



Falling Backwards: Australian Historical Fiction and the History Wars

Nadia Wheatley

To cite this article: Nadia Wheatley (2019) Falling Backwards: Australian Historical Fiction and the History Wars, *Australian Historical Studies*, 50:2, 270-271, DOI: [10.1080/1031461X.2019.1598328](https://doi.org/10.1080/1031461X.2019.1598328)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1031461X.2019.1598328>



Published online: 12 Jun 2019.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 9



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

devastating environmental impact of the settlers' huge herds of sheep and cattle. And Joshua Reid shows how both the Māori on New Zealand's South Island and the Makah people who lived on the coastal northwest corner of what became US territory claimed ownership of maritime spaces and their natural resources, causing clashes with European whalers and sealers.

An important, if more predictable, connection among other essays concerns Indigenous peoples' political engagements with the British empire. The common thread in these studies is their authors' insistence on the active and often shrewd agency of these peoples. Colin Calloway shows how the Iroquois skilfully played the British and French against one another. Michael McDonnell's essay on another Indian group advances a similar argument, though he goes even further, arguing that 'the architecture of empire in the new British North American territories was very much built upon Indigenous foundations, and on Indigenous terms' (49). Likewise, Rebecca Shumway insists that the Fanti drew a reluctant British empire into the Gold Coast of West Africa to protect them against the expansionist Asanti. According to Justin Brooks, the Highland Scots, North American Indians, and Bengalis all played 'determinative roles in contesting or reshaping' (300) the British imperial agenda despite its 'genocidal intent' (281) toward them. Meanwhile, an imperial agenda all but disappeared in the 'tangle of politics' (137) that Sujit Sivasundaram describes as the distinguishing feature of the Persian Gulf in the age of revolution.

Finally, a third group of chapters addresses the social encounters and cultural exchanges that occurred between Indigenous peoples and agents of the British empire. Kate Fullagar focuses on two individuals – the Cherokee Ostenaco and the Ra'iatean Mai – who journeyed to London to advance the interests of their peoples. So did the Ojibwe leader and Methodist preacher Shawundais (aka John Sunday), whose career is recounted by Elspeth Martini. Whereas Fullagar stresses the particularistic agendas of Ostenaco and Mai, Martini argues that Shawundais gained 'a more global sense of other Indigenous peoples' similar struggles' (322) from his time in London. The role that Christianity played in the Indigenous engagement with empire is highlighted by Tony Ballantyne. His chapter on the first CMS mission in New

Zealand stresses the mutuality of that engagement: the mission was entangled in Māori politics even as the Māori became increasingly entangled in the agenda of empire. Nicole Ulrich describes a very different dynamic in the Cape of Good Hope, where a more fully entrenched colonial system's exploitation of slaves, sailors, the Khoisan, and other subaltern groups provoked popular radicalism and revolt.

A couple of caveats about the editors' professed objectives. Despite their assertion that the Age of Revolution was 'a particularly crucial era' (4) for those who faced empire, it seems little more than a chronological convenience – and a fairly flexible one at that – for conjoining a disparate array of encounters. And despite the editors' insistence that the volume is intended to initiate a comparative examination of Indigenous experiences of empire in this era, they largely leave that task to the reader. Fortunately, the chapters themselves provide plenty of material for the reader to work with.

DANE KENNEDY

George Washington University

© 2019, Dane Kennedy



Falling Backwards: Australian Historical Fiction and the History Wars

By Jo Jones. Perth: UWA Publishing, 2018. Pp. 273. A\$39.99 paper.

I was about to begin writing this review when I read an article by Grace Karskens in the latest *Griffith Review*, concerning a visit she recently made to Dyarubbin (aka the Hawkesbury River) in the company of three Darug women and the historian/archaeologist Paul Irish. Together they are uncovering the Aboriginal history of the early settlers' farms that flank the river – a hidden history that runs in parallel (and sometimes conflicts) with the well-known pioneer history of this country. The name of their project, 'The Real Secret River: Dyarubbin', instantly brings to mind Kate Grenville's award-winning novel, which of course is set on the Hawkesbury.

The Secret River, and the controversy that greeted its publication, provides a touchstone

for Jo Jones' assessment of Australian historical fiction and the 'History Wars'. The other works under consideration are Grenville's *The Lieutenant*, Richard Flanagan's *Gould's Book of Fish*, David Malouf's *Remembering Babylon*, Kim Scott's *Benang*, and *Captivity Captive* by Rodney Hall. To these texts, Jones applies a variety of literary theories, ranging from post-structuralist critiques of the Enlightenment to (among others) Lyotard's 'model of the immanent critique', Wyschogrod on *The Ethics of Remembering*, and a bewildering diagram of 'The Operation of History in Colonial and Metahistorical Narratives' by Amy Elias. Clearly, this was all a necessary part of the PhD thesis from which this book is derived, but the author is at her best when she responds directly to the novels or discusses the need for us all (writers and readers alike) to make an ethical response to Australia's dark past. She sees historical fiction as a way 'to explore various ways of breaking the silence', beyond the opportunities provided by history alone (256).

Of all the theoretical frameworks, it is 'form theory', derived from Hayden White's *The Content of the Form*, which underpins the main critique. 'In treatments of a past that has been contested, effaced, celebrated or forgotten', the author declares, 'the question of narrative form is one of deep political significance' (4). Of course, in Australia, the history that best fits this description is the period characterised either as 'invasion' or 'settlement', depending on one's point of view. So, it was a good test case for the author to study a handful of novels published when the interpretation of that era was a raging battleground between the political left and right. Regarding this contest, Jo Jones' own sympathies are clear.

However, the exploration of this idea in *Falling Backwards* is a bit like an experiment without a control group. If we are to assess the historical novels produced during this period, they need to be measured against works of a previous era. A couple that spring to mind are Thomas Keneally's *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith* (1972) and Xavier Herbert's *Capricornia* (winner of the 1939 Commonwealth Sesquicentenary Literary Prize). Most cogently, the depiction of the protagonist in Kate Grenville's *The Lieutenant* cries out for comparison with the William Dawes character in Eleanor Dark's *The Timeless Land* (1941). While these novels were radical in their day, some of the

attitudes expressed in them would now be frowned upon. So, what has made the change? Was it the History Wars alone? Or – given the long gestation of any serious work of literary fiction – was it also other aspects of the *zeitgeist*, including various Land Rights campaigns and the general shift away from the Anglo-Australian cultural hegemony, ongoing since the 1970s?

As well as reflecting the era in which it is conceived, a work of fiction can provide a window into popular culture through the responses of its readers. *The Secret River* became a bestseller because it touched a deep nerve. After the issues raised during the History Wars, many well-meaning Australians wanted to read what Jones describes as a 'narrative of regret' (106), while also wanting the kind of 'safety of narrative closure' (40) that the novel provides. In Jones' view, it is Grenville's use of 'a highly conventional realist narrative' (119) that is the problem.

Although the author says it is 'not [her] intention to set up a realist/non-realist hierarchy' (24), the book overall does document 'the shortcomings of realism as it appears in the novels under discussion' (25). While Grenville's chosen form is out, Flanagan's 'postmodern and experimental narrativisation' is in, as are Rodney Hall's use of the Gothic and Kim Scott's 'hybrid' blend of traditional Indigenous and European modes of storytelling. Malouf's 'liberal humanist narrative' is judged to be 'ideologically problematic' (41).

Certainly, by offering multiple meanings or even by eschewing meaning altogether, postmodernism allows an author to slip back and forth between the frontiers of history and fiction, thereby avoiding the risk of the kind of interpretation to which some historians objected in *The Secret River*. For many readers, however, postmodernism is anathema. They want fictional characters to think and feel as they themselves do, and they want the plot to seem 'true'.

And so, I come back to 'The Real Secret River: Dyarubbin': a reminder that the country itself holds histories more powerful and more real than all our fictions.

NADIA WHEATLEY
University of Sydney
© 2019, Nadia Wheatley

