

“‘Comfort History’: Settling the Unsettled Past in Kate Grenville’s Colonial Trilogy”

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“Over the past fifteen years”, as Kenneth Gelder and Paul Salzman point out, “historical fiction has dominated the Australian literary landscape, just as the so-called history wars have dominated debates about ‘Australian’ identity and its cultural and historical origins” (2009: 64). Indeed, a significant number of historical novels has been recently produced, suggesting that contemporary settler Australian writers are haunted by the ghosts of the country’s violent past. While some concerned scholars perceive this surge of historical fiction as a threat to any scientific discourse about national history, others have hailed it as evidence of settler novelists’ determination to engage and come to grips with the legacies of colonization. Accordingly, arguments such as the ones advocated by historian Mark McKenna, who believes that, “in Australia, a country ... in which history that is critical of the nation struggles to be heard above the constant din of national self-congratulation, we need to resist any tendency to embrace historical fiction as a substitute national history” (2006b: 110). These conflict with the views of literary critics such as Amanda Johnson who “writes ... in defence of historical novels dealing with ‘Australian’ themes, championing not only the ‘logic of the novel’ but also the idea of the novelist as a kind of resilient historiographic fool within the archive” (2011: 2). Kate Grenville has fuelled this dispute through her particular fictional revisitation of Australia’s colonial past, which can be seen as an attempt to aestheticize and harmonize the same archive. On one level there is little doubt that her endeavour to deal with the darkest chapter in the country’s national history corresponds to a sincere determination to challenge the official foundational narrative and to openly confront the nation’s shameful past. However, as we shall see, a closer look at her Colonial Trilogy reveals an altogether more undigested bias. This essay seeks to explore the fictional representations of settlement and frontier violence in Grenville’s Colonial Trilogy with a view to highlighting how, through the use of subtle representational and discursive strategies, the author contrives to soothe her white readership’s guilty conscience whilst nevertheless pursuing an agenda ostensibly dictated by the imperatives of reconciliation.

On 28 May 2000 Kate Grenville “walked across [the Sydney Harbour Bridge] to show that [she] supported the idea of reconciliation between black and white Australians”

(Grenville 2007b: 10). At the end of the walk, an unsettling moment of eye-contact with an Aboriginal woman proved the catalyst for a journey into the national past which Grenville would undertake with the intention of unearthing the murkier chapters of Australia's national history. Her discoveries inspired her Colonial Trilogy, which consists of three historical novels, namely: *The Secret River* (2005), *The Lieutenant* (2008), and *Sarah Thornhill* (2011). Loosely based on the life of Grenville's own ancestor, Solomon Wiseman, *The Secret River* narrates the story of William Thornhill who is transported with his wife and children to Australia for an offence of stealing. Once he gains his pardon, Thornhill claims a parcel of allegedly uninhabited land where he sets about to wrest a home from the wilderness despite all the signs that point to the continuing presence of alternative owners. His obdurate unwillingness to take those signs on board results in a direct confrontation with the local Aborigines. Eventually, as the hostilities reach their climax, Thornhill ends up taking part in a massacre planned by his fellow settlers to exterminate the natives.

Grenville then continues her journey into Australia's past with *The Lieutenant*. Set in the early days of British settlement in New South Wales, this novel was also inspired by a historical figure. The protagonist, Daniel Rooke, is indeed, as Lynette Russell indicates, "based on William Dawes, a First Fleet naval officer, astronomer, and scientist who set up camp just on the fringe of the embryonic Sydney settlement, where he was to observe the southern skies and map the constellations" (2010: 200). Isolated in his hut away from the rest of the community, he befriends an Aboriginal girl, Tagaran, who agrees to teach him the language of her people. When the tensions between settlers and Aborigines escalate into violence, Rooke abandons the punitive expedition against the natives, in which he felt compelled to participate, thus choosing to privilege his devotion to Tagaran over his duties as a soldier.

Finally, in the last novel of the Trilogy, Grenville takes up the story of the Thornhill family to pursue it through the following generation. Less immediately grounded in history, though deeply informed by the historical record, *Sarah Thornhill* focuses on the youngest daughter of William Thornhill after the latter has reinvented himself as a wealthy and well-respected landowner. Illiterate yet very insightful, Sarah grows up unaware of her father's crime. She falls in love with the mixed-race Jack Langland and dreams of their life together as husband and wife. However, her dreams presently turn into nightmares when the secret lurking in her family's past is divulged. Rejected by her sweetheart and consumed with guilt, she must embark on a journey in the hope of atoning for her father's wrongs.

Since its publication in 2005, the first novel of the Trilogy, *The Secret River*, has been at the heart of a heated debate about the impact of historical fiction on Australia's representations of its own past. Various scholars, mostly historians, incensed by Grenville's claims for her novel's historical authority, lambasted her for trespassing into the no-go zone of the country's colonial history. Mark McKenna, exasperated by an extract from an interview with Ramona Koval in which Grenville seems to imply that fiction is superior to history, led the charge by highlighting "the dangers that arise when novelists ... claim for fiction, at the expense of history, superior powers of empathy and historical understanding" (2006b: 98); while Inga Clendinnen, quite in line with McKenna's argument, confesses that, after reading *The Secret River*, she "flinched from what looked like opportunistic transpositions and elisions" (2006: 16). For Clendinnen, Grenville's historical venture, premised as it is on "Applied Empathy", that is "the peculiar talent of the novelist to penetrate other minds through exercising her imagination upon fragmentary, ambiguous sometimes contradictory evidence" (2006: 20), is fraught with flaws, if not absurdities. Indeed, an overenthusiastic reliance on empathy, in the framework of historical fiction, may tempt the novelist to blur the boundaries between past and present, between self and historical character, thus uncritically conflating her/his own emotions and expectations with those of the historical people he/she is seeking to understand. Thus Grenville's empathetic impulse supposedly led her to assume that violence could have been avoided if only one could "go back 200 years and say to the settlers, 'Look, this is how the Aborigines are,' and to the Aborigines, 'Look, this is why settlers are behaving the way they are. Let's understand this. There's no need for all this brutality'" (Grenville 2005). In the words of John Hirst, Grenville may well have fallen prey to the lures of what he terms "the liberal fantasy", a naïve view according to which "the conquest could have been done nicely" (2005: 82). In fact, what Grenville seems to ignore in Hirst's view is that, "if Aborigines had earlier understood the settlers' intentions there would have been more violence and sooner. The settlers were fortunate in that the Aborigines at first welcomed them or avoided them or attempted to accommodate them" (2005: 84).

Grenville attempted to bring to a close what she described on her website as "the bogus controversy" surrounding the publication of her novel. In an essay meant as a response to McKenna's and Clendinnen's accusations, she first gainsays the claim that she deems her novel a work of history, by stating:

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. (2007a: 66; emphasis added)

Then she strives to demonstrate that the allegations about the superiority she has supposedly ascribed to fiction over history are manifestly grounded in quotes which “have been narrowly selected, taken out of context, and truncated” (2007a: 66). Perhaps Grenville's response has proved sufficient to elucidate the ambiguities triggered by her public comments. Yet it has actually brought to the forefront the real ambiguity that, in my opinion, surrounds *The Secret River* as well as the other two novels of the Trilogy. Indeed, while not dismissing McKenna's and Clendinnen's denunciations—I definitely believe that they were effective in thwarting the confusing amalgamation of history and fiction to which all the reviews of and interviews about *The Secret River* has given rise—I think it will be useful to orient the debate towards other paths that have not been fully explored. My argument is in effect triggered by the very statement that Grenville proffered in her response to the historians' charges, namely: “This book isn't history, but it's solidly based on history. Most of the events in the book really happened and much of the dialogue is what people really said or wrote” (2007a: 67). Unlike the above-mentioned historians, I feel more unsettled by Grenville's unquestioning use of the historical record as a supposedly reliable source of information than by the superior status that she may attribute to fiction. Any scholar acquainted with the legacies of colonialism would most assuredly be aware of the likely gaps and distortions with which colonial histories are fraught. Having said this, I do not wish to undermine or discredit the validity of the archive as a starting-point for a journey into the past. Yet I do wish to call attention to the fact, shrewdly highlighted by Jeannette Allis Bastian, that, in the particular context of former colonial societies such as Australia, “the archival records were ... created by the winners” (2006: 268). Accordingly, as Bastian further points out, these records must be approached “as obstacles to be overcome, predicaments to be resolved and mazes to be negotiated rather than as the sources of enlightenment and memory” (2006: 268). Although Grenville seems to espouse a progressive agenda inasmuch as she uses fiction so as to supplement history by presumably filling the gaps in the official narrative, she surprisingly never casts doubt upon the legitimacy of her historical sources, as one can notice in the following statement:

Whenever possible I based events in the book on recorded historical events, adapting and changing them as necessary. Thornhill's first meeting with the

Aboriginal people on the Hawkesbury is based on a similar incident involving the first Governor, Captain Arthur Phillip. The incident in which Captain McCallum fails to ambush a group of Aboriginal people is based on many accounts of similar failures by the military. The Proclamation which gives settlers permission to shoot Aboriginal people is taken verbatim from Governor Macquarie's Proclamation of 1816. The massacre scene is based on eyewitness accounts of the Waterloo Creek killings in 1838. Some characters are also loosely based on historical figures, and some of their dialogue is taken from their own mouths. (2007a: 67)

At this point in my argument, it is worth emphasizing that my disquiet stems mostly, not from the use of the archive per se, but rather from the lack of acknowledgment, on the part of the author, that her representation of Australia's colonial history is largely, if not entirely, shaped by the voices of "the winners". There is then room for arguing that, in foregrounding the historical rootedness of *The Secret River*, as well as that of *The Lieutenant* and of *Sarah Thornhill*, Grenville endows the Australian historical record with an authority which is hardly reconcilable with any genuine decolonizing enterprise.

Yet, in view of what she writes in *Searching for the Secret River*, a memoir which documents the process of writing *The Secret River*, Grenville seems, in the early stages of her investigation, to have grown aware of the shortcomings of the historical record. She indeed asserts: "I realised ... that I'd learned one very useful thing: not about Solomon Wiseman, but about searching for the past. I'd learned the difficulty of establishing even the simplest fact" (2007b: 38). Yet, overwhelmed by "the urge ... to make sense of things" (2007b: 38), she did not allow this nascent insight to mature sufficiently so as to inform, perhaps more objectively, her representation of the colonial past. Rather, she resorts to the very conventional and highly problematic form of historical fiction to embed her discoveries into a harmonizing pattern. Eleanor Collins and Caterina Colomba underline the flaws of such a formal choice in their critical examination of *The Secret River*. While Collins is disquieted by the relentless chronology and the stark realism of the narrative as well as by the absence "of the hazy line between objective facts and subjective reproductions of facts" (2010: 170), Colomba stresses the fact that, in the context of historical fiction, "reality can be freely manipulated" (2009: 97). I, too, wish to acknowledge my discomfort in the face of Grenville's formal choices, like her avoidance of those literary tropes or techniques—such as fragmentation, narratorial inconsistencies, or multiple voices—which could have served to register the partiality of her

sources. The same objection can be levelled at the other two novels of the Trilogy which also display an entrenched adherence to chronology and realism.

Like *The Secret River*, *The Lieutenant* and *Sarah Thornhill* fail to convey the uncertainties and intricacies inherent in the historical record. Indeed, in *The Lieutenant*, the lack of consensus among historians about William Dawes' morality and the nature of his relationship—whether sexual or otherwise—with the Aboriginal girl is completely overlooked; whilst in *Sarah Thornhill* Grenville is at such pains to reconcile empathy with chronological consistency that she falls into the pitfall of anachronism, by allowing her modern pro-Aboriginal stance to uncritically permeate the representation of her 19th-century protagonist.

It is worth mentioning that, despite its anachronism and its unsettlingly simplistic denouement, as shall be demonstrated later on, *Sarah Thornhill* has garnered glowing reviews. Sarah's modern insights—which are, in my estimation, implausible given her illiteracy as well as the temporal and geographical setting of her upbringing—have indeed seduced reviewers such as Delia Falconer and Stella Clarke, among many others. Whereas Falconer is confident that “*Sarah Thornhill* will be welcomed by many readers as just the story we need now” (2011), Clark goes so far as to aver that “Grenville's vivid fiction performs as testimony, memory and mourning within a collective post-colonial narrative” (2011). Admittedly, Grenville's decision to tackle the thorny issue of frontier violence in her Colonial Trilogy testifies to her sincere wish to keep the memory of the colonial past alive in the country's collective consciousness. Yet I feel reticent to concede that such an endeavour can be hailed as a genuine act of mourning. In effect, as Dominick LaCapra points out,

a book ... cannot be adequately defended on the basis of the mere fact that it keeps an issue alive in the public sphere and somehow forces a people to confront its past. A great deal depends on precisely how a book (or any other artefact) accomplishes this feat and what it contributes to public discussion of sensitive, indeed volatile, issues-issues that bear forcefully on contemporary politics and self-understanding. (2001: 121)

In adopting the traditional form of the historical novel, Grenville has chosen to tread on the smooth path of a narrative which, by virtue of its allegiance to the conventional plot structure (beginning, middle, and end), calls to mind those narratives, deemed dubious by LaCapra, that “seek resonant closure or uplift” (2001: 54). Indeed, each novel in the Trilogy slides from its

climax to an uplifting closure which is hardly congruous with an ethics of mourning that ought to eschew “any facile notion of redemption or harmonization” (LaCapra 2001: 156). For example, in *The Secret River* William Thornhill ends up feeling tormented by guilt after his involvement in the massacre. The burden of his crime is so oppressive that he hopelessly attempts to atone for it by offering food and warm clothes to the only Aboriginal survivor. This unlikely ending seeks to achieve catharsis and closure even as it contrives to restore some kind of morality to the perpetrators by emphasising their remorse and urge for redemption. On the other hand, the protagonist of *The Lieutenant* does not need his morality to be restored since he is the fictional counterpart of, purportedly, “the most morally upright man” in the history of early colonial Australia (Pybus 2009: 12.1). In this sense the novel as a whole epitomizes what LaCapra identifies as the redemptive narrative “that denies the trauma that called it into existence by prematurely (re)turning to the pleasure principle, harmonizing events, and often recuperating the past in terms of uplifting messages or optimistic, self-serving scenarios” (2001: 78). Nor does *Sarah Thornhill* depart from the redemptive pattern laid out by its predecessors. The journey of atonement undertaken by Sarah, the circumstances of which shall be unravelled below, offers a typical uplifting closure which any settler Australian reader, plagued by angst and guilt, may well be yearning for.

My point then runs counter to Collins' argument that “Kate Grenville's *The Secret River* is a discomfiting novel” (2010: 167). I actually wish to demonstrate that, however politically uncomfortable *The Secret River* as well as the other two novels of the Trilogy might be on a surface level, it remains that a form of moral comfort can be identified as their ultimate emerging objective. My suggestion is that Grenville's allegedly subversive revisitation of the national past proves ambiguously compromised by an apologetic discourse which, even as it attempts to voice guilty feelings over the violence inflicted upon Aborigines, subtly seeks absolution from colonial culpability through the invocation of extenuating circumstances. Indeed, *The Secret River*, for all its efforts to dredge up unpalatable facts about the dispossession and massacre of the Aboriginal populations, abounds with continuing references to a range of national myths that stand in marked contrast with the author's avowed purpose of inscribing her novel within the discourse of apology. Invoking mythologies such as convictism, hardship and ownership as well as the pioneering spirit, the representation of the colonial past perceptibly fails to conform to the requirements of a critical exposure of official historiography. Literary scholars such as Sheila Collingwood-Whittick and Rebecca Weaver-Hightower, amongst others, have pinpointed the unsettling implications of some of the representational strategies employed in the first novel of the Trilogy. In her insightful

analysis of *The Secret River*, Collingwood-Whittick recognizes traces of the myth of ownership in “the intensely lyrical description” (2009: 136) of Thornhill’s first sight of the land that he would eventually claim for himself:

A chaos opened up inside him, a confusion of wanting. No one had ever spoken to him of how a man might fall in love with a piece of ground. No one had ever spoken of how there could be this teasing sparkle and dance of light among the trees, this calm clean space that invited feet to enter it. (Grenville 2011: 110)

This description, Collingwood-Whittick argues, “de-contextualises settler desire for land and aestheticizes such desire by constructing it as the result of visual rapture and a romantic love of place” (2009: 136). She further adds that, “in this version of Australian settlement, the materialistic craving for real estate that drove colonial expansion has been made to disappear” (2009: 136). In the same line of thought, Weaver-Hightower maintains that *The Secret River* “plays out a fantasy of non-Indigenous Australian spiritual connection to the land, which brings a sense of legitimacy to contemporary non-Indigenous ownership of the land that conquest does not” (2010: 143). Expanding on Collingwood-Whittick’s and Weaver-Hightower’s insights, I would like to suggest that the novel’s obsessive thematization of the settlers’ love of the land betrays a barely concealed hankering for historical legitimacy and the moral comfort that may be derived from it. Significantly, Grenville indulges in a highly poetic language to capture the emotional metamorphosis Thornhill experiences when he “set foot on that promised land” (Grenville 2011: 136):

It seemed that he had become another man altogether. Eating the food of this country, drinking its water, breathing its air, had remade him, particle by particle. This sky, those cliffs, that river were no longer the means by which he might return to some other place. This was where he was: not just in body, but in soul as well. (Grenville 2011: 302)

A person capable of such love and sensitivity could hardly be perceived as a cold-blooded murderer, and his involvement in the massacre may ultimately appear as the unfortunate consequence of a tragic escalation of interpersonal individual conflicts rather than being part of the genocidal logic that underpinned settler colonialism. The colonial enterprise is thus

endowed with a more palatable dimension in which the settlers are seen, above all, as disoriented individuals who, once exiled from their native country, naturally long for some “promised land” and succumb to evil only under the most extreme circumstances.

Several scholars who examined this novel endeavoured to lay bare the various national myths which inform the portrayal of William Thornhill. Whilst Collins underscores “the myths of the worthy convict and the toiling pioneer” (2010: 169), Collingwood-Whittick draws attention to “the overdetermined victimhood of the novel’s main protagonist” (2009: 133) as well as to the “battler” status bestowed upon him. Interestingly, Thornhill stands out as a victim both before and after his transportation to Australia. In London he grows up at the mercy of the pitiless English class system, and is used to being so hungry that “he had eaten the bedbugs more than once” (Grenville 2011: 12), and so cold that he has been known to piss on his own feet to warm them. The sentence of death passed upon him for stealing timber, which was eventually changed into exile, reinforces his victim status. In New South Wales he is portrayed as a vulnerable deportee who strives to secure a better future for his family and is constantly defending them against Aboriginal attacks. Admittedly, it would be unfair to dismiss convicts’ suffering as a mere myth. Convictism and deportation are undoubtedly traumatic experiences which marked indelibly the foundation of the Australian nation. However, it seems to me profoundly disturbing, if not completely inappropriate, to dwell on—not to say exaggerate—this suffering in a narrative supposedly meant as an apology to the Aboriginal people. In a sense, this overemphasis on Thornhill’s predicament can be read as a discursive manoeuvre aiming at vindicating his subsequent actions. Bain Attwood expresses a valuable insight into settler Australians’ ontological crisis which possibly unearths the roots of the twisted logic also underlying Grenville’s dubious representation of her protagonist:

Many settler Australians were ... unsettled by the way in which the new Australian history changed their position in relation to the status of victimhood. They were used to seeing their forebears as victims, not oppressors, as sufferers, not perpetrators. The new Australian history placed their forebears in a past in which they were responsible for heinous deeds. Most importantly, it called for mourning in respect of another people’s historical experience. (2005: 30-31)

In effect, Grenville seems at pains to navigate a path through the legacies of the shameful past, and to absorb the new pattern of identity delineated by those revisionist

historians in whose wake she positions herself. Thus, despite her avowed willingness to shatter the taboos surrounding Australia's colonial history, she ends up playing the card of empathy in a way which reinscribes a deeply-rooted tradition woven by the same ineradicable national mythologies. Her representation of William Thornhill then testifies to a form of ambivalence, which is further manifest in the narration of the massacre in which Thornhill takes part. According to Collingwood-Whittick, who has meticulously probed this scene, the protagonist is depicted as "a horrified, passive witness to the slaughter rather than a participant in it" (2009: 138). Indeed, an array of discursive strategies is deployed to mitigate Thornhill's involvement in the murderous attack against the natives:

After that first shot, *things had moved too fast around Thornhill*. He pointed his gun at blacks as they ran but *the muzzle was always too late*. He stood in the clearing, the thing up against his shoulder, *watching ...* Then Thornhill felt a blow on his hand where it held the gun so that *he dropped the thing ...* He bent for the gun and was knocked over by another rock in the small of the back. For a moment he was sprawled with his face in the dust, *helpless as a beetle ...* Thornhill got the gun up to his shoulder but *he was too slow again ...* The gun was still up at Thornhill's shoulder, his finger was against the trigger, but *he could not move, a man in a dream*. He was aware of issuing orders to his finger to pull back on the trigger, but *nothing happened*. (Grenville 2011: 319-20, emphasis added)

"Does such a version of events", Odette Kelada rightfully asks, really "ease the guilt of a white readership?" (2010: 11). Perhaps it will suffice to consider the novel's massive success and popular appeal to answer Kelada's question. Not only did *The Secret River* win numerous literary prizes, but it has remained to this day "the most frequently set text in English courses" in Australia (Cosic 2011). Historians' and literary scholars' perspicacious criticism manifestly failed to curb Grenville's pursuit of a finally unabashed "comfort history", since she dedicated the second novel of her Colonial Trilogy to what obviously amounts to a celebration of an historical white hero. Inspired by "precisely the type of individual in whom historians of Empire are increasingly interested—a second-lieutenant in the Royal Marines in the American War of Independence, a member of the First Fleet, an astronomer, engineer, and surveyor at Sydney Cove, governor of Sierra Leone, anti-slave campaigner, and missionary and educator in Antigua" (Pinto 2010: 179), the protagonist of *The Lieutenant* is, in the words of his author, "a proper lovable hero" (Grenville 2008).

Similar to *The Secret River*, *The Lieutenant* paints a rather attenuated, if not rosy, picture of settlement in which the first settlers are motivated by “peaceable intentions” (Grenville 2010: 98), “have nothing but good will towards [the Aborigines]” (Grenville 2010: 107), and resort to violence only when one of them is murdered by the local natives. In the centre of this picture stands Lieutenant Rooke, a learned and compassionate man, driven by the noble sentiment of friendship and an insatiable thirst for knowledge of anything concerning Tagaran in whom “he recognises his sister” (Grenville 2010: 147). Like Thornhill, Rooke proves a reluctant perpetrator. Indeed, during a punitive expedition mounted against the natives, he loads his gun slowly, “even drops his bag of shot”, and when he eventually fires, “he fixes on a patch of glittering water far from the [natives’] canoe, and hopes that for once his aim is good” (Grenville 2010: 264). However, the historical figure on which Lieutenant Rooke is based may not have been as admirable as the readers of the novel are incited to believe. According to Ross Gibson, “Dawes engaged in entrepreneurial activities in the camp (and possibly amongst the Eora [the local natives]) The Governor reported how he had to reprimand Dawes for trading contraband within the starving economy of the prison camp” (2012: 171-72). In West Africa, where he joined the movement for the abolition of slavery (after being sent away from the colony because of insubordination), he was accused of trading in slaves (Pybus 2009: 12.3), and according to the reports of Thomas Perronet Thompson, the first crown governor of Sierra Leone, “Dawes was notorious up and down the coast as a debaucher of local African women, as well as the wives and daughters of the black settlers. Worse yet, Thompson charged that Dawes encouraged women to kill the babies that resulted from such liaisons” (Pybus 2009: 12.5). Significantly, none of these dark facets of Lieutenant Dawes filter through the representation of his fictional counterpart. Brigid Rooney, writing in defence of Grenville’s fictional revisitation of the colonial past, affirms that “the fictional reality [offered in *The Lieutenant*] parallels and mirrors, without ever supplanting ... , the historical record to which it refers” (2010: 36).

As against this claim, I wish to argue, in view of the above-mentioned statements about Lieutenant Dawes’ questionable morality, that the novel has failed to mirror history insofar as the historical sources have obviously been selected and edited in order to leave out any testimony or evidence that may tarnish the image of Grenville’s “founding hero”. More noteworthy still is the deliberate elision of the possible sexual dimension in the relationship between Rooke and Tagaran, evident in the author’s decision to make her prepubescent, that is, younger than the fourteen or fifteen-year-old historical character on which she is based. Grenville accounts for this distortion by stating: “I felt that as a writer I had to work quite

hard, I had to use all the weapons I could to say we're looking at a different sort of relationship here, not a sexual one. So making her younger just helped that a little bit" (Grenville 2008). Given the contentious context of the novel, this may be interpreted rather differently—i.e. as yet another discursive manoeuvre meant to wash away potential stains in Dawes' reputation.

Fifteen years afterwards, Lieutenant Rooke will be allowed, despite his insubordination, to die a natural death in Antigua where, as the novel puts it, "he had given his life for [the slaves]" (294). Like the protagonist of *Schindler's List*, "a specific example of a redemptive narrative" (Grenville 2010: 157) according to LaCapra, Rooke ultimately "emerges as a martyr and a hero" (2001: 157). The novel thus ends on a rather positive note which flirts with fantasies of redemption and nostalgic grandeur. The last novel of the Trilogy similarly indulges, as suggested above, in fantasies of redemption by dint of its mobilization of a fairly uplifting closure. When Jack learns about the dark secret in Sarah's family—disclosed to him alone by Sarah's malevolent stepmother who wants to put an end to their relationship—he harshly rejects Sarah and flees to New Zealand. Wounded by this unexplained rejection, Sarah marries another man and strives to establish a new life away from the Hawkesbury. Yet she is haunted by her memories with Jack and, above all, by guilt when she finally discovers her father's crime. Her torment is further exacerbated by the ghost of her half-Maori niece, that is, the child that her brother fathered on a Maori woman in New Zealand before drowning at sea. The girl is brought to live with the Thornhills where she leads a miserable life at the mercy of Sarah's ruthless stepmother, gets pregnant by one of the family's Aboriginal workers, and is eventually sent away to die having an abortion in a maternity hospital. Overwhelmed by the burden of guilt, Sarah readily abandons husband and daughter and follows Jack who has come back to invite her to embark on a journey to New Zealand to meet her niece's Maori relatives and confess, as a measure of expiation, the child's mistreatment at the hands of her family.

This journey, however symbolically significant it may seem, conveys what LaCapra identifies as "a kind of redemptive ritual, rather than a form of mourning that is tensely bound up with the problems of the past" (2001: 157). Indeed Grenville, again driven by an empathetic impulse, weaves a redemptive version of the past "in which the progressive realization of some goal evacuates (or makes up for) all negative elements" (Roth 2012: 84). A kind of atonement then seems to be achieved, by virtue of Sarah's moving confessions, as suggested in the following extract:

When it was finished, I was emptied. By and by I heard the women [the Maori relatives] start in to singing, a sad quiet song “My part was finished”. The shred of story I had, I’d handed it along. “Paid the only price I could”. These women had taken it into themselves. It was theirs now, part of what they would do to honour the girl. (Grenville 2012: 302)

In offering a semblance of settlement of the unsettled past, the novel slips into what LaCapra refers to as the “simplistic therapeutic, ‘feel-good’ ethos” (2001: 152) which ultimately undermines the author’s avowed intention of critically confronting the legacies of colonization. Effectively, a fair and respectful representation of a traumatic past should, as Michael S. Roth emphasizes, “convey that the historical consciousness is always unfinished business, and that balance is not necessarily the goal of recollection or representation” (2012: 85). It should also “enable and try to bring about processes of working through that are not simply therapeutic for the individual but have political and ethical implications” (LaCapra 2001: 152). *Sarah Thornhill*, though obviously well-intentioned, has failed to live up to these expectations, thus compromising its legitimacy as a Sorry Novel.

In a review of *The Secret River*, entitled “Picking up the Stitches of Our History”, Grenville asserts that

there are no easy answers to all those questions about land rights and health care and appalling mortality rates [of Indigenous Australians] They’re all questions that are kind of too hard for everybody, and it seems to me, in a situation like that, the only thing you can do is go back to the point where it went wrong ... and you unpick it, like knitting, you’ve got to undo the whole thing, all those 20 rows, to where you went wrong, where you dropped the stitch, work out why you dropped it, what your choices were, and then you go on. (Stubbings 2005: 12)

In the light of this statement, it is presumably with the ambition to make amends for past wrongs that Grenville embarked on a journey into Australia’s national past. This ambition, however benevolent, clashes with the fact, aptly emphasized by McKenna, that “writing the past does not mean righting the past” (2006b: 109). Admittedly, as Colomba points out, “questioning and examining the past is an undeniable need for comprehension and critical reading of the present” (2009: 98); yet such a venture may easily surrender to the lures of “comfort history”. This is indeed, as this essay has strived to demonstrate, the case of

Grenville's Colonial Trilogy which, in falling into the pitfalls of national mythologies and fantasies of redemption, ends up reinscribing the kind of foundational discourse that it actually meant to subvert. An effective decolonizing enterprise, in my view, should not be premised solely on an excavation of the past. In effect, when they locate the colonial trauma at some safe distance in a remote past, the Sorry Narratives "can become charged melancholic objects that sustain the tie to old traumatic injuries while deflecting from the urgency of addressing new violent histories in the present" (Schwab 2010: 82). Perhaps the answers to "those questions about land rights and health care and appalling mortality rates" that are, according to Grenville, "too hard for everybody", may emerge from an examination of the present also. In other words, I believe that, besides exploring the past, more attention could be paid to current issues, such as the Intervention in the Northern Territory or Aboriginal deaths in custody, issues that, if impartially represented, would surely not right the past, yet would at least shatter the ongoing silence about Indigenous Australians' current plight.

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