pursuit of knowledge but there indefatigable and persevering to the end" (135). However, Rooke begins to question the morality of his own thinking and behaviour, and the empirical project which he contributes to and benefits from.

When Michelle Elleray describes the image of Cook as representing ideas of "benevolent imperialism" and "legitimized knowledges" she indicates that "enlightenment values" are not always read as positive or moral. The phrase "benevolent imperialism" suggests that figures such as Cook are the acceptable face of imperialism; somehow evidence of humane and rational behaviour is seen to soften the ideas of exploitation of indigenous peoples and their lands that are associated with imperialism. Elleray's phrase "legitimized knowledges" suggests that there are knowledges that are illegitimate or are at least treated as such by dominant Western schools of thought. Aileen Moreton-Robinson draws attention to the way that Western ways of knowledge are often seen as deracialised despite "whiteness being exercised epistemologically" (Moreton-Robinson "Whiteness" 75). Moreton-Robinson notes that white discourses have represented the Indigenous "other" since the 1700s. She identifies Cook as a

producer of an early negative representation of Australian indigenous people in his 1770 statement that Australia was *terra nullius*, dismissing the rights of the indigenous people “because they were uncivilised, which meant the land belonged to no one and was available for possession” (76). Moreton-Robinson sees this early representation as having lasting impact and influencing future representations of indigenous people as “treacherous, lazy, drunken, childish, cunning, dirty, ignoble, noble, primitive, backward, unscrupulous, untrustworthy and savage” (72).

At the beginning of the novel Rooke can be clearly seen as a kind of minor Cook figure and, like the popular image of Cook, representative of white Enlightenment values. His absolute faith in science is reflected in his use and interest in language. He sees language as a tool for conveying information and prioritises clarity and accuracy, especially in comparison to Lieutenant Silk. However, his relationships with Tagaran and other indigenous people shake his faith in his scientific approach to language and his Enlightenment view as a whole. The challenge that Australia in general poses to his scientific and organised mind is signposted by his inability to describe the Australian landscape. The country as a whole seems beyond Rooke’s ways of knowing as is shown when Grenville describes the way that Sydney Cove “seemed made according to a different logic from the world Rooke knew” (Grenville *The Lieutenant* 58). The use of “logic” here ties Rooke’s visual understanding of the world to his scientific and mathematical understanding of it. Scientific language is also present when Rooke muses on the possibility of teaching an Australian parrot to repeat a tune. Rooke, on first seeing the birds, wonders if they could

“be taught to talk... or learn a tune.” The thought is dismissed due to the potential difficulty of catching the birds and Rooke’s feeling that the music of Europe was out of place in Australia: “Buxtehude seemed another species here, the dialogue of a fugue from another world” (58). The use of “species” and as the broader idea of catching a native bird and teaching it to speak and entertain evoke some of the racist views of early colonisers. It is an eerie foreshadowing of the way the colonists treat the Aboriginal characters later in the book, and, of course, reflects the historical reality. However, it is notable that Rooke discards these ideas as futile and inappropriate. His thought that “there was something about these woods of New South Wales that made a man fall silent” suggests that Rooke is already beginning to relinquish the superiority of his white, Enlightenment epistemology against the challenges that indigenous Australia provides to that ideology.

Rooke again equates the way he treats language with mathematics when, struggling to convince the Governor of the worth of his astronomy, he reflects that “he arrived at a sentence the way other people did multiplication: the hard way, by adding” (73). His view of language as essential, pure, objective and scientific has already been challenged by his lies to the Governor about the importance of his observatory needing to be isolated from the rest of the camp. After the discussion with the Governor is over, Rooke ponders his own use of language: “Squeaked through, that was his thought. A narrow squeak. What squeaking? Why squeaking? It was a relief to wonder about the silly phrase” (75). Rooke’s response to his new reality is to consider the inadequacy or obscurity of language. After securing his observatory hut, Rooke’s first action is

to attend to his ledgers – to prepare to convert his scientific observations to written records: “They would represent a miracle of translation. The language of muddle, of wobble, of improvisation, would be transformed into exactitude” (Grenville *The Lieutenant* 79). Although at this stage in the novel Rooke has not decided to begin recording the indigenous language in his notebooks, his view of the ledgers roughly reflects his method and aims in creating the dictionary notebooks.

Rooke’s othering of the Australian landscape and his tendency to exoticise non-whites call to mind the kind of Anglocentric colonial representations that Moreton-Robinson criticises for establishing whiteness as the invisible standard against which all non-white people and practices may be ranked. However, there is generally some acknowledgement of his raced whiteness. When Rooke encounters black slaves in Antigua he notices that the slaves do not meet his stares: “It must be a thing they were taught: never to look a white man in the face. Their own features were exotic, powerful, as if carved from a stronger medium than the insipid putty of English faces” (25). Although Rooke’s whiteness is acknowledged here only within the context of slavery, and his description of the faces of the slaves is directly exoticising, Rooke does recognise the limits of his knowledge: “That speech he had heard was made up of no sounds he could give meaning to, but it was language and joined one human to another, just as his own did” (25). Initially Rooke finds the Australian landscape entirely alien and terrible, describing its features as grotesque: “Gnarled pink monsters twisted arthritic fingers into the sky Even the rocks were not like any others he had seen, monstrous plates and shards piled

haphazardly on each other" (57-58). However Rooke's relationship to the landscape changes as he begins to struggle not with its innate strangeness but to recognise that it is the limits of his own understanding that make it hard for him to interpret and live in the land: "The place flowed past, a blue of namelessness. *Tree. Another tree. Bush. Another sort of bush. White flower. Yellow flower. Red flower.* To be unable to give things their proper names was to be like a child again" (92). Here, a lack of language affects both Rooke's sense of self and ability to function in the bush: "unrelenting newness made for a kind of blindness" (96). Later, Rooke attempts to cope with his lack of knowledge in the same way that he earlier attempted to map the new land, "like Euclid, he would begin with an assertion" (94), and attempts to name some trees: "*Firs*: it was what everyone called them. But when he pulled off a spray of the needles he saw that, unlike a fir's, they were jointed, the knuckles packed together more closely at the tip. What leaf grew like a telescope, pushing itself out segment by segment?" (96). Rooke's attempt to name the trees foreshadows his attempts to similarly catalogue the Cadigal language. He begins by making what seems to be a simple and obvious connection but on realising that his first assumption was incorrect is unable to continue to catalogue indigenous Australia. By these repeated failures the universality and superiority of white epistemology is challenged.

As the narrative continues the inability of the British to communicate with the indigenous people because of their lack of shared language comes to the fore. Rooke sees the lack of shared understanding between the two communities as foreboding:

In the absence of any understanding about the new arrangements, Rooke could see that there was a dangerous ambiguity to the presences of a thousand of His Majesty's subjects in this place. No such understanding was possible without language to convey it. And persons to whom the news could be delivered. And yet it seemed that the silence might continue indefinitely. (108)

Rooke sees violence as a possible outcome in the absence of actual conversation but sees war as "a species of conversation" which at least offers an alternative to the silence that was "neither war nor peace. It was a null" (108). The use of the word "null" seems to make oblique reference to the doctrine of "terra nullius" perhaps suggesting that along with representing the indigenous as nomadic, being unable to converse with the indigenous people provided a justification for increasingly dispossessing them of their land.

Rooke continues to consider the difference between his approach to language and that of others, pondering among other things, the lack of poetry based on specific and scientific toil: "The pleasure of precision was one unsung by poets, as far as he knew ... If he were ever to attempt a poem, he thought he would take exactitude as his subject" (109). This moment, in which Rooke is seen enjoying the "small thrill of marking the afternoon readings of the instruments into the prepared spot in his ledger" marks the last in which Rooke is able to keep at a moral distance from the actions of the settlement and also when the use of language to obscure or manipulate the reality of the situation becomes clearly morally wrong. Another marine, Lieutenant Gardiner, like Rooke "an odd sort of fellow" comes to Rooke deeply troubled by his

participation in the kidnap of two Aboriginal men. One of the chief sources of discomfort for Gardiner is the role of language in masking the truth of the capture: "*Brought in*, that is what [the Governor] calls it. The natives were *brought in*. Never mind that they were kidnapped. Violently... Who will say how it really was? Tell the truth about it?" (112). The scene with Gardiner is followed by one in which Rooke ventures down to the camp to witness the captives and sees Lieutenant Silk acting as recorder for the Governor who is attempting to teach some English words to the kidnapped Aborigines. Silk's obvious complicity in the kidnap and continued imprisonment of the men, coupled with Gardiner's distress about the Governor's slippery and inaccurate speech around the kidnap deepen the mistrust the reader has for Silk as a truthful chronicler of the settlement. Given that Silk is an obvious parallel for the historical Watkin Tench, Grenville also leads the reader to question the accuracy and intention of Tench's journals and those of his contemporaries, which are generally viewed as important first person records of the colonisation of New South Wales.

After the escape of the captured Boinbar and Warungin, Lieutenant Silk comes to Rooke's hut in an attempt to find out Gardiner's story of the capture as his written account is lacking without it: "The whole story is excessively diverting. But I lack the beginning how they were taken...I need detail, I need the account of an eyewitness, but he would tell me nothing" (121). Rooke feels his, by now familiar, discomfort with Silk's naked desire to create an entertaining written account at the expense of accuracy and despite individual feelings: "He wondered if writers of narratives could smell when there was

more to a story than met the eye" (122). As at the earlier hanging of the mutineers in Barbados, Rooke feels the danger that words can pose to the individual, here in Gardiner's regrets: "*I wish to God I had not done it.* [Rooke] had heard those words, and heard them with sympathy. That made him subject to their dangerous power. He must forget that he had ever heard them" (123).

The second section of the novel "The Astronomer" ends with Rooke failing to observe Dr Vickery's comet. This scientific failure, like his inability to name the trees earlier, foreshadows the failure of the language learning that is at the core of the novel. Rooke again realises the limits of his knowledge and expertise: "It had not occurred to him that he would not find the comet. He thought now that was an arrogance for which he was being punished" (123). Anxious about his failure and fearing that the Governor will force him to return to military duties, Rooke, at Gardiner's suggestion, writes to Dr Vickery explaining his lack of progress. He begins to practice some of the shifty language techniques of Silk and the Governor almost accidentally: "He was conscious of something wordy and obscuring about this sentence But, as Gardiner had guessed, the act of writing had the effect of shifting his anxiety out of his mind and onto the paper" (129).

Part Three of *The Lieutenant* is "The Names of Things". It begins with the arrival, by choice this time, of Boinbar, Warungin and several other Aboriginal men in the British settlement. Lieutenant Silk is thrilled by this new source of material, joking that he "had quite exhausted the literary potential of brick making and road building. God willing, today marks the opening of a new chapter in the affairs of Sydney Cove" (139). Silk's use of "chapter" is of course

both literal and figurative, calling attention to the way in which all event is potential material for his constructed text. Silk's reaction also reminds the reader that the arrival of the men also begins a new chapter in the actual novel *The Lieutenant*, drawing a connection between the dubiously motivated Silk and the actual author, Grenville. That this connection is drawn here is striking, considering that it immediately precedes Rooke's most critical view of Silk as author yet:

'At last, I can now go forward. Mr Debrett of Piccadilly will get his sparkling narrative after all.'

Rooke nodded, because that was what Silk expected. But he could not comprehend how a man could be presented with a moment as astonishing as a star moving out of its place, and see only the chance to make a story. He saw for the first time how different they truly were, he and Silk. Silk's impulse was to make the strange familiar, to transform it into well-shaped smooth phrases.

His own was to enter that strangeness and lose himself in it.
(139)

Rooke's disparaging language (*only* the chance to make a *story*) conveys his distaste for Silk's actions. His critique of Silk would seem to apply to Grenville as a writer of historical fiction as well. However, Rooke speaks at this point in the novel with his faith in the purity and nobility of scientific enquiry intact and as fully distinct and separate from writing for entertainment or

pleasure. His view of himself as someone who desires only “to lose himself” in the other culture rather than “make the strange familiar” seems at odds with his demonstrated fondness for recording fact and measurements in his ledgers and naming and claiming his newly sighted stars.

After this, Warungin comes on his own accord to Rooke’s observatory and the two have a verbal exchange in which Warungin teaches Rooke the word *Berewal* meaning, Rooke supposes, faraway. Warungin describes himself as Cadi-gal and identifies Rooke as Berewal-gal: “Rooke understood. *Berewal*, a great distance off. *Gal*, tribe. Warungin was teaching him the name of his own people: *Berewal-gal*, the great-distance-off tribe” (143). Rooke is “pleased to have been named: it was a gift” however the interaction also unsettles him. Being recognised and named by Warungin destabilises his perceived superior knowledge position as white: “it was shocking too. None of the mysterious belongings or impressive skills of the white men ... gave them any special standing. They were just one more tribe” (143). Witnessing Warungin and Rooke’s apparently benign encounter, Rooke is soon joined by a group of several women and children. One of these children is a girl “perhaps ten or twelve years old”. Rooke feels a sort of connection with the girl, Tagaran, and begins with her help to start to record the Cadigal language. The rest of the novel focuses on the relationship that develops between Tagaran and Rooke.

Stepping in the dark: translation, literacy and the language of feeling

He could hear the way she was speaking slowly, making it easy for him. He tried to turn the sounds into syllables but could only get as far as the first few. She repeated each one and he said them

after her. It was like being taken by the hand and helped step by step in the dark. (Grenville *The Lieutenant* 149)

The dedication to *The Lieutenant* reads: “Dedicated to Patyegarang and the Cadigal people and William Dawes. Their story inspired this work of fiction”. Although Patyegarang, the Cadigal people and Dawes are given roughly equal weighting in this introduction, Patyegarang’s fictional equivalent in the novel, Tagaran, does not appear until page 147 of *The Lieutenant*. However, the relationship between Tagaran and Dawes’ fictional counterpart, Daniel Rooke, forms the emotional core of the novel. Grenville takes all of the dialogue attributed to Tagaran from the actual Dawes’ “language notebooks”,¹² which as she states in the author’s note are the most extensive written records of the language of the indigenous people of the Sydney area. The language notebooks, and their creation as fictionalised by Grenville, complete the unsettling of Enlightenment attitudes that has continued throughout the novel and dismantle any remaining confidence in the possible objectivity, morality and accuracy of the written text, especially in a colonial context.

The contrast between orality and literacy is often used to emphasize the gulf between indigenous cultures and colonising ones. Like all white representations of the indigenous, representations of indigenous cultures that do not have a written language can be skewed positively or negatively, made to signify which ever view of the indigenous is desired. Terry Goldie notes that even the way the writing status of a culture is described can be positive or negative when he writes that “It is important to differentiate between orality, an

¹² For a discussion of Grenville’s decision to quote all dialogue of indigenous characters from the Dawes’ notebooks, see Chapter Two pages 71-72.

essential quality, and illiteracy, the negative value of the same state which is not a value but a lack" (Goldie 108). Grenville's novel is careful not to imply that the non-writing state of the Cadigal signifies any intellectual or cultural lack. Tagaran's intelligence and quickness is repeatedly emphasised and the ease with which she interprets and understands Rooke's culture causes him to view himself as comparatively inferior. Rooke's understanding of the non-writing culture of Tagaran's people is therefore not portrayed as a "lack" but rather as a cultural difference that marks their culture as being beyond the bounds of the knowledge of the white colonisers. Goldie, in describing representations of non-writing cultures by white writers claims that "[t]he writers' sense of indigenes as having completely different systems of understanding, different epistemes, is based on an often undefined belief that cultures without writing operate within a different dimension of consciousness" (16). He describes a shift between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; the epistemologies of cultures without writing being portrayed as malevolent in the nineteenth century and benevolent in the twentieth.

As well as not being seen as culturally lacking because of their non-writing culture, Rooke's early interactions with Tagaran and her people emphasise other positive attributes of the Cadigal. Of the tropes of indigenous people so often repeated in white representations, the depictions here lean toward the "indigenous as natural" with Rooke being repeatedly shocked by some behaviour or other of the Cadigal and then realising its innate sensibleness and appropriateness to the local environs.

Rooke approaches his new self-appointed role firmly from his position of man of science. His mechanical view of language as essentially scientific informs his approach: “language was more than a list of words, more than a collection of fragments all jumbled together like a box of nuts and bolts. Language was a machine. ... It required someone who could dismantle the machine, see how it worked, and put it to use: a man of system, a man of science” (Grenville *The Lieutenant* 152). Rooke’s aims in deciphering exemplify the Enlightenment view of the New World as a place to colonise and take profit from, both intellectually and economically. Rooke hopes that his work will impress the Governor, both by allowing him to “fulfil his own ambitions” by effectively colonising the area and setting up a productive white settlement, and to “be the first to learn of an addition to the world’s sum of knowledge almost as dramatic as Galileo’s or Kepler’s” (154).

Tagaran shows some interest in the physical act of writing, although her friends are either less curious or, in the case of another girl, Worogan, will “not even come close enough to see, as if the pen held a dangerous power” (160). Rooke notes that Warungin, the dignified indigenous elder “[does] not approve of the writing-down business”. By not having her indigenous characters attempt to speak in broken-English or seriously attempt to read and write in English, Grenville avoids reproducing the kind of white colonial narrative that gives all the authority to the literate white coloniser like those “depictions of the reception of writing” identified by Vanessa Smith “which figure a transition from naïve ciphering to competent interpreting [by an indigenous character]”

and therefore “place the contest of authority that occurs in early contact scenarios within the framework of European pedagogic control” (Smith 8).

Rooke is concerned with creating an accurate scientific and sociological resource and remaining removed and objective as a translator. His concern about Silk’s representations of life in the settlement mean he is reluctant to “go beyond the literal, to take words into some place where they were no longer simply descriptive, but had a life of their own” (Grenville *The Lieutenant* 187). He is aware of the way that his literacy allows him power over his own historical consciousness (the way he is conscious of and understands both his own history and has a sense of a communal history). As Bill Ashcroft and Helen Tiffin note: “literacy leads to the development of historic consciousness. It allows the scrutiny of a fixed past. It enables distinction to be made between truth and error” (Ashcroft and Tiffin 80). Rooke’s recording of the facts of his conversations with Tagaran come to serve a dual purpose; acting as both quasi-scientific record of a language, and a kind of coded journal which preserves the memory of his relationship with Tagaran. Despite being unable, like Silk to, move beyond the literal and “convey ... drama on a page” and record the emotional truth of his interactions with Tagaran, Rooke feels that even his painstakingly literal recordkeeping will allow him to recall the poignant moments he shares with Tagaran: “These words could carry none of the life of the exchange. The only reason for recording them was that they would allow him to remember. For the rest of his life he could read these words and be transported back to this here, this now. This happiness” (Grenville *The Lieutenant* 187). Ultimately though, he is unable to describe the reality of his

relationship in his language notebooks as he lacks the vocabulary, even in English:

He thought there might not be any words for what was happening between himself and Tagaran. Like the language of the *Cadigal* that he was learning, word by half-understood word, the language of his feelings for her was beyond his reach. He could only step forward blindly, in trust. (191)

The disparity between Rooke's and Silk's respective views on the proper use of writing and reading in the colonial settlement come to a head when Silk discovers Rooke's language notebooks. Silk presses Rooke on his goals for the notebooks, suggesting publication. Rooke's empathetic internal reaction marks how his Enlightenment views have started to shift; instead of adding to the store of human knowledge, sharing his work now seems upsetting: "Silk could imagine no use for words other than reaching an audience. Why would a man labour if not to publish? Until recently he himself would have viewed things the same way." (204). When Silk suggests incorporating Rooke's work into his own narrative as an appendix, talk of reimbursement infuriates Rooke. Silk's reading of the notebook also reveals to Rooke his failure to capture the real and emotional truth of his interactions with Tagaran. His scientific approach and vocabulary have proved too meagre to convey his real meaning: "He had failed to record the joke on the page, in the same way he failed to note that they were breathing" (207). The joke that Rooke failed to record was one made by Tagaran, who on being told by Rooke that washing would make herself white, throws down the towel in mock despair. Silk's interpretation of Rooke's

representation of the incident is that Tagaran literally believes that she can become white through vigorous washing and indeed would desire to become so. This seems to suggest that even a written text written by a white writer from a seemingly objective viewpoint can be read in a racist way. In this way Grenville defends her own texts against misreading from within the novel itself. Rooke attributes Silks' misreading to "his own arrogance as a man of science to have so precisely written down every detail of that small event" (207). When Silk interprets another exchange recorded in the language notebooks as signalling that the relationship between Rooke and Tagaran is sexual in nature, Rooke is deeply distressed: "what could Silk know, reading his words through a lens of prurience, and making guesses that were so wrong as to be sickening" (210). Rooke's views of the language notebooks changes as he comes to see them as a potential threat to his relationship with Tagaran, his life in New South Wales and the existence of the Cadigal. The reality of his participation in the colonising project, and the part the language notebooks play in it are made clear to him.

He took the notebooks from Silk, got up and put them away on the shelf. Once up there between Lacaille's *Stelliferum* and the *Nautical Almanac*, they were invisible. So small, like the first nag in a stocking, that could hardly be detected, that seemed not to have any importance. By the time the snag had unravelled the whole thing, it was too late to mend. (210)

Rooke recognises the ambiguous position he holds as a translator. Ashcroft and Tiffin describe that ambiguity as arising from the conflicting aims of translation and interpretation:

The interpreter always emerges from the dominated discourse. The role entails radically divided objectives: it functions to acquire the power of the new language and culture in order to preserve the old, even whilst it assists the invaders in their overwhelming of that culture. In that divided moment the interpreter discovers the impossibility of living completely through either discourse. The intersection of these two discourses on which the interpreter balances constitutes a site both exhilarating and disturbing. (Ashcroft and Tiffin 133)

Rooke's discomfort with Silk's reading of his language notebooks as recording something other than the reality he sought so carefully to reflect is also shared by the critic Ross Gibson. Whereas, the (fictional) Rooke is discomforted by the (fictional) Silk's misinterpretation of the languages notebooks, Gibson is uncomfortable with authors of fiction (Grenville is specifically identified) fictionalising events surrounding the historical fact of the actual language notebooks of William Dawe's. Gibson outlines his scepticism about historical fiction that deals with the notebooks:

After pondering the Dawes material for fifteen years now, and having read the fictions inspired by them in the meantime, I can't shake the conviction that a well-made novel must obscure the most puzzling and provocative elements in the notebooks. This is because a novelist typically deploys a long narrative arc to bring principal characters into vivid focus and the reader is encouraged to appreciate every character as an entity who is complete and

singular in a represented world that tends towards resolution. While a novel can be a marvel in the way it might encourage its readers to empathise with distinctive figures, this special affordance of the form can block out other qualities of existence that are worth knowing too, crucial qualities of the world and its people, including conundrum and character-traits such as indeterminacy, multiplicity and mutability. (Gibson)

The fourth section of *The Lieutenant*, “To Be of the Party”, is the climax of the novel. After the fatal spearing of the menacing gamekeeper Brugden, the Governor orders a “punitive” expedition of marines to go out and “bring in” six indigenous men. Silk’s use of “bring in” instead of capture or kidnap repeats the shifty language use that distressed Lieutenant Gardiner earlier in the novel. In the discussion about the “expedition” the language of the indigenous people is used to portray them as both savage and civilised. The bloodthirsty Lennox claims that the Aborigines cannot be trusted: “They lurk and they skulk and they smile, and attack a man only when he is unarmed. I believe in fact, that they do not even have a word for treachery in their vocabulary.” Rooke then considers this interpretation of indigenous people’s behaviour as inadequate, noting that even in English “treachery was a word with a broader reach than it was entitled to. What it boiled down to was that the men in this hut had been taught to fight by certain rules.” Rooke imagines a possible reading of the situation from the point of view of Warungin: “Uninvited guests had arrived in his home. They had been pleasant, offered small gifts. But then they had stayed, longer than visitors should, and rearranged the place to suit themselves”

(Grenville *The Lieutenant* 242). When Rooke attempts to dissuade Silk from embarking on the mission, and making him take part himself, he describes the sophistication of the indigenous language, arguing that the use of the dual plural signifies a kind of morality and civility that should excuse them from retribution: “‘*You and me, or all of us, or me and these others but not you*, all embedded in the pronoun! While English makes only the crudest of distinctions! Imagine, Silk, a race of people using a language as supple as that of Sophocles and Homer!’” (245).

Rooke meets with Tagaran and, with his limited language skills, he is able to confirm that the view of the Cadigal is indeed that which he imagined Warungin as having. Their conversation, conducted equally in English and Cadigal is symbolic and therapeutic, as well as practical:

‘*Minyin gulara eora?*’ Rooke asked, Why are the black men angry?

He knew the answer, but needed the words. Needed the thing they were used to, the question and the answer.

‘*Inyam ngalawi white men.*’ Because the white men are settled here.

He thought perhaps she needed it too, backwards and forwards, word and word. (252)

This exchange could be read as a symbolic conversation between white settler Australians and indigenous people as a whole and when Rooke asks Tagaran to take a warning to Warungin he finds some reconciliation in using

her language “*Piabami Warungyi?*” he said again. There was a pleasure in using her language for this It was a language whose very cadence sounded like forgiveness” (254). The feeling of reconciliation is short-lived however; he confesses that he will be one of the men in the party hoping that “putting the thing into words would make it go away. But it was still sitting between them”. Their personal relationship is so strained by the breakdown of the white/Aboriginal relations that it is irresolvable through language: “This was a question beyond the game of words. It was out of the reach of their grammar lessons” (255).

The novel ends with Rooke recognising that he cannot remain a part of the settlement with about being complicit in its violence toward the indigenous people; with the expedition in mind he thinks “If you were part of such an act, you were part of its wrong. ... If you were part of that machine, you were part of its evil” (280). The change in Rooke is described in terms of language, as being brought about by his conversations with Tagaran and his efforts to transcribe her language: “Daniel Rooke seemed to have been replaced, syllable by syllable”. When Rooke abandons the mission and confronts the Governor, issues of language and vocabulary are at the fore. He remembers the hanging of the mutineers and feels like “a man with the noose about his neck being asked to say his last words and not able to think of what he had prepared” (284). When he tells the Governor that God will judge his actions, the Governor responds angrily “‘you are mighty sure of yourself for a junior officer, and mighty free with the Almighty’s name!’ There was an awkwardness about this – *mighty* and

Almighty – that made all three men pause and listen to the words ringing together” (286).

The novel ends with the small fifth section, “Antigua, 1836”, where Rooke, having spent his life as an abolitionist, lies on his death bed. He is no longer concerned with the notebooks being misinterpreted, confident that when “he and Tagaran were both dead, when their children’s children were dead, the notebooks would tell the story of a friendship like no other” (298). Rooke seems not to consider what Tagaran’s life may be now, and even his assumption that she will have lived to have children seems presumptuous considering the actions of the Governor that caused him to leave New South Wales.

Lies and white magic: the representation of writing in *Wanting*

Dickens’ editorial

The main creator of written texts in *Wanting* is Charles Dickens. In the chronology of the novel, Dickens has recently finished his latest novel *Hard Times* and is yet to begin on his following work *Little Dorritt*. As “the most popular novelist in the land” (Flanagan *Wanting* 21) he is approached by Lady Jane Franklin to write a public defence of her husband Sir John Franklin. Franklin is missing in the Arctic where he was leading an expedition to find the Northwest Passage. An article has been published in the Illustrated London News by a Dr John Rae that asserts that not only are all members of the expedition dead, they were reduced to cannibalism before their deaths. Lady Franklin is distressed by the piece, declaring that it is slander if Sir John is still

dead, and an impediment to fundraising for his rescue if he still living (24). From this early appearance Dickens is shown to be a writer for whom story reigns above all things. He has little respect for the factual truth, instead insisting on the primacy of his own moral truths. His views on journalism also show a prioritising of story: “as an old newspaperman, Dickens found newspapers an ever less satisfactory form of fiction” (26). It is Lady Jane Franklin’s subconscious story construction around her husband’s legacy that appeals to Dickens: “He had found something unearthly, even ridiculous, in her triumphant rendering of her husband. Part of him despised such nonsense. But another part of him wanted to share in it, to shore up its leaking holes, to buttress and burnish this improbable story of English greatness and English goodness” (28). The gruesome and heroic aspects of the Franklin story also appeal, as Dickens says to Wilkie Collins: “I am rather strong on voyages and cannibalism” (38).

His privileging of story over fact is also evident in both his critical assessment of Rae’s article (“The man had no gift for story” 41) and his positive response to Franklin’s *Journey to the Polar Sea*: “Whatever the truth of the book, it revealed Franklin as an infinitely better writer than poor old Dr Rae. Sir John Franklin, Dickens recognised, was surely as fine a creation of Sir John Franklin’s own pen as *Oliver Twist* was of his” (46). This recognition of Sir John as a kind of author of self is not surprising considering the preoccupation the Dickens of the novel has with self construction and reputation. Dickens’ obsession with controlling his public image seems linked with his creative skills as a novelist. His wife Catherine is painfully aware of his hypocrisy regarding the gulf

between his public reputation and private life: “hadn’t he, in every book and speech and utterance, said it was all about family and hearth and home? ... Hadn’t she loved him, and in his books wasn’t such love always triumphant? She could not understand why in his home he had come to despise that same love as stupid” (158-59). In Catherine’s case, Dickens’ controlling will and carefully managed identity makes her feel as if she is one of his fictional creations: “Catherine finally understood that she had been his invention as surely as any of the blurred pages on the desk He had made her that boring woman of his novels; she had become his heroine in weakness and compliance and dullness” (159). To Catherine, Dickens’ skill as a creator of fictions extends well into the real world and carries with it enormous menace: “he would remake her with his wit, with his tongue... . The world, she realised, was whatever Charles wanted” (159). The only person beyond the reach of Dickens’ verbal and literary reach is his dead baby Dora. When trying to describe his loss to future mistress Ellen Ternan, Dickens’ is disarmed: “It wasn’t reducible to risible anecdote or ridiculous dialogue. Against her death he seems to be able to offer neither defence nor explanation” (167). His usual use of language leaves him incapable of expressing his raw emotion: “Words for him were songs, a performance. But he was not singing or performing now” (168).

Robinson’s diaries

George Augustus Robinson is the ironically titled “Protector” of the Tasmanian Aborigines. Like most of Flanagan’s characters he is a fictionalisation of an actual historical figure. The diary kept by Robinson is another written text that is central to *Wanting*. Like Dickens’ defence of

Franklin in *Household Words*, it is racist and misrepresents the situations it purports to record correctly. Unlike Dickens, Robinson is not motivated by explicit racism, social climbing, or profit, but rather a desire to evade the reality that his ghastly experiments upon the indigenous community in Tasmania are failing spectacularly at a great physical and social cost to the indigenous population. Robinson is repeatedly seen to be revising and manipulating the record of his diary. He also spends a great deal of time composing and delivering overlong sermons and lectures to a largely indifferent or coerced audience of indigenous people and white settlers. George Robinson remakes the story of Towterer, Mathinna's father, into one "of courage and nobility, the childlike fear of savages" to entertain his audience at the dinner celebrating the arrival of the new Lieutenant-Governor Lord Franklin and his wife Lady Jane. His disregard and disrespect for the life of Towterer is evidenced by the bowdlerised version of his life story and his renaming of Towterer as King Romeo. This approach to truth and storytelling is contrasted with the approach of Towterer himself, whose view of the world was one in which "the world were infinite, and all things were revealed by sacred stories" (58).

Mathinna's letter

Mathinna, the Aboriginal orphan adopted by the Franklins, shows a desire to write having witnessed Sir John and Lady Franklin engrossed in reading, poring "over the scratching, like so many plover tracks in the sand, that marked the boxes of bound paper they read" (119). She is intrigued by the obvious power of the written word, noting of the books the Franklins' read that "large currents of feeling passed through them". She appreciates "the music of

the scratching when Lady Jane read poetry” and recognises the power of writing when she witnesses Sir John giving instruction to servants after receiving information by memoranda. The representation of Mathinna’s response to literacy more closely follows colonial texts in which, as Vanessa Smith notes regarding texts that deal with cultural encounters between the indigenous Pacific and white colonisers, “European literate culture seeks to define itself against Polynesian oral culture in terms of presence and lack.” (Smith 4). Mathinna asks Lady Jane if God is writing to her “when, on going to the beach at Sandy Bay for a picnic, she had seen seagull tracks in the sand” (Flanagan *Wanting* 120). Lady Jane laughs at her question and Mathinna realises that “what was written in the world mattered not, but what was written on paper mattered immensely”. This representation of Mathinna as a receiver of texts seems to reflect both a history of representation of indigenous peoples in which “‘Natives’ are depicted as making a comical attempt to enact a literacy that they have failed to grasp” (Smith 4) as well as the common trope of the “primitive” as “natural”. However, it is important to note that it is Lady Jane who laughs at Mathinna and the real reading audience is invited to view this as dismissive. The reader is privy to Mathinna’s thought processes and is therefore less likely to interpret her “reading” of the seagull tracks as comical. Mathinna accepts Lady Jane’s diktat that she must wear shoes if she wants to be taught to write. Mathinna views the shoes as a “blindfold” that mean she must “feel her way through this strange world with her other senses ... all in order to learn a little of the white magic of paper and ink”.

Mathinna’s main act of authorship in the novel is to write a letter:

'Dear Father,' she wrote.

I am a good little girl. I do love my father. I have got a doll and shift and petticoat. I read books not birds. My father I thank thee for sleep. Come here to see me my father. I thank thee for food, I have got sore feet and shoes and stockings and I am very glad. All great ships. Tell my father two rooms. I thank thee for charity. Please sir please come back from the hunt. I am here yrs daughter

MATHINNA (Flanagan Wanting 121)

Flanagan appears to have based the *fictional* Mathinna's letter on a transcription of a letter written by the *historical* Mathinna. The letter was transcribed by Sir John Franklin's teenage daughter, Eleanor, in her journal. Eleanor is not fictionalised in *Wanting*. Penny van Toorn has noted that the earliest piece of writing produced by an Aboriginal author in Australia was also a letter, written in 1796 by Bennelong (van Toorn 53). Van Toorn, although acknowledging that Bennelong's letter is "unprecedented" as a Aboriginal authored written text also states that it "can't be regarded as an imprint of a pristine 'Aboriginal' voice". Using Nicholas Thomas' term she describes it instead as an "entangled object" – that is, a product of intercultural entanglement (54). Mathinna's letter is a similarly entangled object, like Bennelong's letter it draws "on existing models of language, genre and social etiquette" (55). van Toorn states that Bennelong must have had some understanding of what a letter was, what purpose it served in white society and some idea of the etiquette or "British colonial epistolary norms" (55). The actual Mathinna must have had a similar understanding.

There are two “Mathinna’s letters” to consider – one is the “real” historical letter (that reproduced by Eleanor Franklin in her journal) and the fictionalised version in *Wanting*. Both letters are even more “entangled” than Bennelong’s letters. The “real” letter is of course not the original letter, it is instead a transcription by a young white woman. To make this discussion more complicated I have not even been able to source Eleanor Franklin’s journals in which the transcription apparently appears. The closest I have come is a short essay/memoir by Tasmanian author Carmel Bird in which the transcription is reproduced. Bird is a white Australian author; her website tells the visitor that she “is primarily a writer of fiction”. Her essay/memoir “*The Cyclopedia: A Short Strange Secret Misty Smoky Mysterious History*” appears in the 2001 collection *Storykeepers* edited by Marion Halligan. *Storykeepers* is, as the blurb informs the reader, a collection of essays by eighteen “well-known” Australian writers “discussing the writers or stories who inspire them”. The collection is a reasonably typical example of the popular genre of personal essay and memoir.¹³ The stated aim of the writers’ essays is to answer such significant questions as “Who are we? Where do we come from? Where are we going?” and so on. The eighteen writers are roughly half writers of fiction and half academics located in Australian universities. One writer (Alexis Wright) is indigenous.

Bird’s essay focuses on the importance of Tasmania to her work as a fiction writer. She states that having lived in Tasmania for the first twenty-three years of her life she has always been fascinated by “the short, strange, secret

¹³ For a discussion on the place of memoir and the personal essay in Australian writing and thought culture, see Chapter Three at pages 107-08.

history of the place" (Bird 56). Although Bird's description of Tasmanian history as "short" appears to erase the significant pre-European history of the place, her essay is initially concerned with the erasure of several groups from *The Cyclopaedia of Tasmania* with which she was fascinated as a child. She notes that the cyclopaedia focussed on white men, with white women making only an occasional appearance: "Very, very occasionally there was a picture of a woman such as Miss Marion Oldham who was the Principal of the Wattle Grove State School, but women were generally not part of the main narrative" (58). Another notable absence, striking even to the young Bird, is "that of the Chinese population which was actually considerable" (59). Although the Cyclopaedia is recognised as exclusive and unrepresentative, Bird also declares that "it awakened and nourished [her] interest in the stories of indigenous Tasmanians" (59). The Cyclopaedia eulogises Tasmanian Aborigines as an extinct race. Bird quotes the Cyclopaedia: "SPECIAL interest attaches to the Aboriginal inhabitants of the "garden island," inasmuch as they have become utterly extinct; and that, too, within the memory of many persons who are still in the prime of life" (402). As a child, Bird was "prepared to believe what the book said" and felt that "there was something really creepy about the prose itself, this smooth, confident story of what was being named 'extinction'" (Bird 60).

The young Bird finds another book about colonial Tasmania, A. W. Loone's *Tasmania's North-East*, more satisfying; both for its "lively and personal style" and "the deep compassion and a very real sorrow" (61) of its author when discussing Aboriginal extinction. Loone's book ends with a conclusion that consists of the stories of three prominent Tasmanian Aborigines; Truganini,

King Billy and Mathinna. It is the story of Mathinna that “most deeply touched” the young Bird’s heart. Bird retells the story of Mathinna in her essay and is interested to note that she was known by several names: “Her name was to begin with ‘Mary’ but was later changed by white folk to ‘Mathinna’, suggesting to me a rather complex and bewildering confusion of black and white identity” (63). Bird had, at age twelve, read the journals of Eleanor Franklin. She notes that despite living together and sharing a governess, Eleanor Franklin only mentioned Mathinna twice in her journal which, she suggests, indicates the nature of their relationship or lack thereof (64). Bird reproduces Mathinna’s letter as copied by Eleanor, noting that it is:

... a statement in the form of a letter to Mathinna’s stepfather (her own father died when she was two). It seems to me that there is a conflation of three fathers – the stepfather, Governor Franklin, and God. The letter is dated 14 November 1841, and it reads:

Mathinna is six years old. Her mother Eveline, father, modern name Hannibal, Cape Sorrell tribe. I am good little girl. I have pen and ink cause I am good little girl. I do love my father. I have got a doll and shift and a petticoat. I read. My father I thank thee for sleep. I have got red frock. Like my father. Come here to see my father. I have got sore feet and shoes and stockings and I am very glad. All great ships. Tell my father two rooms. (64-65)

Flanagan’s fictionalised version of the letter is reproduced below. Lines in bold are those added by Flanagan that do not appear in the “real” Mathinna letter:

Dear Father,

*I am a good little girl. I do love my father. I have got a doll and shift and petticoat. **I read books not birds.** My father I thank thee for sleep. Come here to see me my father. I thank thee for food, I have got sore feet and shoes and stockings and I am very glad. All great ships. Tell my father two rooms. **I thank thee for charity.***

Please sir please come back from the hunt. I am here yrs daughter

Flanagan's version avoids the ambiguity about which father Mathinna is addressing. Just prior to writing the letter Flanagan's Mathinna does consider the new multiplicity of "fathers" in her life: "There was God her Father, and Jesus his Son, who was also a sort of a father; there was the Protector, who had the Spirit of God the Father; and then there was Sir John, who was also her father, her new father – so many fathers" (Flanagan *Wanting* 120). The letter is addressed to her "Dear Father" and Mathinna is clear which of the previously mentioned "fathers" she is addressing; her actual father "King Romeo, whom the old people called Towterer, who had gone to where all the old people go, that place of the hunt" (120). The purpose of the letter is to convey to him "her loneliness, her dreams, her wonder, her joy, her ongoing ache of sadness" (121). The buttressing of the letter with this information and with the poignant addition of the extra phrases, allows Mathinna's letter to be read as more than the tragic-comic "real" letter as received by Carmel Bird. Instead it can be seen as a reasonably clear and competent summarising of her current situation. To Lady Jane the letter is a sign that the removal from "the dying elements of her

race” is positive and has allowed her to start to become more civilised. When Towterer fails to reply to Mathinna’s letters and she discovers them stashed in a box under a skull (Towterer’s, although this fact is unbeknownst to Mathinna) she is disillusioned with writing and this disillusionment soon spreads to virtually all aspects of the white society in which she is forced to live.

After her abandonment by the Franklins, Mathinna finds herself spending time with Robert McMahon, a white Catechist who is increasingly cruel to her. In imitation of Lady Jane she begins keeping a journal in order to impress him. Her writing ability is, despite being limited, a symbol of her difference from the other indigenous people among whom she now lives. The reader is told that for Mathinna, writing is “a reward ... and a form of power” (216). Her time with the Franklins has created an association between writing and power, both of which Mathinna associates with white people. After reading Mathinna’s diary and realising her low level of literacy; Robert McMahon burns it. Mathinna’s view of writing as somehow magical persists. Walter Talba Bruney, a young Aboriginal man, is a former favourite of Robinson the Protector and has been educated by him. His ability to write is viewed by the other Aboriginal people a magical power and described as “so powerful that it had come to be regarded as a form of sorcery” (218). At the end of the novel Walter Talba Bruney garrottes Mathinna and leaves her to drown in a puddle. As he walks away from the scene he is thinking of *his* favourite text, the Bible.

Both *The Lieutenant* and *Wanting* destabilise the real world readers’ faith in the authority and morality of written texts. They draw attention to the way that written texts can be manipulated and that even so-called primary texts

are mediated. The particular effect of this kind of destabilisation in historical fiction is to encourage a critical reading of all texts which deal with history – from historical fiction, to contemporary historical work, right back to primary sources and the seemingly objective historical record. The representation of the creation and reception of texts, especially historical records, journalism and first person accounts, lend these novels a vague hint of Linda Hutcheon's historiographic metafiction, that "fictionalized history with a parodic twist" that is "obsessed with the question of how we can come to know the past today" (Hutcheon 53). They differ widely in the way they show Aboriginal readers responding to white texts. Tagaran of *The Lieutenant*, although interested in Rooke and his behaviours, does not valorise writing as a practice of a more sophisticated race. *Wanting's* Mathinna shows more of an interest in writing and reading. For Mathinna, writing is inextricably linked with whiteness and imbued with a kind of magic. Earlier in the novel she is able to act as an author herself and sees her own writing as connected to the natural world. After she is raped by Sir John and subsequently abandoned by the Franklins, Mathinna's attempts at writing become a symbol of her degradation. By the end of the novel her position as both a creator and receiver of written texts is closer to the racist tragic-comic colonial representations observed by Vanessa Smith (Smith 4).

The Lieutenant and *Wanting* both have a strong internal focus on the creation of texts and the role of the author. By drawing their own readers' attention to the process of writing they encourage sceptical reading of the novels themselves. The destabilising of historical texts which is created by the fictionalising of their creation and revealing the motivations of their

fictionalised authors creates a tension between the novel's own uses of historical texts as source material.

Chapter Two

Inside the Book II:

White Representations of the Indigenous in *The Lieutenant* and *Wanting*

As the previous chapter has shown, *The Lieutenant* and *Wanting* draw attention to the construction of written texts and question the motivations of authors. This flirtation with the boundary between historiographic metafiction and what might be called straight historical fiction encourages the reader to consider the novels as constructed texts by authors who are specifically located in a particular time and place and may have particular motivations and inspirations. The particular attention the novels pay to the representation of indigenous characters and relationships between Aboriginal characters and white characters, can both draw attention to and obscure the fact that both novels *themselves* produce representations of indigenous peoples. They draw attention to the history of negative white representation of indigenous people, by showing white characters engaged in the production of these representations. This focus on the production of representations could be seen as either drawing attention to the way in which these novels themselves are just the latest branch in a long genealogy of white representation of the indigenous. Alternatively, it could be seen that the novels obscure that fact by focussing the reading audiences' critical attention on the *fictional* representations of *fictional* indigenous people by *fictional* whites rather than on the act of representation that the novel is itself. Marcia Langton has said that, in Australia, the "most

dense relationship is not between actual people, but between white Australians and the symbols created by their predecessors. Australians do not know and relate to Aboriginal people. They relate to stories told by former colonists" (Langton *'Well, I Heard It on the Radio'* 40).

These "post-colonial" novels contain a tension between desiring to critically reveal the history of white representation of Aborigines while inevitably creating further white representations. Langton notes that textual representations of Aboriginal people by white or non-Aboriginal people objectify Aborigines, although the way that these white accounts perform this objectification can be obscured by rhetoric:

Representational and aesthetic statements of Aboriginal people by non-Aboriginal people transform the Aboriginal reality. They are *accounts*. It is these representations that Aboriginal as subject becomes, under the white gaze imagining the Aboriginal, the object. The audience, however, might be entirely unaware that they are observing an *account*, usually by the authorial We of the Other. (Langton *'Well, I Heard It on the Radio'* 40)

However, works that verge into the territory of historiographic metafiction draw attention to this objectification through "self-conscious fictionalisation" that "makes us aware of the act of fictionalisation, of the distinction between the author and the subject, by using devices such as artifice" (Langton *'Well, I Heard It on the Radio'* 40).

Wanting and *The Lieutenant* both feature relationships between adult white males and indigenous adolescent females. In *The Lieutenant* the developing relationship between Lieutenant Daniel Rooke, a Royal Marines officer and astronomer sent to New South Wales as part of the First Fleet, and Tagaran, a Cadigal Aboriginal girl, forms the emotional core of the narrative. Rooke and Tagaran's relationship is a fictionalisation of the historically documented relationship between British naval officer and scientist William Dawes and an Aboriginal girl, Patyegarang. In the novel's dedication Grenville states that the "story" of Dawes, Patyegarang and the Cadigal people inspired her "work of fiction". *Wanting* fictionalises the lives of several historical figures; chief among them is Mathinna, an Aboriginal child "given" in 1841 as a gift to Sir John Franklin Lieutenant Governor of Tasmania and his wife Lady Jane Franklin.

Skin on skin: first contact and the indigenous girl

The novels are both aware of the history of white representation of indigenous peoples that they inherit. Grenville and Flanagan differ in the mechanics of their representation of indigenous characters. They each represent a different approach that can be taken by a white writer writing about indigenous people. At one extreme we have Grenville's "unknowable Aborigines". Grenville is acutely aware of her position as a white woman in Australia and seeks to actively engage in national discussions about identity and history in her fiction. She has been explicit about her attempts to write sensitively about Aboriginal people and Australian history as a white Australian of settler and convict descent. She has written at some length in her 2006 "writing memoir" *Searching for the Secret River* about her relationship to

Aboriginal people as both a writer and a politically engaged white Australian citizen. *Searching for the Secret River* covers her experiences while writing her popular 2005 novel *The Secret River* from the moment of inspiration to the submission of final proofs to the publisher. In *Searching for the Secret River*, Grenville states that she cannot and does not desire to write from the point of view of Aboriginal characters: "I'd always known I wasn't going to try to enter the consciousness of the Aboriginal characters. I didn't know or understand enough, and felt I never would" (Grenville *Searching for the Secret River* 193).

Despite her reservations about writing from the perspective of Aboriginal characters, Grenville does not want to erase their presence from her writing. She sees including Aboriginal characters and history as an explicitly political act that is a reaction to the history of erasure of Aboriginal experience in both her own family history as well as wider white Australian culture: "I'd seen that there was an empty space in my own family story where the Aboriginal people belonged. The whole point of writing the story was to fill that space" (193). As part of her research Grenville takes a research trip to the Kimberley to observe "people of unmixed Aboriginal descent, living in traditional ways" (193). The following passages where Grenville watches a group of Aboriginal people make for uncomfortable reading: "Their skin was as black as shadows. Their faces – I glanced quickly and then away – folded in on themselves, unreadable" (194). Grenville emphasises her inability to interpret the gestures, language, art and even facial expressions of the Aboriginal people as she others and exoticises them. Despite her careful observation of their bodies, movements and behaviours she is no closer to any meaningful

understanding. Her examination of the Aboriginal people whose home she has visited has unfortunate echoes of colonial representations of Aboriginal people. The trip to the Kimberly seems to undermine any remaining confidence Grenville has in depicting Aboriginal characters in her novel. On her return to Sydney she decides to remove all the Aboriginal dialogue from her manuscript: "It might be historically accurate to have the Aboriginal characters speaking broken English, but it made them less sympathetic, more caricatured. Their inside story – their responses, their thoughts, their feelings – all that was for someone else to tell, someone who had the right to enter that world and the knowledge to do it properly" (198).

Grenville adopts a similar approach to depicting Aboriginal characters in *The Lieutenant*. The relationship between the Aboriginal girl Tagaran and the British officer Lieutenant Daniel Rooke forms the core of the narrative. Although Aboriginal characters are given a much more central role in the novel, Grenville maintains her stance of not writing from their perspective. The most significant difference in Grenville's writing of Aboriginal characters in *The Lieutenant* as compared to *The Secret River* is that *The Lieutenant's* Aboriginal characters are given dialogue. There are several reasons that Grenville's objections to providing Aboriginal dialogue in *The Secret River* do not apply to *The Lieutenant*. First, *The Lieutenant* is a novel about first contact. The Aboriginal characters do not speak any English when they first appear in the novel. This allows Grenville to avoid her concerns about depicting the Aboriginal characters as speaking broken English and thereby rendering them as unsympathetic caricatures to the reading audience. Second, as she states in

the “Author’s Note” to *The Lieutenant*, Grenville takes all the Aboriginal dialogue in this novel from the notebooks of William Dawes (the historical basis for Rooke), along with some direct quotations from the works of Watkin Tench (Grenville *The Lieutenant* 306). It seems that this close adherence to historical sources has given Grenville the confidence and authority she needed to assign dialogue to her Aboriginal characters.

There is a tension between Grenville seeking refuge in the historical sources as a source for Aboriginal dialogue and the ways in which she depicts the creation of these very documents within the novel (as discussed in Chapter One of this thesis). Indeed, the writing of Watkin Tench is the most undermined by *The Lieutenant* (via the fictional proxy Lieutenant Silk) yet the reader is asked to view Grenville’s quotation from Tench as lending some kind of authenticity to her historical fiction.

The Lieutenant is a “first contact” novel, in that it deals with perhaps the most famous moment of contact in the history of white and Aboriginal Australians, the arrival of the First Fleet in New South Wales in 1788. The first depiction of Aboriginal characters comes on page fifty-one of *The Lieutenant*, one sixth of the way into the novel. As the ship *Sirius* enters Sydney Cove, Rooke sights his first Aborigines:

Rooke saw men running along the shore, shaking spears. He could hear them on the wind calling the same word over and over: *Warra! Warra!* He did not think that they were calling *Welcome! Welcome!* He suspected a polite translation might be something like *Go to the Devil!* (51)

The reader has followed Rooke's progress from his boyhood in Portsmouth and now makes "first contact" with Aborigines alongside him. The Grenville's choice not to write from the point of view of the Aboriginal characters leaves the reader with the same lack of knowledge as Rooke, unable to interpret these first words. On meeting other Aboriginal men at closer range Rooke finds their bodies as uninterpretable as their words: "The men were dark and naked, their faces shadowed in the sunlight ... They watched, densely black in the sunlight" (52).

Although these are her character's observations about the unreadability of the "densely black" Aboriginal body, they closely mirror Grenville's own writings about her visit to the Kimberly in *Searching for The Secret River*. Also described in *Searching for The Secret River* is the Grenville experience of her own "first contact" moment. During the 2000 March for Reconciliation on the Sydney Harbour Bridge when she notices some Aboriginal people observing the marchers. Her eyes meet that of a particular Aboriginal woman: "Our eyes met and we shared one of those moments of intensity – a pulse of connectedness. We smiled, held each other's gaze, I think perhaps we gestured with our hands, the beginning of a wave" (Grenville *Searching for the Secret River* 12). Grenville's thoughts immediately turn to the arrival of the First Fleet, reinforcing the image of first contact. Grenville feels anxious about the fact that her convict ancestor Solomon Wiseman and the Aboriginal woman's ancestors may have had a similar moment of meeting: "I was sure that Solomon Wiseman wouldn't have smiled and waved at any Aboriginal man watching him come ashore" (12). The effect of this thought upon Grenville is profound: "In that

instant of putting my own ancestor together with this woman's ancestor, everything swivelled: the country, the place, my sense of myself in it" (13).

Although Grenville sees some indication of progress in Australian race relations (the smiling, the waving), in *Searching for The Secret River* there is a sense that white Australians, even those as politically engaged as Grenville, are stuck in an ongoing moment of first contact. Grenville experiences her own personal moment of first contact on the bridge, which inspires her to research her own family history in Australia, which in turn inspires her to write historical first contact narratives about Australia (*The Secret River* and *The Lieutenant*).

The relationship between Rooke and Tagaran seems to suggest a model for relations between white and settler societies. It certainly seems more positive than that suggested by *The Secret River* where tensions between Aborigines and settlers reach a flash point at a horrific massacre where an entire Aboriginal settlement, including women and children, are slaughtered. The massacre removes the problem of contested land use but leaves the settler Thornhill uneasy on his new land despite his great prosperity. Grenville was criticised by conservative historian John Hirst for comments made in a much criticised radio interview with Ramona Koval of the ABC where she said: "You want to go back 200 years and say to the settlers, 'Look, this is how the Aborigines are,' and to the Aborigines, 'Look, this is why the settlers are behaving the way they are. Let's understand this. There's no need for all this brutality'" (Koval "Interview with Kate Grenville"). Hirst provides this quote as evidence that Grenville is suffering under the misapprehensions of a "liberal

fantasy” about the nature of settlement: “Here is the liberal faith that conflict comes from misunderstanding Worrying over conquests; wishing it were peaceful”(Hirst 84-85).¹⁴ It is also interesting to note that Hirst sees politically inclined white liberal Australians as caught within a perpetual “first contact” moment: “one group has just stepped off the boat and confronts the traditional owners of the country. That’s where the liberal imagination is fixed” (Hirst 95).

It is not only right-wing historians who are critical of this supposed fixation of the “liberal imagination” on the moment of first contact. Chris Healy sees the recurrence of “first contact” narratives in white writing as a result of the relative lack of any representations of Aboriginal people in Australia. He calls this invisibility of Aboriginal people in the white Australian imagination a “rhetorical erasure” of Aborigines and states that it “has flourished at the same time as it has been flatly contradicted by the persistence of indigenous being. Indigenous people and Aborigines just keep on appearing, often in the eyes of settler Australians as if for the first time” (Healy 10).

If Hirst sees the mark of “liberal fantasy” upon *The Secret River*, *The Lieutenant* could be seen as Grenville attempting to explore the ways in which good faith conversation and a desire to understand each other could positively impact upon the colonising process. Grenville’s Rooke is a man of reason, compassion, curiosity and (oddly for a Royal Marine) pacifism. He appreciates and is interested in the culture of the local Cadigal people. His desire to communicate with and understand them is strong enough to motivate him to

¹⁴ Hirst’s “liberal fantasy” criticism of Grenville has been attacked by another critic of Grenville, Inga Clendinnen. Clendinnen’s criticism of Grenville’s interview with Romana Koval is explored further in Chapter Three. For Clendinnen’s response to Hirst see Inga Clendinnen, “The History Question: Who Owns the Past?,” *Quarterly Essay*.23 (2006): 48-57.

create a dictionary of their language. Indeed Rooke feels the impulse to record the language as if it is a calling: “everything in his life had been leading here. He saw it as clearly as a map, the map of his life and his character. ... Difference held no fear for him. He knew that strangeness was commonplace when you inhabited it” (Grenville *The Lieutenant* 152-53). The possibility for dialogue seems greater than in *The Secret River* where the main character William Thornhill is an ordinary man who finds wealth and stability by his complicity in oppressing the local Aboriginal people and alienating them from their land. However, Rooke’s increasing knowledge of the language of the Cadigal does not lead to any sort of resolution or accord. Rooke comes to realise that the conflicting aims of the two groups are irreconcilable. He imagines what the occupation of the white settlers must look like to Warungin, a Cadigal elder: “Uninvited guests had arrived in his home. They had been pleasant, offered small gifts. But then they had stayed, longer than visitors should, and rearranged the place to suit themselves” (Grenville *The Lieutenant* 242).

The Secret River and *Searching for The Secret River* show the moment of first contact and the recognition of profound and perhaps unbreachable difference between white settlers and Aboriginal people. *The Lieutenant* attempts to break from this eternal first contact moment to suggest a model for relationships between white Australians and indigenous Australians based upon the historical relationship of Daniel Rooke and Tagaran. Representing contact between indigenous and settler societies by a relationship between a white man and an indigenous girl is no new idea, as can be seen by the earlier mention of the Inkle and Yarico fable. If we choose to read *The Lieutenant*

through the lens of these oft repeated tropes, Tagaran can be easily cast as the “Indian maid”.

However, Grenville seems to deliberately disrupt the expectations of this kind of reading. The most obvious way in which Grenville’s narrative differs from the established romance trope is that Grenville goes to some effort to keep her cross-cultural love story resolutely platonic. Although historians have not come to a consensus over whether the relationship between the historical William Dawes and Patyegarang was sexual, Grenville is clear that the relationship of Rooke and Tagaran is not. Grenville gives Tagaran’s age as “perhaps ten or twelve years old” (Grenville *The Lieutenant* 147), at the younger end of the scale for the possible age of the historical Patyegarang, who is generally supposed to have been around fifteen at the time of her relationship with Dawes (Gibson). *The Lieutenant* makes it clear that Rooke has no sexual intentions towards Tagaran. Her body is described as a child’s and Rooke repeatedly associates her with his sister Anne and categorises their relationship as brotherly: “She was like Anne had been at ten or twelve, was his instant thought. Dark skinned, naked, she was nothing like Anne, yet he recognised his sister in her” (Grenville *The Lieutenant* 147). Despite Rooke’s innocent and fraternal feelings being made explicit, the commodity of sex still brings pressure to bear upon the text. The pressure to conform to the expectation of the sex commodity, whether by rape or romance, comes from within the text as well. Rooke is concerned to make his intentions clear and is mortified when he feels that he may have blurred them:

he took his jacket from its peg and put it around her. For an instant he felt her narrow shoulders under his hands, felt the life of her, her breathing self, right next to him. Then she twirled like someone dancing a minuet, taking hold of the collar of the jacket as she did and handing it back to him

Straight away he regretted that momentary touch on her shoulders, He might think of her as his sister, but Tagaran was not his sister. He wanted to explain, *I have a younger sister you remind me of.* (178-79)

Rooke's feelings toward Tagaran are also characterised as fatherly (191). Rooke is distressed when other characters assume that his relationship with Tagaran is sexual. On reading Rooke's language notebooks which document his conversations with Tagaran, Rooke's friend Silk (a fictionalisation of Watkin Tench) infers a physical relationship: "My word, but you are ahead of the rest of us here. Are Mrs Butcher's beauties not enough for you? What a sly dog you are!" Rooke finds the implication repulsive and is particularly disgusted by the thought of Tagaran as a sexual being: "he ... had a picture of Tagaran – some leering, grotesque Tagaran – flaunting herself at him" (208). Grenville generally avoids descriptions of Tagaran's body, perhaps to emphasize Rooke's disinterest in her sexually. More often her face is described, usually in some variation of "bright", "expressive", "vivid" or "curious". These descriptors emphasise Tagaran's most important qualities, her curiosity and intellect.

The ability of the Aboriginal people to go unseen in the bush is highlighted repeatedly in the novel and is sometimes attributed to their dark

skin: "he realised that he was being watched. Two native men were standing a short distance away, as still as rocks, men whose dark skin made them part of the landscape" (69). Before the expedition to capture six Aboriginal men toward the end of the novel Rooke ponders how difficult it will be to find the men in the bush if they choose to hide, watching the hunting party "from behind trees and rocks, their skins part of the speckled light and shade of the place" (247). As has been mentioned earlier, on first coming "*face to face with natives!*" (52) Rooke describes them as silently watching him, "densely black in the sunlight". Throughout the course of the novel Rooke attempts to overcome the unreadable alien blackness of the local people by his sincere efforts to learn the language. He imagines that his efforts will somehow facilitate greater understanding between the settlers and the indigenous inhabitants. However, by the time of the expedition to capture alive six Aboriginal men, or bring back their heads in bags, all chance for understanding and harmony seems lost. As Rooke, in despair at the actions of himself and his colleagues, attempts to cleanse himself both physically and spiritually by bathing at night in the ocean, he looks "back at the dense blackness of the land" (278). This direct echo of the earlier description of the Aboriginal men seems to have two main effects; it strongly associates the Aboriginal people with the land and it emphasises the ultimate impossibility of gaining true knowledge, understanding, or mastery of either the indigenous people or their land.

The last image of an Aboriginal character in the novel is that of Tagaran waving off Rooke's ship as he leaves New South Wales for good, a final merging of indigenous person with land: "Soon Tagaran become [sic] indistinguishable

from the rocks around her, the rocks indistinguishable from the headland, the headland nothing more than a distant part of the landscape" (302).

In *Wanting*, Richard Flanagan takes a different approach to Grenville in his representation of Aboriginal characters. Unlike *The Lieutenant*, which is written in the limited third-person, *Wanting* is written in the omniscient third-person allowing Flanagan to write from the point of view of all of his main characters. He does not seem to share Grenville's anxiety about writing from the point of view of an Aboriginal character, as one of his central characters is Mathinna, a fictionalised version of an actual Aboriginal girl briefly adopted by Sir John and Lady Franklin during John Franklin's tenure as the Lieutenant Governor of Van Diemen's Land. The novel alternates between chapters set in Tasmania from 1836 to 1843, and chapters set in 1854 London. The London chapters deal with the breakdown of Charles Dickens' marriage and his affair with a teenage actress, Ellen Ternan, and his engagement by Lady Jane Franklin to defend her husband from accusations of following the fatal failure of his 1845 expedition to find the Northwest Passage. The Tasmanian chapters are chiefly from the point of view of Mathinna, the Franklins, and the "Protector" of Aborigines, George Augustus Robinson.

Savage and civilised, natural and naked, bones and bodies: *Wanting* represents the indigenous

The indigenous as savage

In his representation of indigenous characters, or more particularly, the way in which white characters speak about indigenous characters, Flanagan

engages with ideas about savagery – especially the idea of the noble savage. Ideas about savagery and civility are the central theme of the novel. There are three characters that appear to have the strongest views on the nature of the savage as opposed to the nature of the civilised person of society. Aboriginal Protector George Augustus Robinson is engaged in a misguided paternalistic project of “collecting” the surviving Aboriginal people of Van Diemen’s Land and creating a kind of reserve or village in which they can live and be saved. The results of this experiment are horrific, resulting in widespread death by disease. The first chapter is narrated from the point of view of Robinson as he ponders the aims of his mission. Robinson’s mission is a “civilising” one and Aboriginal people are variously described in this first chapter as “tame blacks”, “wild blacks”, “savages” and “his sable charges”. The first chapter sets up the first opposition of many in the novel between the supposedly savage and civil. The effects of Robinson’s attempts to raise “his sable charges to the level of English civilisation” are shown to be grotesque and horrific. The chapter is almost satirical at times as it uses Robinson’s naïve and paternalistic mission to reveal the absurd and flawed nature of the English model:

Were his people not knowledgeable of God and Jesus, as was evidenced by their ready and keen answers to the Catechist’s questions, and evinced in their enthusiastic hymn-singing? Did they not take keenly to the weekly market, where they traded skins and shell necklaces for beads and tobacco and the like? Other than his black brethren kept dying almost daily, it had to be

admitted that the settlement was satisfactory in every way.

(Flanagan *Wanting* 2)

Robinson feels fond and paternal towards his “savages” and views them as somewhere between children and animals. The most obvious marker of this is in the way he renames them. Robinson’s charges are given names from Greek mythology or literature. When Lady Jane attempts to engage him in conversation about Mathinna’s new name, Leda, it is revealed that he does not even know the myths behind the names. His unthinking and disconnected translation of Western tradition to Australia is an obvious parallel for the imposition of policy and social values on the indigenous people.

Robinson believes that the savage can be civilised and that this is a good and moral project. The fictional Charles Dickens has stricter views on the nature of savagery. He sees the dividing line between savagery and civility as clear and permanent. Dickens’ views on the nature of savagery are stated repeatedly throughout the novel but are first provided in conversation between Dickens and Lady Jane. Dickens plans to mount a public defence of the late Sir John Franklin against accusations of cannibalism in the last days of his fatal expedition to the Northwest Passage. This defence is largely based on two racist ideas; one, that the cannibalism was the work of the local indigenous people the “Esquimaux”, and that the Esquimaux provided false testimony to Westerners who were investigating the deaths. In the novel, Dickens is explicit in his view that the immoral savages have slandered the memory of the Franklin expedition: “Here we have a race of thieving, murdering cannibals asserting that England’s finest were transformed into thieving, murdering cannibals – what remarkable

coincidence!" (31). Dickens sees the difference between the savage and the civilised as one of control, the ability to conquer desire with reason. He sees the savage as controlled entirely by passion and the white man as liberated by civilisation. The views on race and savagery espoused by this fictionalised Dickens in *Wanting*, are also found in the writings of the actual historical Charles Dickens. Dickens ran his defence of the Franklin expedition over two issues of his *Household Words* journal.¹⁵ Dickens expressed extreme vitriol against the "Esquimaux" and advised his readers not to trust the word of the "savage", "firstly because he is a liar; secondly, because he is a boaster; thirdly, because he often talks figuratively; fourthly, because he is given to a superstitious notion". The deities recognised by the "savage" are described as "barbarous, wide-mouthed, goggle-eyed gods". *Wanting* shows the fictionalised Dickens in the act of writing the *Household Words* articles. Here, Dickens' hatred of the savage becomes associated with his misogyny:

He paused, his attention momentarily distracted by an odd thought.

'We believe every savage to be in her heart covetous, treacherous, and cruel.'

Realising his error, he crossed out *her* and wrote above it *his*.
But did these words not sum up his own folly so many years before? (Flanagan *Wanting* 42)

¹⁵ The article titled "The Lost Arctic Voyagers" ran over two successive Saturdays in *Household Words*: Charles Dickens, "The Lost Arctic Voyagers," *Household Words*, 245 (1854). Charles Dickens, "The Lost Arctic Voyagers," *Household Words*, 246 (1854).

Flanagan's novel depicts the fictional Dickens' distaste for the savage as being rooted in the savage's perceived lack of control over their desires. He associates the negative qualities of the savage with the qualities of women. Yet, he despises women (specifically here Maria Beadnell, the object of his youthful affections) partly for the way in which they cause him to lose control over *his* desires. Dickens remembers the loss of control with great shame and embarrassment, a terrible slip from the civil toward the savage: "wasn't that control precisely what marked the English out as different from savages?" (43). Maria Beadnell is further associated with Dickens' grotesque savages by Flanagan's use of cannibalism as metaphor: "Maria Beadnell and her vile family had treated him as little better than a corpse to play with, to feast upon for their own amusement" (43).

Throughout the novel men are extremely resentful toward women when those women have caused them to lose control over their own behaviour. Dickens feels anger toward the memory of Maria Beadnell and is cruel to his wife Catherine, who he eventually leaves. Dickens' resentment of Catherine builds and he begins to blame all his problems on her, not just as an individual but as a woman, and more specifically, a wife: "I am obliged to live in a home with a wife. They say Christ was a good man, but did he ever live with a woman?" (77). While the racist views of characters within the novel are shown to be hypocritical or absurd by revealing their own contradictory thoughts or behaviours, Dickens' misogyny is explicitly opposed by the views of his friend Wilkie Collins. Although Collins does not openly reprimand Dickens, the reader is privy to his thoughts: "Wilkie liked women. He found Dickens' railing against

women difficult. Unlike his older friend, he was neither sentimental nor conventional about them" (77). Even within the world of the narrative Dickens' views are shown to be old fashioned and regressive. The other notable example of a man resenting a female for causing him to lose control of his impulses is Sir John Franklin. After his rape of the ten year old Mathinna, Sir John comes to blame her for not only his actions in the rape, but his downfall as Lieutenant Governor: "The savage had caused his downfall ... yes, it was her whose actions had fed the rumours, armed his enemies, created the scandal that had led to this pretty pass" (176).

For both Franklin and Dickens the Arctic far North becomes an idealised male space, free from the contaminating influence of women. Franklin longs "to flee back to the comforting old dream of being with a small band of men in the ice" and Dickens' attempts to convey the appeal to Wilkie: "'Do you know what appeals so much about the Arctic?' he said, and smiled once more. 'There are no women there.'" If some of the male characters combine their views of the "savage" with misogyny, so Lady Franklin describes men in a similar way: "men as weaker – depraved, certainly – and in servitude to an uncontrollable animality" (55).

Mathinna is the central indigenous character in the novel and the ways in which she is represented in some ways reflect familiar tropes. Mathinna is represented as the Indian Princess, the noble savage, marked both by her high birth (she is the daughter of Towterer/King Romeo, a chief) but also by her manner. When Sir John and Lady Franklin first lay eyes on her she is described thus "[t]he child wore a long necklace of some beauty around her neck and a

large white kangaroo skin over one shoulder. She stood out not because of her simple but striking costume, nor her diminutive size, nor her big dark eyes. Rather it was a certain, indefinable attitude" (49). Mathinna is also referred to as a princess toward the end of the novel. In her degraded state, an alcoholic prostitute, the term is meant to mock: "She was the Governor's pet piccaninny princess, you know, all pearly smile and tarry flashness... . But now she's lost her looks" (229). When Garney Welch discovers Mathinna's garrotted, drowned corpse in the street he recalls his last sight of her alive, dancing drunkenly in the street her dance "part native jig and something of a toff's dance, half-hyena and fully a princess" (251).

The indigenous as natural

Mathinna is portrayed as having a deeper connection to the land than the white characters, the most obvious indication of this is in her reluctance to wear shoes; she does not want any artificial barrier to come between her and the earth. Mathinna's shoelessness represents a direct and literal connection to the land which unsettles the white characters, such as Montague: "he pointed to the ground, where they could see her naked toes forking their way in and out of the mud" (133).

For Lady Jane, Mathinna's refusal to wear shoes represents the failure of her civilising experience. To the reader, Mathinna's resistance represents resistance to the colonial project, an intrinsic connection between indigenous characters and their land, and an absurd focus on trivial details at the expense of cross-cultural understanding by the white administration in colonial Australia. In the notes to *Wanting* provided on his website (Flanagan directs

readers here in his "Author's Note"), Flanagan notes that the historical Mathinna's story had been largely forgotten for a century and had "survived only in the enigmatic painting made of her as a child in a red dress by the convict artist Thomas Bock" (Flanagan "Postscript"). Also on his website Flanagan reproduces a piece of writing by Lady Franklin in which she discusses the aim of the, as yet unpainted, commissioned portrait:

Mathinna's portrait will show the influence of some degree of civilisation upon a child of as pure a race as they, and who in spite of every endeavour, and though entirely apart from her own people, retains much of the unconquerable spirit of the Savage; extreme uncertainty of will and temper, great want of perseverance and attention, little if any self-control, and great acuteness of the senses and facility of imitation. (Flanagan "Postscript")

In the novel, the painting is completed just before the ball and Sir John's rape of Mathinna. Mathinna refuses to wear shoes even for the painting and a copy with shoes added is found to "have somehow lost the delightful spontaneity of the original" (Flanagan *Wanting* 197). On board the boat, as they sail away from Van Diemen's Land, Sir John presents Lady Jane with the original portrait but in an oval frame that "neatly cut Mathinna off at her ankles and finally covered her bare feet" (197). The framed portrait is comforting to Sir John as it restores his image of Mathinna to when she was, in his words, "at her most admirable" before "her sorry decline". For Lady Jane the framed image is a reminder of her ultimate failure in "civilising" Mathinna.

When Mathinna first appears in the novel she is running through long wallaby grass. Although she is running for help for her father who is dying, the pleasure and sensation of being in the natural world overtakes her:

she loved the sensation of the soft threads of fine grass feathering beads of water onto her calves, and the feel of the earth beneath her bare feet, wet and mushy in winter, dry and dusty in summer. She was seven years old, the earth was still new and extraordinary in its delights, the earth still ran up through her feet to her head into the sun, and it was as possible to be exhilarated by running as it was to be terrified by the reason she had to run and not stop running. (9)

Here, Mathinna is shown to be in tune with the natural world and her physical sensations have primacy over her thoughts. Her heightened physicality is emphasised by the repeated scenes in which she dances. These dancing scenes mark important points in her life; she dances at the arrival of the Franklins, at the ball before being raped by Sir John, and just before her death. When Lady Jane sees Mathinna dancing at the arrival function, she is impressed by her dancing, particularly in Mathinna's ability to convey feeling by dance. Lady Jane remarks to her husband that it could almost be said that "her body thinks" (53).

The indigenous as body

If Mathinna's body is important to the way she communicates with people and communes with the land, the other significant Aboriginal bodies in

the novel are Robinson's dissection subjects. Aside from Mathinna, the main way in which Aboriginal bodies are present in the novel are as corpses and skeletons, and those are usually in pieces. The dissection of bodies by Robinson, who is not skilled enough to diagnose the cause of the deaths he has facilitated, and the boiling down of Towterer's skull so that Lady Jane can keep it and take it to several phrenologists who can come to no useful conclusions, emphasises the arbitrary and pointless cruelty of the white administration in Tasmania.

The degradations suffered by Aboriginal bodies at the hands of white people in the novel also serve to highlight the irony and arrogance of Dickens' attempts to blame the cannibalisation of Franklin's expedition on the indigenous people of that region. The bodies of Aborigines, both living and dead, become a site on which white people enact their desires and play at roles they cannot fulfil in white society. Robinson plays at doctor and ruler, and along with Lady Jane, plays as scientist. Both Lady Jane and Sir John play at parenthood. Sir John plays at a kind of romance with Mathinna until his rape pushes the act too far and the delusions, including those of Lady Jane, are destroyed. All of this serves to underline Flanagan's interest in the nature of savagery and civilisation.

The indigenous as animal

While Mathinna's elevated social standing and her intrinsic nobility are repeatedly suggested by other characters' descriptions of her, she is more frequently described to with reference to her physicality or in relation to animals. From the first pages of the book Aboriginal people are associated and described as animals. Terry Goldie notes that "all such figurative associations between indigene and animal, reinforces the image of the indigene as nature"

(Goldie 45). The first instance of this is from the point of view of Robinson, who views the Aboriginal people he has “collected” as either “tame blacks” or “wild blacks” (Flanagan *Wanting* 1). Robinson also notes that some whites hunt Aboriginal people and shoot them down “with as much glee as they hunted kangaroo, and with as little care” (11). When Lady Jane sees Mathinna dancing at her arrival she is moved by her dancing and appearance to remark that “you almost wish to hold the little wild beast and pet her” (51). In fact, it is Lady Franklin’s quasi-scientific curiosity that has led the Franklins to visit the Aboriginal settlement on Flinders Island in the first place. Lady Franklin approaches the visit as if it were to a zoo having declared the settlement to be “a scientific curiosity as remarkable as the quagga roaming free in the Menagerie du Jardin des Plantes” (56).

Lady Jane Franklin often associates Mathinna with animals, more frequently as it becomes clear that her attempts to “civilise” her have failed. Often she is compared with exotic animals in order to emphasise her difference, such as at Lady Jane’s first meeting with Mathinna after becoming her “mother”. To Lady Franklin “[t]he black child standing in front of her seemed as mysterious as a lynx from Siberia or a jaguar from the New World” (116). Early on in their relationship Lady Jane is enraged when someone does not acknowledge Mathinna’s status as her adopted daughter, instead asking if she is to be Lady Franklin’s pageboy: “‘As though the child were a Gibraltar monkey,’ raged Lady Jane to her husband. ‘Just some exotic ornament to our vanity’” (123). However, by the end of their residence in Tasmania Mathinna’s status is exactly that: “she was some other creature whom they came to regard as they

did several other pets around Government House – the albino possum, her cockatoo, a wombat – an exotic object of amusement” (132).

More specifically, Mathinna is repeatedly associated with kangaroos or wallabies. When she is still an infant she is abducted and used as bait to lure her parents into Robinson’s care. She is delivered to him by one of his “tame blacks”, Black Ajax, in a sling made from a fresh kangaroo skin (64). The association of Mathinna with kangaroos or wallabies reaches its peak at the masque ball. Mathinna wears a Wallaby mask, Lady Franklin a fox mask and Sir John a black swan mask.

The ball is where Mathinna becomes most aware of her status as a black child in the white community. This feeling of otherness and alienation, combined with her natural use of dance as a form of personal expression, her enjoyment and pleasure in dancing, and being admired for dancing lead to the moment in which she breaks away from the proscribed moves of the English dance: “Mathinna realised she was no longer holding Sir John’s hands nor in step with anyone else, as she had so patiently practised, but was moving to something more fundamental and deep-rooted” (150). At the moment when Mathinna breaks completely from the English dance she feels a connection to her land despite being on board a ship: “she felt not the wax with which the oak deck had been prepared but the earth of Van Diemen’s Land”. The repeated motifs of bare feet and the kangaroo also come into play: “she kicked off her shoes and became a kangaroo absolutely still, except for its head, click-clicking around, then a stamp, two leaps, and she was flying” (151). This moment of liberation and flight calls back to the introductory image of Mathinna running

through the wallaby grass and pondering the possibility of flight: “if she ran that little bit faster, she might also fly and reach her destination quicker. Then she remembered that only the dead flew and put all thought of flying out of her mind.” (9). The image of flying carries with it contrasting meanings, on one hand liberation, on the other, death. As her dance goes on Mathinna feels something ominous “she was no longer leaping and flying but falling and falling, and hands were coming to her, white hands, hands in awful glove like rags used to dress the dying – and was she dying?” (151). This negative turn following the joyful image of Mathinna’s dance on the ship foreshadows the scene that follows the dance scene, and in some ways *does* cause her death, her rape by Sir John.

As Sir John lies dying in the frozen Arctic, his legs grotesque and stinking stumps, his mind is full of positive images of Tasmania of “Eden after the rain” of “good things, cockatoos and whales and children”. However his final thought is of Mathinna, her “rumpled red dress, a whimpering wallaby face” (177). This image gives him “a sense of his own horror” and he dies. This final image shows Mathinna the girl as a hurt, vulnerable, and indigenous animal.

Marcia Langton in her seminal work ‘*Well, I heard it on the radio and I saw it on the television...*’ discusses the iconic Australian film *Jedda*, about a half-caste Aboriginal girl whose departure from her white station home with what Robinson of *Wanting* might describe as a “wild black” leads to her death. Langton says that *Jedda* is the reflection of the white nightmare of the return to primitivism of the adopted Aboriginal child. In *Wanting* Lady Jane has the same “nightmare” regarding Mathinna and eventually surrenders to it in abandoning her. However, *Wanting* reveals Lady Jane’s “nightmare” as racist and formed in

an ignorance of Mathinna's culture and world view and disregard for her comfort and happiness. In both *Wanting* and *The Lieutenant* this idea is reversed, particularly in the case of *Wanting*. *Wanting*, which is explicitly concerned with the concepts of savagery and civility, almost directly reverses what Langton calls *Jedda's* "fascination with the 'primitive'" (47). Langton describes a present day response to *Jedda* by Aboriginal artist Tracy Moffat's short film *Night Cries, A Rural Tragedy* "as an inversion of colonial history is to play out the worst fantasies of those who took Aboriginal children from their natural parents to assimilate and 'civilise' them" (47). Although the "worst nightmare" that Langton suggests is the idea that a white adoptive parent may end up relying on the adopted black child as their only companion and carer, Flanagan's novel could be seen also as "an inversion of colonial history". The racist, colonial discourse represents the Aboriginal woman or female child as "black velvet"¹⁶ temptress who would seduce the white man from civility and reason. Sir John increasingly sees Mathinna as "black velvet", with his sexualised view of her as a seductress reaching its peak at the masque ball. His sexualised view of the child Mathinna is disturbing: "by nine he noticed her budding beneath her virginal white-silk Regency dress By ten there was a swelling suggestion of breasts and, with it a changed attitude – more knowing, more devious" (Flanagan *Wanting* 141) The rape scene shows Franklin's projection of sexual desire onto Mathinna as he ogles "her diminutive body, her exposed black ankles, her dirty little feet, the suggestive valley of her red dress between her thin legs" (152). The reader clearly sees Sir John Franklin as

¹⁶ Langton describes the term "black velvet" as connoting "the lascivious white male gaze on Aboriginal women" and states that the term "has passed into 'redneckspeak', and the subliminal power of the concept also ricochets around most of the sexual images of Aboriginal women" (Langton *Well, I Heard It on the Radio* 50).

wholly responsible for raping Mathinna and, on his death bed; he comes to see himself as guilty too.

Summary

Both *The Lieutenant* and *Wanting* draw attention to past representation of indigenous people by white writers by invoking some of the tropes most commonly used to portray indigenous people. Indigenous people in the novels are represented as natural; as having a special connection to the land or of even being a part of the natural landscape. In *The Lieutenant*, Aboriginal people's bodies are exoticised and represented by white characters as impenetrable and unreadable. *The Lieutenant* is essentially a novel of "first contact", which invokes the many occasions that indigenous people have been represented as just coming into existence in white imaginations.

Wanting represents indigenous characters through several different tropes. Mathinna, like the indigenous characters in *The Lieutenant* is portrayed as having a essential connection to the land and the natural world. She is often described as being like an animal, most commonly as a wallaby or kangaroo. The representation of Mathinna as an animal tends to be overtly racist when focalized through the white characters. Through the character of Sir John, Mathinna is represented as the sexually available "black velvet" woman. However, his rape of her shatters this representation.

Chapter Three

Outside the Book:

Historical Fiction in Public

So far, this thesis has concentrated on the way in which Kate Grenville's *The Lieutenant* and Richard Flanagan's *Wanting* engage with ideas about Australian history and ideas about the role of reading, writing and representation *within* the texts of the novels. This chapter discusses the ways that the novels as *books* are read and represented as engaging with ongoing national conversations about Australian history and society. Considering the novels as books acknowledges the role that writing and speaking by the novelists "around" the actual text, such as author's notes, dedications, interviews, essays and websites, play in the reception of the novels by critics, academics and the reading public. This chapter considers whether Grenville and Flanagan, as writers of fiction, are also "public intellectuals" and how their public engagement in discussions about Australian history and society brings certain critical pressures to bear upon their novels. The high profile criticism that Grenville received from Australian historians on the publication of her earlier novel *The Secret River* is also addressed.

Writers as "the nation's conscience": are novelists public intellectuals?

Over the past decade or so significant critical attention has been given to the idea and role of the public intellectual in Australia. In his chapter in 2004's *The Ideas Market: An Alternative Take on Australia's Intellectual Life* (which he also edited), David Carter has traced the adoption the term "public intellectual"

in Australian critical and public discourse to the 1998 publication of Robert Dessaix's collection *Speaking Their Minds: Intellectuals and the Public Culture in Australia* (Carter "The Conscience Industry" 16). Carter does provide a general definition of the term "public intellectual", even though he wishes to avoid "the usual script" followed by those writing about public intellectuals of "attempting to define what a public intellectual is – and then ... advocating more of it" and suggests, tongue-in-cheek, that a "public intellectual might be defined as someone who publicly calls for more public intellectuals" (20-21). He describes the "most familiar use of the term" defining the public intellectual as "a writer in the fullest sense of the term" who is concerned with "questions of general cultural significance, always addressing their moral dimension" (15). In Australia where, as Carter asserts, the moral dimension is nearly exclusively related to the nation, the public intellectual acts as "the nation's conscience".

The public intellectuals that Carter identifies are mostly academics – primarily historians and cultural theorists. In *The Ideas Market* he provides a list of thirty-two high profile public intellectuals.¹⁷ Although he says that "some are academics, some are novelists" (24). However, although most are writers, just one is a novelist: David Malouf. Also making the list is poet Les Murray. What is special about Malouf and Murray that allow them to be identified not just as writers of fiction but as public intellectuals? Carter claims that the unifying behaviours of all the public intellectuals he identifies are:

publishing essays, reviews and opinion pieces on 'public issues',
participating in media commentary and public forums, getting

¹⁷ Carter first lists right-wing public intellectuals and then left-wing. It is interesting to note that eight of the thirteen right-wing public intellectuals he lists are journalists.

invited to writers' weeks and arts festivals, and, commonly, writing what we might call intellectual autobiography – in short, being intellectual in public. (24)

Interestingly, Murray and Malouf are two of the authors chosen by Australian studies academic Brigid Rooney in her 2009 book *Literary Activists: Australian Writer-Intellectuals and Public Life*. Crucially, Rooney is talking about *writer* intellectuals not *public* intellectuals, although writer intellectuals (at least the high profile ones that are the focus of Rooney's work) could perhaps be seen as a subspecies of the larger public intellectual genus. Rooney devotes a chapter each to Malouf and Murray, in Murray's case focussing on the negative response of feminists to his work and the "oscillation between bully and victim that has ... characterised [his] public rhetoric" (Rooney 103). Public and critical reaction to Murray's writer intellectual persona is described as polarised: "One must, it seems, either be for Murray or against him" (103).

A more helpful example of the Australian writer intellectual for this study is novelist David Malouf. As Rooney notes, Malouf's public persona is a strong contrast with Murray's. Where Murray is provocative and aggressive, Malouf is "unflappable" and "unflaggingly reasonable" (120). Malouf as a public or writer intellectual is an interesting comparison to Kate Grenville due to significant echoes in the way both novelists have behaved and been received in Australian public discourse. Like Grenville, Malouf (as noted by Rooney) enjoyed a surge in visibility and an elevation of his literary reputation when his 1993 novel *Remembering Babylon* was shortlisted for the Booker Prize. The novel was the subject of an attack by high profile intellectual Germaine Greer. In

a review titled "Malouf's Objectionable Whitewash" published in *The Age* newspaper, Greer criticised Malouf for minimising the violence of the colonial frontier and occluding Aboriginal experience. Rooney suggests that Greer's critique (and an additional critical reading of the novel by Suvendrini Perera) is an early example of the emergence in Australia of critical whiteness studies. The reception of the novel, Greer's review, and the reaction to that review by members of the media, academy and the public, make the publication history of *Remembering Babylon* an interesting case study of the Australian author in public. As Rooney states, for Malouf "this latest phase in the long intensification of the writer's role in the public sphere was just beginning" (126).

Malouf continued the "intensification" of his public role by returning to fiction about the colonial frontier in his next novel, *The Conversations at Curlow Creek*, and continuing the work of the public/writer intellectual by engaging publicly¹⁸ with (to repeat David Carter's quote from earlier in this chapter) "questions of general cultural significance, always addressing their moral dimension" (Carter "The Conscience Industry" 15). Rooney considers that from the mid-1990s Malouf's early fiction, coupled with his increased non-fiction output, left him ideally placed to exist in a newly "middlebrow" Australian book marketplace. Rooney references the idea of a contracting market for literary fiction and increasing "middlebrow" readership with an interest in non-fiction (such as personal essay, memoir and creative history) chiefly back to David Carter's 2002 essay in the *Australian Humanities Review*, "Public Intellectuals, Book Culture and Civil Society".

¹⁸ Malouf does this in numerous high profile speaking engagements, interviews, essays and newspaper opinion pieces. The Austlit database is a useful starting point for reading some of these numerous examples.

The rest of this chapter uses Carter's ideas about Australian public intellectuals and Rooney's examination of Malouf as a model writer intellectual to consider whether Kate Grenville and Richard Flanagan can also be considered public intellectuals or writer intellectuals, or whether they occupy a different role in Australian public discourse. This chapter also examines whether their recent novels - Grenville's *The Lieutenant* and Flanagan's *Wanting* - are explicitly "moral novels" and whether the work the novels are doing in Australian public discourse is ethical.

Are Grenville and Flanagan public intellectuals, writer intellectuals or something else?

Do Kate Grenville and Richard Flanagan fit the definition of the Australian public intellectual as defined by David Carter? Carter's central qualification for the public intellectual is that they be a writer who engages with questions of national significance. Naturally, this engagement with moral questions must take place in public; that is, outside the academy. Most of the names on Carter's list of examples of public intellectuals are in fact members of the academy who engage in public debate outside it by publishing essays in newspapers or widely read periodicals, or by publishing books of their own that reach a readership beyond a solely academic audience. Grenville and Flanagan are certainly writers, or perhaps more specifically, authors. Their novels certainly engage with questions of national and moral significance. Indeed, their most recent novels take as their subjects highly contested sites in Australia's colonial past. The use of these historical sites alone would be enough to place the novels within Australian public discourse about nation and history, however

the novels go further, actively engaging with and unsettling ideas about race and colonialism.

Although both authors show engagement with Carter's "questions of moral significance" within their fictions, it is the way they write and speak about these ideas *outside* their novels that may allow them to be categorised as public intellectuals. Both writers currently enjoy a relatively high public profile within Australia. In Grenville's case the publication of 2006's *The Secret River* and its subsequent nomination for the Man Booker Prize and the Miles Franklin Award led to an increase in her (already considerable) public visibility as an established Australian author. The parallel to David Malouf's experience following the publication and success of *Remembering Babylon* has already been noted. The subject matter of *The Secret River* heavily influenced the kind of questions that Grenville publicly engaged with following its publication. Grenville spoke at length about her reasons for writing the novel, eventually extending this to the book-length writing memoir *Searching for the Secret River*. *Searching for the Secret River* cast the writing of the novel as the novelist's response to ongoing national conversations about the colonisation of Australia, the dispossession of Aborigines and the treatment of Aboriginal people after colonisation. Grenville spoke of her desire to reveal painful aspects of the Australian past to her (white, settler) audience in order to facilitate the kind of conversations she saw as necessary for political change in Australia. She articulated this desire in an interview on ABC Radio with Ramona Koval: "my feeling is that until we are prepared to look at all those slightly hidden, slightly secret places in our history, we can't actually make much progress into the

future" (Koval "Interview with Kate Grenville"). Here the work of the fiction writer is seen as acting as a kind of middleman between the historical past and the contemporary reader. Grenville has a clear view of fiction as an appropriate vehicle for political change, or at least, the catalyst for conversations that may lead to that change. Her comments about the role of fiction in Australia, especially fiction dealing with the colonial past, drew the ire of historians from across the political spectrum. In terms of Grenville's public profile, publication of critical essays on *The Secret River* and its author in serious popular periodicals such as *Quarterly Essay* or major broadsheets like *The Australian* or *The Australian Financial Review* drew more attention to her work and public persona.

Grenville's engagement with the Australian colonial past and, more specifically, the most tender and contested flashpoints within it, continued with the publication of the follow-up novel to *The Secret River*, 2008's *The Lieutenant*. As she did with *The Secret River*, following the publication of *The Lieutenant* Grenville commented publicly about what she saw as the role for fiction in Australian public discourse. In a public reading of the novel, Grenville spoke of the relationship between the eponymous Lieutenant Rooke and the young Aboriginal girl Tagaran as a "relationship of huge affection, it's mutually respectful, it's platonic" (Grenville "Kate Grenville on *the Lieutenant*"). In another interview Grenville suggested that this relationship, based on a documented historical relationship between a British marine and a Cadigal girl, could offer a sort of model to contemporary black and white Australians. Discussing Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's 2008 public apology to the Aboriginal

people, Grenville spoke of seeing her work of historical fiction as intimately related to the current political mood: “He [Rudd] kept talking about conversation, dialogue, all that kind of thing, and I suddenly realised that I had actually written a book in tune with what he was saying. *The Lieutenant*, to my great joy, is not just a book about the past, it offers a kind of model for the possibility of conversation here and now” (Mansfield). It is clear that Grenville frequently publicly addresses questions of moral significance both within her fiction and in speaking publicly about the aims of her fiction. Responses of readers to her novels also clearly demonstrate that her audience recognises her work as having a moral purpose and being directly related to contemporary Australian politics.

In February 2009 Grenville took part in the Guardian Book Club, a readers and writers event organised by the British newspaper *The Guardian*. Grenville discussed *The Secret River* with literature columnist and academic John Mullan and took questions from the audience. Mullan collated the responses, noting the high percentage of Australians in the audience, and commented on the way that the responses revealed the perceived moral seriousness of the novel, saying that for some readers: “the book was not just artful historical fiction: it was a story with a special moral weight” (Mullan). Some members of the audience seemed to see Grenville as fulfilling one of Carter’s roles of the public intellectual, that of “the nation’s conscience” (Carter “The Conscience Industry” 15): “Several readers thanked the author, not just because they had enjoyed the novel but evidently because they thought she had done a kind of national service” (Mullan). When an audience member asked

whether it would be overreaching to read the prosperity of the emancipated convict William Thornhill and his family as a critical comment on contemporary white Australian attitudes, Grenville responded that her novel was “a precise reflection of Australian life and attitudes,” that revealed a “blankness at our hearts” (Mullan). If these clear examples of Grenville doing the work of the public intellectual both in and around her fiction were not enough to classify her as a public intellectual, in February 2010 she wrote an opinion piece for *The Guardian* about the lack of improvement in the lives of Aboriginal Australians following Rudd’s 2008 apology (Grenville “A True Apology to Aboriginal People Means Action as Well”).

Like Kate Grenville, Richard Flanagan has had explicit public engagement with “questions of national significance”. As Grenville does in *The Lieutenant*, Flanagan takes a particularly sensitive episode of colonial history as his subject in his 2008 novel *Wanting*; the treatment of Tasmanian Aborigines by colonial administrations. The history of the relationship between white and Aboriginal Australians in Tasmania has had a particularly high profile in Australian public discourse due, in part, to the work of conservative historian Keith Windschuttle in his provocatively titled multi-volume work *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History*. Windschuttle appears on Carter’s list of public intellectuals and has become one of the most widely known Australian historians. Just as Grenville makes a gesture toward past intellectual controversy with her title *The Secret River*, so Flanagan cannot avoid engaging in the public debate around Australian history through his choice of subject matter. Again like Grenville, Flanagan also engages in public debates outside of his fiction writing. However, where

Grenville's excursions into public discourse tend to focus on her personal experiences as a liberal, white Australian whose research and fiction writing inevitably causes her to become engaged in public debate, Flanagan's public persona is more didactic. A quick survey of their respective entries in the Austlit database illustrates this difference. Of the fourteen works by Grenville categorised as "columns" by the Austlit database all can be categorised as memoir; whether personal memoir or writing memoir. Most are a combination of the two, some representative titles being "Kate Grenville : The Books That Changed Me", "What I've Learnt : Kate Grenville, Author, 59", "My Bedside Table: Kate Grenville" and "My Bookshelf: Kate Grenville: Author".¹⁹ By considering Flanagan's four entries in the same category in the same database the difference between the public personas of the two authors is made evident. While Flanagan and Grenville both participated in the cosy sounding Christmas recommendation piece in *The Age* "Readings of Comfort and Joy" and, again in *The Age*, Flanagan authored a Tasmania travel piece, his other columns listed by Austlit are the loftier sounding "Love of Art Will Stop the Advancing Barbarians" and "Free Speech Can Bloom Only If There Are Those Prepared to Defend It" (both published in *The Sydney Morning Herald*).²⁰

Flanagan has, in recent years, been a particularly publicly outspoken on issues relating to the Australian publishing industry. He has frequently asserted

¹⁹ Kate Grenville, "Kate Grenville: The Books That Changed Me," *The Sun-Herald* August 30 2009.

Kate Grenville, "What I've Learnt: Kate Grenville, Author 59," *The Weekend Australian Magazine* November 7-8 2009.

Kate Grenville, "My Bedside Table: Kate Grenville," *The Age* 13 October 2005.

Kate Grenville, "My Bookshelf: Kate Grenville: Author," *The (Sydney) Magazine*.No. 58 (2008).

²⁰ Richard Flanagan, "Love of Art Will Stop the Advancing Barbarians," *Sydney Morning Herald* 2008.

Richard Flanagan, "Free Speech Can Bloom Only If There Are Those Prepared to Defend It," *The Sydney Morning Herald* 2003.

his belief that fiction is important as a last bastion of free speech and as a vehicle for moral messages. His chapter in David Carter and Ann Galligan's *Making Books: Contemporary Australian Publishing* was an edited version of a keynote address Flanagan gave to an Australian publishers' forum. In the chapter, "Colonies of the Mind; Republics of Dreams: Australian Publishing Past and Future", Flanagan argued for widespread changes to the Australian publishing industry from improving design and editing, to reconsidering the relationship between writers, editors and agents. Flanagan also asserted the moral value of books, particularly in contemporary Australia: "I think that in an ever more unfree world, books are going to become more rather than less important to us, as they are one of the last vehicles we have left where single voices can speak their own truth, untrammelled by the dictates of power and money, and they will, if they do their job with enough craft and integrity, be heard" (Flanagan "Colonies of the Mind; Republics of Dreams" 147). His closing address at the 2009 Sydney Writers' Festival was similarly concerned with the health of the Australian publishing industry and was characterised in the media as a "blistering attack" (Steger) on proposals to allow parallel importing of books into Australia.

In addition to his passionate public engagement with publishing issues, in his home state of Tasmania Flanagan has been extremely outspoken about local issues, especially environmental issues. In addition to engaging with public conversations about the environment, freedom, literature and terrorism,²¹ Flanagan has also written four book-length works of history and has become

²¹ Flanagan dedicated his 2006 novel *The Unknown Terrorist* to Australian David Hicks, then a detainee at Guantanamo Bay.

increasingly well-known as an essayist. Flanagan was also a scriptwriter for Baz Luhrmann's 2008 film *Australia*. Luhrmann publicly called the Australia of the film "a mythologized Australia" and stated that his aim was to blend historical romance with the story of the Stolen Generations (Fox). As a scriptwriter for the film Flanagan engaged in Australian public discourse through yet another creative platform.

As has already been established, most of those Australians recognised as public intellectuals (by David Carter for example) are not primarily writers of fiction. Although Carter calls his public intellectuals "writers in the fullest sense of the term" (Carter "The Conscience Industry" 15), writers like Flanagan and Grenville might be more specifically identified in the same way as Brigid Rooney classifies Helen Garner and David Williamson, as "freelance creative writers" whose "literary careers [have] developed independently of institutions and corporations" (Rooney xxi). It is perhaps this independence from institutions that most separates Rooney's writer intellectuals and literary activists from the more general group of public intellectuals. Literary activist seems a most fitting identifier for Richard Flanagan who has been an activist in the most straightforward sense, once threatening the Australian government with "the biggest civil disobedience campaign in Australian history since the Franklin River blockade" (Flanagan "Richard Flanagan: Why We Must Stop This Dark, Satanic, Mill") at a protest march against the construction of a pulp mill in Tasmania. Being perceived as independent from any institution has an impact on the way that public comment by fiction writers is framed and responded to within Australian public discourse. In the context of both the Australian Culture

and History Wars, not being associated with an academic institution insulates the novelist from the accusations of ivory-tower cronyism, obsession with theory and disconnect from “real” Australians that are so often levelled at academic historians and critics.

White Australians, memoir, and reconciliation

Gillian Whitlock has identified a phenomenon of white Australian historians turning to memoir as a way to “openly and personally take account of a moral anxiety about the past” (Whitlock 114). She defines historians broadly as those members of the “Australian intelligentsia” who work professionally with the past. Whitlock sees the increase in professional historians writing memoir, or weaving their ostensibly academic works together with personal anecdote, as a direct response to the circulation of shocking and traumatic Aboriginal testimony: specifically those testimonies arising from the Stolen Generations and Deaths in Custody enquiries. In Whitlock’s words, “black testimony is triggering white memoir”. Whitlock gives many examples, including her identification of the way in which cultural historian Chris Healy begins his *The Ruins of Colonialism: History as Social Memory* with an (to use Whitlock’s term) “autobiographical gesture” – his own story of taking part in protest marches on the 1988 Bicentennial Day.

Grenville stretches her equivalent “autobiographical gesture” to book length in her 2006 writing memoir *Searching for the Secret River*. *Searching for the Secret River* tells the story of the conception, birth and delivery of Grenville’s prizewinning 2005 novel *The Secret River*. Like Healy, Grenville uses her experience on a protest march as a way into her larger project. Her march is the

year 2000's March for Reconciliation in which 20,000 people crossed the Sydney Harbour Bridge as a symbolic gesture. Grenville acknowledges that her personal motivation for walking was somewhat nebulous: "I walked across it to show that I supported the idea of reconciliation between black and white Australians" (Grenville *Searching for the Secret River* 10). An encounter with an Aboriginal woman on the bridge (their eyes meet and they exchange smiles and "the beginning of a wave") leads Grenville to imagine a meeting between her convict ancestor and an invented indigenous "great-great-grandfather" of the woman on the bridge. This moment is one of distressing epiphany for Grenville as the "wilful blindness – even hypocrisy" of her participation in the march is revealed to her. She writes: "We were strolling towards reconciliation – what I had to do was cross the hard way, through the deep water of our history. This is the story of what happened when I took the plunge and went looking for my own sliver of that history" (13).

Searching for the Secret River performs the same kind of retreat to the personal as a place from which the white writer can speak as does the historical work that builds itself upon the personal past of the historian. Fiction, as well as memoir, is here cast as a personal white response, not to black testimony but rather to black existence. The writer's memoir performs a clever double role on behalf of novel. The memoir as a record of archival research seeks to lend the novel *The Secret River* the gravitas of academic history, while casting the writer's experience of that research as a kind of painful plunge into an unfriendly past gives the novel the irreproachable defence of the personal.

Grenville and the historians

Grenville was publicly criticised by historians Inga Clendinnen and Mark McKenna (among others) for a perceived tendency to claim for her fiction the status of history. The oft discussed “History Wars” has meant that all works of history are considered against a spectrum of previous scholarship; ranging, to use the pejorative vocabulary of the History Wars, from the conservative “white blindfold” historians who perceive black Australian history and the rhetoric of reconciliation as prospering to the detriment of white Australian history, to the “black armband” school of liberal historians who aimed to acknowledge the often terrible experiences of indigenous people under white colonisation. It is important to note that the History Wars are essentially a white Australian phenomenon, a debate between white right wing historians and white left wing historians. Marcia Langton has claimed that the “culture wars” in Australia have been an “intellectual dead end”, diverting attention from Aboriginal voices and Aboriginal problems while instead becoming a discussion of “white settlers positioning themselves around the central problem of their country: can a settler nation be honourable” (Langton “Trapped in the Aboriginal Reality Show” 17). Langton is highly critical of the “rhetoric of reconciliation”, describing it as “a seductive, pornographic idea designed for punters accustomed to viewing the Aborigines as freaks” and a philosophical exercise for white settlers that avoids the actual problems faced by contemporary Aboriginal communities. Brigid Rooney connects the white liberal rhetoric of reconciliation with a desire for white belonging, suggesting that “middle-class,

urban white desires for belonging underwrite the impulse to reconciliation” (Rooney 130-31).

The Secret River was that rare thing, a literary novel that was a popular success. According to the Nielsen Top 5000 (a list that tracks books sales by barcode and includes all genres; such as cooking, travel and history) for 2006, *The Secret River* came in at twenty-second place, making it by far the most commercially successful work of Australian literary fiction published that year. The next highest ranked “literary novel” was Richard Flanagan’s *The Unknown Terrorist* coming in at 130, with Tim Winton novels occupying the 376th and 453rd slots (Davis 119). As well as being a commercial success, *The Secret River* was a critical winner. Probably the high point in its publication history was making the shortlist for the 2006 Man Booker Prize. The popularity of the novel led to the increased visibility of the author with Grenville embarking on the now usual round of media interviews and book festivals.

Criticism of Grenville and *The Secret River* by white Australian historians focussed on two perceived tendencies of the author; an overconfidence in the ability of fiction to be read and understood as history and a naivety about the possibility for peaceful settlement of Australia by white settlers in the early stages of British colonisation. A major source for statements by Grenville that drew such disapprobation from the historians was an interview she gave to ABC Radio’s Ramona Koval in July 2005 regarding *The Secret River*. Koval directly invites Grenville to consider her historical fiction in the context of the non-fiction histories of the History Wars:

Ramona Koval: So where would you put your book, finally, if you were laying out books on the history wars? Whereabouts would you slot yours?

Kate Grenville: Mine would be up on a ladder, looking down at the history wars. I think the historians, and rightly so, have battled away about the details of exactly when and where and how many and how much, and they've got themselves into these polarised positions, and that's fine, I think that's what historians ought to be doing; constantly questioning the evidence and perhaps even each other. But a novelist can stand up on a stepladder and look down at this, outside the fray, and say there is another way to understand it. You can set two sides against each other and ask which side will win, the Windschuttles of the world or the Henry Reynoldses of the world? Which is going to win? The sport analogy, if you like, about history. Or you can go up on the stepladder and look down and say, well, nobody is going to win. There is no winner. What there can be, though, is understanding, actually experiencing what it was like, the choices that those people had. And once you can actually get inside the experience, it's no longer a matter of who's going to win, it's simply a matter of; yes, now I understand both sides and, having understood, the notion of one side being right and the other side being wrong becomes kind of irrelevant. So that's where I hope this book will be. It stands outside that polarised conflict and says,

look, this is a problem we really need, as a nation, to come to grips with. 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. Basically to think, well, what would I have done in that situation, and what sort of a person would that make me? (Koval "Interview with Kate Grenville")

Despite Grenville's protestations, *Searching for the Secret River* complicates her defence. The writing memoir asserts the fictional/fictive status of the novel by revealing the process by which the novel was created, exposing the concessions that the novelist makes to her art by altering or compressing historical facts. The memoir is also a justification for the reader who may read the fiction as history by saying in effect "here is a true (or true-enough) story, look at all the history work I did to bring it to you". The back cover of *Searching for the Secret River* tells the potential reader that it is "about family, writing and history" and is the "history of a novel which also asks big questions about the history of our country". Although *Searching for the Secret River* does not directly claim the label of history for *The Secret River* it certainly talks a lot about history around the novel. It is worth noting (as Mark McKenna does) that Grenville takes the title of *The Secret River* from the phrase "the secret river of blood in Australian history" from Australian anthropologist W. E. H. Stanner's influential 1968 Boyer lecture series, "After the Dreaming". In her interview with Ramona Koval she is asked if this is where she has taken the title from and she replies as follows: "Yes, I certainly didn't want to call the book 'The River of Blood'

because that would give, I think, a wrong impression about the book. What I wanted to describe or suggest was the fact that Australian history does have a series of secrets in it" (Koval "Interview with Kate Grenville"). Stanner's phrase is a reference to Aboriginal genocide but his lecture as a whole was a challenge to Australian historians to widen the scope of their work to acknowledge Aboriginal experience. Although Grenville is careful to state that she bears no antagonism toward historians, her choice of title has not gone unremarked by them.

If Stanner's memorable phrase "the secret river of blood in Australian history" is a direct inspiration for *The Secret River*, another famous phrase from Stanner's Boyer Lectures can be seen as an influence on or inspiration for both Grenville's *The Lieutenant* and Flanagan's *Wanting* – his statement that Australian historians were guilty of excluding Aboriginal history from Australian history and perpetuating what he called "the great Australian silence" regarding Aboriginal dispossession and ill-treatment by white Australians and white administrations. Along with his identification of a "cult of forgetfulness" the trope of "the great Australian silence" has been a pervasive and long lasting one. Although Stanner's lecture was focussed on the shortcomings of white historians and it was in works of history that he indicated a great need for Aboriginal content and consideration, works of historical fiction such as Grenville's and Flanagan's can be read as an attempt to take up Stanner's challenge in other disciplines, here white Australian literary fiction.

By 1984, white historian Henry Reynolds claimed that although progress was slow and difficult "white Australians are incorporating the black experience

into their image of the national past" (Reynolds 19). Ann Curthoys notes that, like Reynolds, other white Australian historians such as Robert Manne and Bain Attwood have also claimed that Stanner's silence has been "shattered" by the inclusion of Aboriginal history in Australian histories written after Stanner's 1968 lectures. Manne, Attwood and Reynolds all see Stanner's lectures as the chief influence on this diversification of Australian history. However, Curthoys interrogates this view of Stanner's role, observing that the phrase "great Australian silence" along with the lectures themselves have come to "stand in for a much more complex process of social and cultural change". Curthoys notes the ways in which the elevation of the importance Stanner's lectures and Stanner himself is racialised: "it is a white narrative, a return to the "great man" theory of history" (235). Curthoys suggests that the exclusive focus on Stanner's lectures obscures the role of Aboriginal people themselves in forcing white Australian history to include within its narratives the experience and existence of Aboriginal people.

Stanner's 1968 lectures were perhaps the earliest shots fired in the notorious the "History Wars". The History Wars have been generally framed as being between the "black armband" left-wing and "white blindfold" right-wing factions of Australia's political and academic culture.²² The History Wars have achieved such public attention and notoriety that when Grenville published *The Secret River* Ramona Koval directly sought to discover on which side Grenville was fighting.

²² For an account of the History Wars, see Stuart Macintyre and Anna Clark, *The History Wars* (Carlton, Victoria: Melbourne University Press, 2004).

As has been mentioned, Inga Clendinnen and Mark McKenna mounted what were perhaps the most high profile attacks on Grenville's comments in response to Koval's question. McKenna's essay "Writing the Past" was first delivered as a lecture at the Queensland College of Art in December 2005 and was included in *Best Australian Essays 2006*. In the essay McKenna notes the rise of the popularity of historical fiction in the kind of disparaging language that Hilary Mantel characterised as typically aimed at historical novelists (see page 4 of this thesis). McKenna describes historical fiction as "fast-lit", as opposed to literary fiction, that is largely driven by marketing as linking "the novel to historical or "real" stories makes it easier to market" (McKenna 7). Authors of historical fiction are characterised as lazy or somehow incapable of writing fiction set in the present day, alleging that when faced with the "complexity of life in the present, novelists turn to a past that is more fixed, obedient and malleable, a past where the task of understanding the full context of human behaviour still seems possible" (7). McKenna claims that, due to the contested infighting of the History Wars, the reading public have lost confidence in "historians as storytellers".

McKenna also criticised as naive Grenville's claim to empathise with her historical characters. Following McKenna's essay, Grenville was also criticised in historian Inga Clendinnen's essay "The History Question: Who Owns the Past?" published in *Quarterly Essay*. Like McKenna, Clendinnen took umbrage at Grenville's comments in the Koval interview. She ridicules Grenville's attempts to imagine herself in the place of her characters: "here we have it: Grenville's secret method for penetrating British minds ... the peculiar talent of the novelist

to penetrate other minds through exercising her imagination upon fragmentary, ambiguous, sometimes contradictory evidence" (20). Clendinnen claims that *The Secret River* is "a serious attempt to do history", a claim strongly refuted by Grenville in her response to Clendinnen (also published in *Quarterly Essay* and on the author's website). Grenville took umbrage at the tone of the arguments against her, as well as the reliance of the historians on off-the-cuff comments made in a radio interview:

Here it is in plain words: I don't think *The Secret River* is history - it's a work of fiction. Like much fiction, it had its beginnings in the world, but those beginnings have been adapted and altered to various degrees for the sake of the fiction.

Nor did I ever say that I thought my novel was history. In fact, on countless occasions I was at pains to make it clear that I knew it wasn't. ... There are plenty of easily-accessible sources, then, for historians to consult in order to find out what I thought I was doing in *The Secret River*. But these aren't the sources Clendinnen or McKenna have chosen to quote. Instead, they use a newspaper story and a radio interview. (Grenville "History and Fiction")

The Lieutenant was published in 2008, two years after the height of controversy around *The Secret River*. Grenville was apparently not discouraged with the subject matter of *The Lieutenant* (the 1788 arrival of the First Fleet in New South Wales) potentially making her vulnerable for new attack. On her website Grenville describes *The Lieutenant* and *The Secret River* as being part of

“a loose trilogy” that will be completed by a future novel “set in colonial Australia”. In the same year that Grenville published *The Lieutenant*, her compatriot Richard Flanagan also published a novel “set in colonial Australia”, *Wanting*. As Grenville sets her historical novels in her home state of New South Wales so *Wanting* is set in Tasmania where Flanagan has lived since his birth.

Both Grenville and Flanagan, perhaps influenced by Grenville’s experiences at the hands of the historians, are careful to identify their works as fiction in their authors’ notes and dedications. The dedication of *The Lieutenant* hints at many of the anxieties present in the novel and in the public/academic discussion surrounding the publication of *The Secret River*. First, it appears to give primacy to the story of Patyegarang and the Cadigal people. “Their story” is slightly misleading. *The Lieutenant* is more accurately the story of William Dawes (Daniel Rooke in the novel). Patyegarang and the Cadigal people only appear as part of the “story” of William Dawes/Daniel Rooke. The novel is told in the limited third person from Rooke’s point of view. Grenville has written of her discomfort with writing from an Aboriginal perspective or even writing dialogue for her Aboriginal characters in her “writing memoir” *Searching for the Secret River*:

I made some decisions. I would get rid of all the Aboriginal dialogue. It might be historically accurate to have the Aboriginal characters speaking broken English, but it made them less sympathetic, more caricatured.

Their inside story – their responses, their thoughts, their feelings – all that was for someone else to tell, someone who had

the right to enter that world and the knowledge to do it properly.

(Grenville *Searching for the Secret River* 198-99)

The chief subject matter of *The Lieutenant*, Rooke's relationship with Tagaran (based on the historical Patyegarang), of course makes this position impossible for Grenville to maintain, at least regarding dialogue. In her "Author's Note" Grenville explains the care she has taken in giving even limited voice to her Aboriginal characters lifting all the Cadigal words and phrases directly from Dawes' original language notebooks and only using those after consultation with a Cadigal representative (Grenville *The Lieutenant* 306).

Grenville tells the reader that her novel "is a work of fiction, but it was inspired by recorded events". She then goes on to elaborate on these events and her use of historical sources. Despite the use of historical material the fictive aspect is reinforced: "This is a novel; it should not be mistaken for history". This last statement can be easily read as a riposte to McKenna and Clendinnen. Where they accused Grenville of attempting to write history with *The Secret River* or of pitching her fiction as a *kind* of history, here she makes it clear that to do so with *The Lieutenant* will be a misinterpretation on the behalf of the reader; the author attempts to keep her hands where we can see them.

Flanagan also adds a disclaimer to *Wanting* in his "Author's Note": "This novel is not a history, nor should it be read as one. It was suggested to me by certain characters and events in the past, but it does not end with them" (Flanagan *Wanting* 255). Like Grenville, Flanagan then goes on to recount the known facts that he takes inspiration from before directing the interested reader to his website to read more about his use of historical sources.

The websites associated with the books are commonplace as marketing tools in the current literary marketplace. However, when supporting a historical novel they also provide an opportunity for the author to buttress their fictions with source material and further reading suggestions for keen audiences and book groups. In Grenville's case, her website provides her with a platform to respond to critics as she did in the case of Mark McKenna and Inga Clendinnen's criticisms of *The Secret River*. However, as referred to in Chapter One of this thesis, the citing of historical sources to lend authority to the historical fiction of the novels does create a tension with the way that those very sources are undermined *within* the novels.

The way that the fiction of Grenville and Flanagan engages with "questions of national significance" and the way that the authors themselves engage with these questions in interviews and opinion pieces mean that they are viewed as public intellectuals within Australian public discourse. These public personas lend gravitas to their fictions and place their novels at the centre of debates that are otherwise dominated by non-fiction writing such as history and memoir. Their roles as public intellectuals or writer intellectuals are self-propagating; after being seen to be responding to national debates in their fiction they are increasingly asked to engage with the debate in interviews, at readings, and in festival panels. The locating of these novels within such areas of debate as the History Wars means that their novels are increasingly represented as having something direct to say to the reader about living in contemporary Australia. What messages may be being transmitted to the

reading public via these historical novels will be discussed in the conclusion to this thesis.

Conclusion

Summary

This thesis has shown that Kate Grenville's *The Lieutenant* and Richard Flanagan's *Wanting* are historical novels that, despite their historical source material, actively engage with current debates in Australia's public discourse. Through drawing attention to the way written texts are created and indigenous people are represented by white writers, the novels invite readers to read critically as they consume both the novels themselves and other texts that deal with Australian history. The novels make reference to the long history of representation of indigenous people by white writers, while inevitably producing further representations themselves.

Through their internal focus on the creation and reception of written texts, the novels invite the actual reader to read with scepticism. By destabilising the authority of written texts - particularly journalism, journaling and historical recording - the novels expose the mediation and manipulation that is potentially a part of all text creation and unsettle the border between historical and fictional writing. This unsettling of borders creates a tension with the authors' use of historical sources to provide source material for, and lend authority to, their novels.

Similarly, the attention paid to white representations of indigenous peoples within the novels can be seen as leading the reader to consider the way that the novels themselves create yet more white representations of Aboriginal people. The texts seem aware of the history of these representations but cannot

avoid reproducing some of the familiar tropes in their own representation of indigenous characters.

The public speaking and writing *outside* the books themselves by the authors places the novels at the centre of national conversations about the facts of the Australian past. Due to the elevated media profile of the “History Wars” in Australian public discourse and the historical aspect of these novels, discussion of these novels has sought to place them within the context of the History Wars. Kate Grenville’s previous entanglement in the History Wars, through the publication of *The Secret River* and the criticisms of that novel made by prominent historians, has meant that she has publicly engaged with debates about Australian history around the publication of *The Lieutenant*.

The way that both Grenville and Richard Flanagan behave as public intellectuals (or perhaps, in Flanagan’s case, as a literary activist) means that their novels act not just as commentary on the Australian past, but also engage with presently relevant ideas of reconciliation and attempt to suggest ways for the national debate to progress. Fiction is suggested as an alternative voice in the History Wars debate and a way for white readers to examine their own place in Australia’s past and present.

Where to from here?

Kate Grenville has suggested that her novel was politically in tune with the national mood surrounding issues of reconciliation around the time of Kevin Rudd’s Labor Government. In an interview with *The Scotsman*’s Sue Mansfield, Grenville connected her novel to current Australian discourse: “[Rudd] kept

talking about conversation, dialogue, all that kind of thing, and I suddenly realised that I had actually written a book in tune with what he was saying. *The Lieutenant*, to my great joy, is not just a book about the past, it offers a kind of model for the possibility of conversation here and now" (Mansfield).

Taking Grenville's comments as a starting point – what kind of model for conversation or reconciliation do *The Lieutenant* and *Wanting* suggest?

Grenville's emphasis is on conversation, which, in the context of *The Lieutenant*, suggests something that involves both white and indigenous Australians. It is worthwhile to note, however, that the History Wars is largely a white Australian debate. Both the "white blindfold" and "black armband" factions consist of mostly white historians. As was discussed earlier, Ann Curthoys has noted that even the increase in histories that acknowledge Aboriginal experience in Australia has been portrayed in historiography as a white phenomenon, with both the exclusion of Aboriginal people from written history and the gradual remedying of the situation being attributed to white historians (Curthoys 235).

Grenville's suggestion that *The Lieutenant* could influence or suggest a path for possible conversation is not the only instance of her addressing the potential influence of her novels on an actual reading audience. In an interview with Harriet Gilbert for the BBC's World Book Club, Grenville describes the way that *The Secret River* provided a way for the reader to understand, and perhaps move towards resolving, some of the debates around race and indigeneity in Australia. After being asked about the historical accuracy of the novel, Grenville stated that: "my books are essentially not about the past. ... what I'm really

writing about is the present. The only way you can really understand the present is to go back and look at where the problems began ... have another look at it" (Gilbert).

Here, Grenville suggests that her books are written for a particular intended audience, white Australians who have a desire to engage with the problems of their country's colonial past. At the same event Grenville explicitly acknowledges this intended audience:

It was a story I felt was important to share ... with my fellow Australians. To try to say look, we have to be, we non-indigenous Australians, have to be prepared to tell truthfully the story of what happened in the beginning.

Grenville seems to address the same "non-indigenous Australian" audience when she states that her books attempt to answer the difficult questions of: "what are we doing here, how do we behave together, how do we somehow share this planet?" The *we*, particularly in "what are we doing here", seems to directly refer to white settler Australians. Grenville acknowledges that her intended audience, at least when initially writing *The Secret River*, were her compatriots: "It was a story I felt was important to share with, at that time I thought, my fellow Australians". This intended audience seemed to respond in kind. In his recap of a public reading discussion held as part of *The Guardian's* online book club, John Mullan noted that "there was a distinct demographic in evidence. The majority of readers who commented on or asked questions about the novel were Australian" (Mullan).

David Carter, in observing the tastes of middle-class “reading groups”, has observed the popular desire in Australian reading culture for “ethically serious fiction”, a category into which *The Lieutenant* and *Wanting* are easily catalogued. According to Carter, “ethically serious fiction” defines those literary novels which address “issues”:

In terms of taste, the reading group preference is for 'contemporary literary fiction' – Margaret Atwood, Toni Morrison, Peter Carey, Michael Ondaatje, Murray Bail, *Memoirs of a Geisha*, *The God of Small Things*, *Eucalyptus* and so forth. Together with the occasional non-fiction title, these suggest above all a taste for books that deal (stylishly) with 'issues' or, as one reader puts it, 'deep moral or political questions' (Hope 2001).^[23] Certain levels of literary or writerly sophistication are linked with ethical seriousness. (Carter "Public Intellectuals")

Carter also notes the way in which these “ethically serious” books act as a kind of status symbol through which the reader seeks to declare something essential about their personality and values:

Good books and good reading are lifestyle and identity 'accessories'. But by linking literary taste to lifestyle I'm not wanting to sneer. ... We can instead conceive of lifestyle and consumption in terms of *self-fashioning* which extends to a whole range of ethical and political commitments. (Carter "Public Intellectuals")

²³ Deborah Hope, "Eat, Drink and Be Literary," [The Weekend Australian](#) 11-12 August 2001.

Reading literary novels such as *The Lieutenant* and *Wanting* is a way for white Australians to engage with high profile national debates such as those surrounding the History Wars. The fact that the work of fiction writers, not just historians and academics, is seen by the reading public as a useful way of understanding the debate lends an illusion of diversity to the conversation. Literary writers are cast as providing a different perspective which might unlock some hidden essential truth that will help the quest for reconciliation. However, like their readers, the historians and the majority of critics and reviewers who have written about their novels, the fact remains that Grenville and Flanagan are white, middle-class Australians. *The Lieutenant* and *Wanting* are written by white settler Australians, for white settler Australians about the problem of being a white settler Australian in post-colonising Australia.

The Lieutenant and *Wanting* are essentially novels about white people in Australia. However, unlike William Thornhill of *The Secret River*, the central white male characters of *The Lieutenant* and *Wanting* are not the fictional ancestors of those present day white Australians who are descended from colonists and convicts (by “fictional ancestors” I mean a fictional proxy for the actual ancestor, a character whose experiences and circumstances roughly resemble those of individuals’ actual ancestors). In the case of *The Lieutenant* and *Wanting*, the white Australian reader descended from settlers or convicts cannot see these characters as roughly representative of their own actual ancestors. The central white characters of the novels - Daniel Rooke in *The Lieutenant* and Sir James and Lady Jane Franklin in *Wanting* - do not remain in Australia.

Grenville's novel seems to seek a way for white Australians to reconcile their citizenship with the way that indigenous Australians have been treated. The central character of *The Lieutenant*, Daniel Rooke, is presented as a sort of model colonist, at least early in the novel. He is tolerant, pacifist, displays a sincere interest in the lives and culture of the Cadigal people and is concerned for their welfare in the face of the British settlement. His platonic relationship with Tagaran is supposedly what Grenville refers to when she states that *The Lieutenant* provides a "model for the possibility of conversation". However, this is not a hopeful model for conversation between white and Aboriginal Australians.

However, *The Lieutenant* provides an inadequate model for current conversation. Despite his intentions Rooke does not manage to create a meaningful, peaceful, or lasting relationship with the Cadigal people. His attempts to translate their language fail and he never really gets close to any real understanding of their culture or psyche. His Western, Enlightenment frame of thinking is not easily applied to Cadigal culture and language. If anything, Rooke comes to realise the impossibility of any peaceful relationship between white settlers and Aborigines as there are two completely incompatible desires: the indigenous people wish to continue to live on their own lands, the white settlers wish to take them for themselves. He leaves Australia when he realises that it is impossible for him to reconcile his friendship with Tagaran and respect for the Cadigal with the colonisation of their lands. Despite his own good intentions he sees that it is not possible to maintain his own personal integrity while remaining part of the colonial

“machine”, realising that: “If you were part of that machine you were part of its evil” (Grenville *The Lieutenant* 280). He spends the rest of his life paying penance for his part in the colonising project by fighting for abolition in Antigua.

The real “Australians” of *The Lieutenant* are the ones who stay, the ones who tolerate what Rooke will not. Therefore, *The Lieutenant* does not act as a hopeful model for contemporary white Australians. It is the opposite of the “comfort history” Grenville was accused of writing in *The Secret River*. Instead of suggesting that the violence of colonisation could have been prevented if only the colonisers and the colonised tried a little harder to understand each other’s points of view, *The Lieutenant* shows the absolute impossibility of peaceful conquest. It is actually a very pessimistic view of the relationship between white and black Australians. It reflects the inability of liberal white Australians to overcome the reality of the First Fleet landing. Grenville’s novel is caught in this ongoing disastrous first-contact moment without any suggestion of how to resolve it but aware that it cannot be ignored either.

The racists and rapists of *Wanting*, although white, are not white Australians. The Franklins leave Tasmania, unpopular with the locals due to Sir John’s perceived failure in the position of Lieutenant-Governor. They leave behind no children in Australia; Lady Jane’s infertility being one of the drivers behind her desire to adopt Mathinna: “[Lady Jane] could not forget her grief, and then the cruel awakening to her barren body, her loneliness, her inescapable sense of shame as a woman, her desperate desire for a child” (Flanagan *Wanting* 194-95). Like the Franklins, George Robinson (the so-called

Protector of Aborigines) is also shown to leave Australia (231). It is Britain that is shown to be culpable, not settler Australia.

The main representative of white settler Australians in *Wanting* is the kindly cart driver Garney Welch. He first appears in the novel when he delivers Mathinna to the Franklins. Initially he does not want to transport Mathinna as he resents Aborigines as his brother “a convict shepherd, had been speared to death by blacks” (112). However, on meeting Mathinna her vulnerability stirs memories of his own deceased daughter and “he began to feel that hate was beyond him” (112). When they reach the Franklin residence Mathinna is frightened and begs him not to leave her. Garney is moved by her distress: “he wanted to hold and soothe what had nothing to do with him”, and leaves quickly: “cursing himself for feeling as bad as he did, his soul painfully open to a wound he thought long ago healed” (114). Garney Welch is moved by Mathinna’s plight but ultimately believes that it “had nothing to with him”.

Garney Welch reappears at the end of the novel when he discovers Mathinna face down in a puddle, garrotted and drowned. He feels pity at Mathinna’s decline, but no guilt. A passage in which Welch reflects on the inconsequence of Mathinna’s death and life to the wider world recalls W. H. Auden’s poem “Musée des Beaux Arts” in its portrayal of individual suffering in the face of the apparent indifference of continuing life:

His gaze followed the dead girl’s eyes upwards. Beyond, life went on as it always had, oblivious to tragedy or joy. Over the next ridge, in a rude, lonely cottage of boughs, a woman was moaning in childbirth, while down on the rocks a fisherman cursed after

pulling up his pot only to discover the legs and shells of crayfish left by a thieving octopus.

‘That’s how it goes’ said Garney Welch softly, as he closed her eyes. (251)

The limited third-person point of view allows Flanagan to avoid passing judgement on Garney Welch’s passivity in the face of Aboriginal degradation and oppression. Garney is shown to regret Mathinna’s life and death but has no regrets about his own part in it. He is a witness to the cruelty and racism of the British administration and a beneficiary of the alienation of the Tasmanian Aborigines from their land. Welch is a sawyer, perhaps foreshadowing the destruction of Tasmania’s forests by white Australians, an issue which Flanagan continues to take a high profile public interest in his protests against deforestation in Tasmania.²⁴

Both novels take as their subject matter two iconic episodes in Australia’s white-meets-black history of first-contact. The stories of William Dawes and Patyegarang (the actual Rooke and Tagaran) and Sir John and Lady Franklin and Mathinna invite meaning to be read into them and seem to encourage the reader to understand them as symbolic of the contemporary relationship between white and Aboriginal Australians. However, ultimately the stories as presented in the novels do not provide a useful or comforting model with which contemporary white Australians can reconcile their citizenship with the facts of their country’s past.

²⁴ Richard Flanagan, "Paradise Lost - with Napalm," *The Guardian* (2004), <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2004/apr/21/australia.environment>>.

Grenville's claim that *The Lieutenant* provides a model for conversation between indigenous and white Australians is demonstrably at odds with the negative and hopeless image actually provided by the events of the novel. Grenville's novel is caught at the same stalled point as all liberal conversations about settlement and indigeneity. *The Lieutenant* does not suggest a way for white liberal settler Australians to reconcile their own self-image as right-thinking, politically engaged citizens with the facts of colonisation and indigenous dispossession. *The Lieutenant* does not offer any absolution of responsibility either, as Rooke discovers that, despite his own personal beliefs and behaviour, to remain in Australia as part of the colonising project is to remain a cog in the imperial "machine".

On the other hand, Flanagan's novel shows the way in which white Australians' lives in Australia have come at a grotesque and tragic cost to the indigenous people. Like Grenville's, his novel offers no model for the future of the Australian discourse around white response to the Australian past. However, he shows in an interview with ABC Radio's Ramona Koval his intention as a novelist is not to resolve these contested national questions but rather to reflect the unresolved (irresolvable?) state of the settler nation back at the reader:

We still as a society would rather have our people read instructive non-fiction that tells us how to live and how to behave, who we should sleep with and what we should do. We don't want to read books, stories, that reflect back to us only the chaos and uncertainty of this life and which, if they have any redeeming feature, it is simply to remind us that in our own strange

uncertainties, we're never alone. (Koval "Interview with Richard Flanagan")

Kate Grenville's *The Lieutenant* and Richard Flanagan's *Wanting* are novels that arise from a particular context in contemporary post-colonising Australia. Their internal interests in the creation of written texts, the nature of history and truth, and the representation of indigenous people by white writers reflect a heightened concern in Australia's public discourse about the role of history in the settler nation. Neither novel represents a new point of view of the contested questions about white Australian identity. Rather, in their return to these historical "first-contact" narratives about black and white in colonial Australia, they reflect back the inability of white settler Australians to comfortably come to terms with the facts of their nation's past.

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