

Sea-change or Atrophy? The Australian Convict Inheritance

Cynthia vanden Driesen

Copyright©2011 Cynthia vanden Driesen. This text may be archived and redistributed both in electronic form and in hard copy, provided that the author and journal are properly cited and no fee is charged.

Abstract: This paper is an offshoot of a larger project which explored the possibility for the erstwhile settler-colonizer undergoing the sea-change into settler-indigene emergent through a study of selected novels of Patrick White. It became apparent to me that the convict figure, who played an ancillary role in these works, could lay claim to the status of white indigene well ahead of the main protagonist. Robert Hughes (in *The Fatal Shore*) discredits the idea of any bonding between the convict and the Aborigine but acknowledges examples of “white blackfellas”—white men who had successfully been adopted into Aboriginal societies. Martin Tucker’s nineteenth century work, *Ralph Rashleigh*, offers surprising testimony of a creative work which bears this out in a context where Australian literature generally reflected the national amnesia with regard to the Aborigine and barely accorded them human status. Grenville’s *The Secret River* (2005), based broadly on the history of her own ancestor, appears to support Hughes’ original contention but is also replete with ambivalences that work against a simple resolution. This paper will explore some of the ambivalences, the ‘food for thought’ on aspects of the Australian experience highlighted by these literary texts, and glances briefly also at variations on the theme in Carey’s *Jack Maggs* and the *The True Story of the Kelly Gang*.

Key words: convict; Aborigine; settler culture

Interpreting the conference theme in its metaphoric sense as a playing with ideas that could stimulate new modes of thinking; of feeding the imagination and the intellect, this paper will highlight selected literary representations of the Australian convict which suggest that the transportation into exile resulted, for some at least, not in atrophy and extinction but in a new transmutation, a re-birth and an attaining to a new status of belonging in the new land. James Tucker’s *Ralph Rashleigh* provides an early (and utterly surprising) foreshadowing of this theme which could not be bypassed, but this study will focus mainly on the convict figure in contemporary works such as Patrick

White's *Voss* and *A Fringe of Leaves* and Grenville's convict protagonist in *The Secret River*. Peter Carey's *Jack Maggs* will provide additional piquancy to this idea as further provender on the menu, of 'food for thought'.

For decades of White Australian history, the question of the 'Stain' on the beginnings of the nation because of its connections with convictism has pre-occupied historians, sociologists, nationalist theorists of all kinds. Hughes cites Bentham's comment that the thief-colony Australia and the experiment of transportation of the criminal element out of the 'civilised' world is one extreme: "the subject matter of experiment was [...] a sort of excrementitious mass, that could be projected and accordingly was projected [...] as far out of sight as was possible." (Hughes, 1987: xi) At the height of the nationalism of the 1890's, the *Bulletin's* definition of who was an Australian, reads as follows: "Every man who comes to this shore, with a clean record, no convict, no lascar, no kanaka [...] is] an Australian." (White, 1981: 161)

Mary Gilmore's tribute marks the beginnings of a view that takes count of the 'sea-change' in the role of convicts in Australia, according them iconic status as the founding fathers of the colony:

I'm old
Old Botany Bay
Stiff in the joints
Little to say...
I am he
who paved the way;
That you may walk
At your ease today:

I was the conscript/Sent to hell
To make in the desert
The living well;
I bore the heat
I blazed the track-
Furrowed and bloody
Upon my back
I split the rock
I felled the tree:
The nation was -
Because of me!
(Gilmore, 1925: 9.)

Hughes feels that the marginalization of the convict figure in the narrative of the nation has continued into contemporary times:

Behind the bright diorama of Australia Felix lurked the convicts, some 160,000 of them, clanking their fetters in the penumbral darkness. But on the feelings and experiences of these men and women, little was written. They were statistics, absences and finally embarrassments. The convicts were the total outcasts from a British society which had transported them to the nethermost part of the world with the strictest prohibitions against return: Regarded as virtually another species of humanity, – the otherness to which they were consigned could be held to be synonymous with that accorded the blacks. (1987: xi)

In Hughes' view there was no possibility of a bonding between these outcasts and the Indigenous people: the convict envied the 'freedom' of the Indigene while the Aborigines realized the convicts were outcasts of the white society and preferred to align with the officers and troops in helping to return runaway convicts to officialdom.

Nevertheless, Hughes mentions immediately after, rather contradictorily, the famous case of William Buckley who absconded in 1803, lived with the blacks for a period of over 30 years and returned to the colony in 1833. J.J. Healy adds further detail to the story. It appears that while Buckley had initially promised to share his knowledge of Aborigines for commercial purposes, when once in possession of his ticket-of-leave, he refused to talk about his experiences. He is recorded to have wished the blacks could have their country back to themselves again and the whites be made to leave 'no matter how.' (Healy, 1989: 11) Stories of 'white blackfellas' (wild white men) who had lived amongst the blacks for long years are too numerous to ignore. Healy mentions other 'wild' white men, such as James Davis and James Bracefield, escaped convicts who returned to Brisbane (in 1842) after a period of 14 years amongst the blacks. Like Buckley, they remained uncommunicative about their experiences. Davis is recorded as having suggested that anyone who wanted more information about the blacks should: "... take his clothes off, and go among them and live with them, as I did." (Healy, 1989: 11)

What is being explored within this paper is something very different from the white man's fear of "going troppo"—the nineteenth century belief of the inevitable degeneracy that threatened the white man who came into contact with savage peoples. This was the fate of Kurtz in Conrad's classic work *Heart of Darkness*. My subject is more nearly an aspiration to indigeneity, a yearning for belonging in the land in the manner of its Indigenous inhabitants. The Jindyworobak poet Roland Robinson in a poem "Would I Might Find My Country," conveys something of the settler's yearning for belonging:

Would I might find my country as the blacks
come in and lean their spears up in the scrub
and crouch and light their flickering fires [...].
Would I might find my people as the blacks
sit with their lubras, children and tired dogs
their dilly bags [...]
and talk in quiet calling voices while
the blood-deep crimson flower of sunset burns
in smouldering ash and fume behind the trees,

behind the thin grassed ridges of their land
(qtd. Elliott, 1979: 27).

Terry Goldie has defined the concept as follows:

When the Canadian looks at the Indian, the Indian is other and alien. But the Indian is indigenous and therefore cannot be alien [...] The importance of the alien within cannot be overstated. In their need to become “native”, to belong here, whites in Canada, New Zealand and Australia have adopted a process which I have termed “indigenization”. (1939: 12-13)

My thesis in this paper finds some support in the Fanonian concept of the sharp divide that demarcates the privileged dwellings of the white coloniser from the habitations of the colonized; it is a means of maintaining the coloniser’s hegemony over the despised lower breed of the colonized. (Fanon, 2004: 6) While most of the chapter focuses on the vengeful dreams of the colonised to take over the privileged space, it is also possible to theorise that if/when the white man crosses over from that hegemonic space, the racial divide becomes elided. The convict, by his crossing over into the intimate dwelling space of the Indigene, discovers it to be the ‘home’, a nurturant space he has never encountered in the space allowed him in the world of white power. In abandoning that world the convict is admitted into a space where he may experience his shared humanity with the blacks.

I have, in a recent study, made a case for the recognition of the Aboriginal presence as being a significant issue for Australian writers probing the perennial questions relating to Australian identity. I have invoked the arguments of J. J. Healy, Terry Goldie and also the theorist Alan Lawson in support of this contention. (vanden Driesen, 2009: 1-27) I will not rehearse these arguments again here but wish to emphasise, at the outset, the importance of the writer in the settler-culture context. As the theorists aver, it is the task of the settler-writer to assist in the forging of the new sense of identity, the yearning for belonging which is endemic in the psyche of the new settler in his adoptive land. Slemon proffers the interesting speculation that it is the literary artist who can probe the subtleties of the issues of newly emergent identity in the complex context of the settler culture since the creative work can allow contradiction, conflict and doubleness in a mode that the demands on the critic for argumentative cohesiveness and intellectual coherence cannot accommodate. (Slemon, 1990: 36-37)

This is the importance of Tucker’s novel *Ralph Rashleigh* (1845), which deals with an Aboriginal theme in the nineteenth century Australian context in which the Indigene was still barely acknowledged as a human. An ex-convict himself, he was also an educated man with a wide experience of all classes of men in the colony. His eighteen years in the colony endowed him with “a historical imagination and a sense of place, which allowed him to penetrate the realities of colonial life more than most men.” (Healy, 1989: 37) Tucker re-creates, with considerable credibility in this novel, the experience of a white

man received into a black tribe and blest with privileges he had never experienced in the harshness of the white world. Rashleigh's experiences in the first two-thirds of the novel could be partly autobiographical and reflect Tucker's own life—first in England and later as a convict in Australia—but the life amongst the Aborigines is much more an imaginative creation marked with considerable vitality and showing awareness of varied and intimate knowledge of the blacks' way of life.

Of the three worlds of Ralph's experience, the Aboriginal world is shown to be the most nurturant: he is adopted as a son by the old *carandje* (medicine man) of the tribe; and only leaves it because of the death of the old man, and the jealousies of a rival. There is considerable feeling in the account of the love and fidelity of the woman Lorra, who dies in order to save him, and of his own feelings for her:

Rashleigh decided he would not bury the body near the tribe, so he constructed a rough sort of hand-barrow into which he placed it. He then ordered the two djins to carry it northward [...] He soon overtook the women, and lifting Lorra's body from the hand-cart [...] he carried it in his arms, never stopping until night [...] One of them (the djins), named Enee, begged Rashleigh to eat. His appetite however was lost in the grief he was feeling [...]

He spent the night in a melancholy vigil over the remains of the girl who had loved him so well that she had not hesitated to draw Jumba's attack upon herself [...]

He wrapped her in his best opossum-skin cloak and buried her in a deep grave with a thick layer of grasses to protect her body from the earth, under the shade of a hanging acacia tree growing beside a murmurous rivulet. As he shoveled the earth into the pit, tears ran down his cheeks, and a great sense of loss overwhelmed him. He lay mourning beside the grave all that day and the night that followed, watched secretly with awe and wonder by the two remaining djins. Next day, they resumed their march, Rashleigh turning often to look back towards the spot where he had left the remains of the only woman, outside his family, who had ever loved him. (RR.227-228)

He is accompanied by the two other native women whom he has inherited and survives with great ease in the wilderness; long enough to rescue survivors from a shipwreck and return them (and himself) to civilization. During all this phase, he maintains the appearance of a black man—and when he does reveal his identity, his protégés find it difficult to accept this:

“Well, I suppose, we ought not to be surprised to see you in your natural colour,” said Mrs. Marby: “but I'm afraid I shall always think of our preserver as black, white though you are now. You are very welcome, black or white...” (RR.255).

The two Aboriginal women find it even more difficult to see him as a white man (he has had to apply chemicals on his skin to restore it to its former colour):

[...] he went to find Enee and Tita, and was surprised to find that they seemed quite unable to resume the old familiar relationship now that he was a white man. [...] He

attempted to speak to them as usual in their native tongue, but was then and always repulsed by them as by a demeanour of distant respect. [...] "You white gentleman now; no more blackfellow," they would say and go about their work. (255).

Several decades were to elapse before a white writer would be daring enough to take up an allied theme. Amnesia in relation to the Indigenous presence in Australia seemed to settle into the collective Australian psyche and nowhere was it more apparent than in the Australian literary scene. In White's novel *Voss* the links between the Aborigine and the convict emerge early. The convict Judd is chosen, by the local landowners, to accompany the expedition because of his knowledge of the country. Like the Aborigines, the very sound of whose bare feet upon the ground "suggested ownership" to Voss (V.169), Judd is enormously at ease in the country: casually breaking a knob of gum off a tree and offering it to the boy Harry to masticate as the group ride through the desert, or scraping the maggots off the carcass of a sheep to prepare a Christmas feast in the desert. At the crossing of the river, his awareness of the hazards saves the party from the disaster of losing all their supplies at the river crossing. When the party finally splits up, Jackie the Aboriginal boy remains as guide to Voss' party; the others return under the guidance of Judd and the young landowner Angus who had earlier objected to sitting at the same table with the convict now "gave his life into the keeping of Judd." (V.347)

The Aborigines' alignment with the world of nature is apparent from their first appearance almost as emanations of the natural world: "as shadows first, followed by a suggestion of skin wedded to the trunk of a tree ..." (V. 191) or as "shreds of shy bark, glimpsed between the trunks of the trees ..." (V. 204) Judd is represented as "A mass of *limestone*, broken by nature into forms that were almost human, and filled with a similar, slow brooding innocence." (V.136) Judd's wife, his sons, his dwelling place seem similarly aligned to the natural world: "the woman stood watching after the manner of *animals*, like the horse which had come down from the mountain, and the herd of brown goats; his sons "had a smell upon them of *young waxy lambs*." (V.147). His dwelling place is seamlessly embedded into the natural world:

a house or hut of bleached slabs, that *melted into the live trunks of the surrounding trees*. The interstices of the slab hut had been daubed with yellow clay, but this too had weathered and formed part of a natural disguise. (V.145, italics mine)

An instinctual being, he seeks solace in communion with the animal world:

Judd followed the tracks of the stock and there found them congregated along the banks of a river [...] One or two surviving goats looked at the surviving newcomer without moving, admitting him temporarily into the fellowship of beasts. The man-animal joined them and sat for a while upon the scorching bank. It was possibly this communion with the beasts that did finally rouse his bemused human intellect, for in their company he sensed the threat of the knife never far distant from the animal throat. (V.345)

Judd's convict past has unshackled him from formal allegiance to the British crown. When needled by Voss as to "the past injustices of the Crown," he carefully answers he avers that he still wishes to serve the colony. Like the old Aborigine Dugald before him, who also simply announced his decision to return, Judd is not intimidated by Voss and the formal allegiances:

'Do you not realize you are under my leadership?'
'Not any more, I am not.' [...]
'It is not cowardice, if there is hell before and hell behind and nothing to choose between them,' Judd protested, 'I will go home [...].' (V.345)

Jackie the black boy recalls him at the end after all the white men have perished through "the haze of memory, [...] the back of his broad hand like *the branches of a tree*, his face *a second copper sun*." (V.420)

Judd survives finally through living with a group of desert Aborigines for several years after the loss of the expedition. In a sense he never really returns to the white world; he has lost his wife and sons during his years in the desert and has also suffered the loss of his wits; he remains forever suspended in his desert world, from within which he addresses the colonial world of Sydney to which he is physically returned at the end of the novel, a shell of his former self but equipped now with a wisdom born of his experience in the desert. Judd's seemingly crazed responses encapsulate the novel's larger theme: "Voss did not die [...] He is still there, it is said, in the country, and always will be." (V.448) His answer to Laura's question as to how this could be is the answer that Laura passes on to others as answer to the perennial question of belonging: "when one has lived and suffered long enough in a country then one can belong [...] if you live and suffer long enough in a place, you do not leave it altogether. Your spirit is still there." (V.443) The convict is positioned in a particular space of belonging to which other whites have limited or no access.

Language and image also construct the convict woman Rose as an autochthonous presence: she is associated with the colour brown, which in the taxonomy of White's symbolism suggests the earth and strength of natural forces. Like Judd, Rose has endured the suffering which is the common inheritance of all convicts. Laura's spiritual progress as well as her understanding of the country owe a particular debt to her convict maid, so she declares:

Finally, I believe I have begun to understand this great country, which we have been preposterous enough to call *ours*, and with which I shall be content to grow since the day we buried Rose. For part of me has now gone into it. (V.239)

In *A Fringe of Leaves*, Jack Chance erupts into the narrative as already a fully-fledged Indigene, a participant in the blacks' corroboree. Ellen, the shipwrecked Englishwoman, notes his presence:

One giant of a fellow, a natural clown by any standards would twirl and leap in the air, slapping his heels and entertain those within earshot of his patter. She could tell that he was respected and envied. (FL.251)

Noting the “patternless welter of healed wounds” (FL.250) on his back, different and yet similar to the ceremonial incisions on the backs of the blacks, she realizes he must be a runaway convict. Physically, he has all the appearance of an Aborigine, he even has the same “stench” noted in their earliest appearance: “all sinew, stench and exultant in their mastery” (FL.241). Ellen notes, he brings with him “the now familiar stench” into the shelter. (FL.265) When he makes love, he handles her “as though she had been a wheelbarrow, or black woman, for she had seen the head of her adoptive family take possession of his wives after such a fashion.” Ellen’s own continuing transformation into the Indigene is underlined by the resemblances she now becomes conscious of between herself and the convict: “She sighed and snorted and thought how foolish she must look naked and filthy beside the naked filthy man.” (FL.298)

He is supremely at home in the wilderness. At their very first halt, he quickly builds a shelter, “low and shapeless scarcely distinguishable from the living bushes [...]” (FL.289) Nakedness is the natural state of the Aborigine and the first step in sharing the life of the Indigene seems to be the ritual discarding of the garments of the white man; one recalls the suggestion mentioned earlier by the returned white blackfella to anyone who seeks knowledge of the blacks: “...let him take his clothes off, and go among them and live with them, as I did.” (Healy, 1989: 11) Ellen allows Chance to “free her of the girdle of vines ... which had been until now the only disguise of her nakedness (FL.268), but the very next morning she has ‘re-clothed’ herself and she notes “his sullen glance at her renewed girdle” (FL.301), a forewarning of her desire to return to the white world.

For his part, he remains naked:

He was carrying the spear and waddy and the cumbrous net he had retained from his life with the aborigines [...]. He had made no attempt to cover his nakedness in any way since losing the strip of bark cloth. (FL.301) Later, he picks up his spear and leaves their ‘camp’ in search of food, while she makes a fire “as she remembered seeing the black women, using sticks and fibre when he reappeared [...] he had speared one of the giant birds [...] so a feast was promised [...]. Preparing for it they did not speak but communicated by grunts and sniffs [...]” (FL.314)

What follows is probably the most idyllic sequence in the entire narrative, where the two of them are represented as a pair of Aboriginal lovers in an Australian Eden, the suggestions present also in the Nolan painting used on the original cover of the novel. It is notable that the barred lines of sunlight falling across the naked body of the convict are suggestive of the convict garb he has worn in the white world and also suggest the merging of the convict into the naked Indigene, an effect which invests the painting with a resonance that is central to the theme of this paper.

His discarding of allegiance to his British origins is underlined by the fact he will not be drawn to take sides against the blacks in the recent conflict “I heard tell among the blacks.” he said, “They was provoked though by whites. So she did not know how she stood.” (FL.292) In fact when she first meets him, his loss of allegiance to his English inheritance is evocatively established by the fact that he can barely speak the English language. “Men is unnatural and unjust” (FL.281), sums up his verdict on the colonial society from which he is a fugitive. His sufferings at the hands of brutal administrators of the convict system have permanently estranged him from his English heritage:

[...] they strip us naked and string us up at the triangles—for the good of our moral 'ealth. I fell down once. The surgeon [...] kicked me to see if I wasn't dead. [...] the bones was showin through me hide [...] the flies got to work on the cuts. I was turned septic [...]. I was deleerious at first [...]. But now I can take notice and hate. (FL. 309)

It is this hate that triggers his decision to return to the wilds just as he and Ellen reach the outskirts of the white settlement:

[...] some demon had taken possession of him. “Ah Ellen, I can hear 'em settin up the triangles - in the gateway to the barracks! They'll be waitin' for me.!” Immediately after he turned and went loping back into the bush, the strength restored to his skeleton. (FL 332).

He chooses to return to the Indigenous world which has proved to be, for him, the nurturant ‘home’ that the England of his past or the transplanted colonial society of Sydney could never be.

While the convict in the White novels is not the chief focus of the work, in Grenville's *The Secret River*, he takes centre-stage. Based on the figure of her own convict ancestor (Thomas Wiseman) he offers a contrast to the figures in the White novels that would almost seem to upend my thesis. Thornhill's mind-set is a classic example of the kind of “ambivalence of placement” which Slemon has described as the natural condition of the settler, one to whom an absolute divide between colonised self and colonising Other is simply not easily available. It is possible to argue however that here one observes that in this case, the allegiance to the colonising Other has emerged dominant. (Slemon, 1990: 36-37)

Thornhill has suffered the same experience of ostracism by the English ‘mother’ which was the fate of all convicts, but is unable to shuffle off his British allegiance. His youth in England is weighted down with the grinding poverty which drives him to the crime for which he is first sentenced to transportation, but he retains a value for the same gentrified social values which have made him a pariah in his native England. Although, unlike his wife Sal, he has no desire to return to England, he still wishes to recreate for himself the life of the English gentleman in Australia, with all the privileges of wealth and social status which had been totally out of his grasp in England. The gaze he turns upon the land

is essentially that of the coloniser: “All a person needed to do was find a place no one had already taken. Plant a crop, build a hut, call the place Smith’s or Flanagan’s, and outstare anyone who said otherwise.” (FL.121) Once he gains his ticket of leave, and the right to possess land and own servants, the colonial greed takes over.

Soon after he has rowed out to what will be called Thornhill’s place, he marks out the space in which he will plant his first crop:

In the centre of the clearing he dragged his heel across the dirt four times, line to line. The straight line and the square they made was like nothing else there and changed everything. Now there was a place where a man had laid his mark over the face of the land. It was astonishing how little it took to own a piece of the earth. (SR.134)

He simply ignores the obvious signs of the presence of previous owners of the land. His son Willy points out to him the moment they start scratching at the soil: “Look Da... some other bugger already digged it up.” (SR.140) Soon after follows the altercation with the two black men:

The man spoke loud and hard and gestured [...]. In any language, anywhere that movement of the hand said, *Go away*. Even a dog understood *Go Away* when he said it. (SR.147)

The opposition of the blacks to the taking over of their land and their periodic “depredations” lead finally to their wholesale massacre by the white settlers. Thereafter as Thornhill prospers and as his possessions grow he becomes transformed into the English gentleman of substance he has always wanted to be:

The Irishman Devine had built a fine stone house for Mr. Thornhill [...]. They had named it Cobham Hall [...]. Devine was full of ways to make the place a fortress. The eminence itself was the start of it. *A hundred of the buggers could not cut you off here he had assured*. The walls were to be of stone, half a yard thick... Cobham Hall was a gentleman’s residence.” (SR.316)

It is a place that re-establishes and perpetuates the divide that Fanon speaks of; the physical divide is the material reflection of the psychic divide between the coloniser and the colonised.

Does this then make nonsense of my thesis? No—for despite Thornhill’s sense of achievement there is a deeper and continuing sense of loss. In the aftermath of the attack there still remains a lone black survivor, Long Jack, who returns to affirm his right of ownership. Thornhill makes various reparatory gestures like setting aside a patch of land, a gift of clothes and even a hut, but Long Jack maintains his pride:

No, he said. It was the first time Thornhill had ever heard him use an English word. Jack slapped his hand on the ground so hard a puff of dust flew up and wafted away. This me, he said, My place. He smoothed the dirt with his palm so it left a

patch like the scar on his head. *Sit down hereabouts.* His face closed down then and he stared into the fire. (SR.329)

It is then the realisation strikes home to Thornhill of the emptiness of his acquisitions:

He would have said he had everything a man could want, but there was an emptiness as he watched Jack's hand caressing the dirt. This was something he did not have: a place that was part of his flesh and spirit. There was no part of the world he would keep coming back to, the way Jack did, just to feel it under him. It was as if the very dirt were consolation. (SR.329)

Each day he sits with his spyglass in his hand—looking down on all his grand possessions, noting that “beyond the wall [...] was another world where the cliffs waited and watched. Above the roses and the rest of it was forest [...] they were unchanged by the speck of NSW enclosed by William Thornhill's wall.” (SR.331)

There is however the massive contrasting figure of another convict in this text, whose situation is more reflective of the sea-change from alien invader to a state of belonging in the land; a belonging which hinges on the bonding with the Indigene: “Blackwood was a big man, bigger even than Thornhill with a lighterman's brawny calves and arms. He had a kind of rough dignity about him, a closed-in quality [...]” (SR.94) He has acquired his own piece of land—but with the recognition that there: “‘Ain't nothing in this world just’ for the taking [...]. A man got to pay a fair price for taking,’ he said, ‘Matter of give a little, take a little.’” (SR.104) Blackwood lives with a black woman by whom he has had a child. Throughout the narrative, a strong antagonism subsists between him and the more brutal of the emancipists who see the blacks as little more than vermin to be eradicated. The Aborigines are actually encamped on his land when the final massacre takes place, and Blackwood loses his entire family. Thereafter, he never speaks to Thornhill though the latter makes the same placatory offerings to him as he does to Long Jack. It is the novelist Grenville who offers Blackwood recompense for the loss of his family: Thornhill's son has shown, from childhood, an affinity with the Indigenous people playing amongst their children, running naked amongst them and learning from the elders. Some days after the battle with the Aborigines, Dick Thornhill leaves his own family and goes to live with Blackwood. Later, Thornhill hears with considerable pain of his estranged son being referred to as Dick Blackwood.

The reader is left feeling that Blackwood is perhaps the ancestor Grenville herself would rather have had. In her book about the writing of the novel *Searching for the Secret River* she writes of her horror at the discovery of the atrocities perpetrated on the blacks and her ancestor's complicity in the displacement of the Indigenous people:

Every rock. Every stream. Every tree would have carried the marks of people who inhabited the land: Wiseman would have known that every acre of this place was as lived in as his own house. No wonder he thought he had to build a fortress.

His descendant, Grenville describes how she sits through the night listening to the wind, the trees, she has the feeling that “the place was speaking to me.” (SR.138-140) She knew she had to tell its story; the outcome is the novel dedicated “to the Aboriginal people of Australia, past present and future.”

Perhaps there has been no more significant a re-invention of the image of the convict than that accomplished by Carey in making over the figure of the unfortunate Magwitch in Dickens' *Great Expectations*. Despite a degree of compassion for the convict's lot, he is still cast as a creature to be shunned. In Carey's hands, the convict emerges as a man of strength and principle, more sinned against than sinning; indeed he is the only true gentleman in a group of men, some of whom may have the title but are, finally far more depraved and corrupt than the transported convict could ever be. The psyche of Grenville's convict remains interpellated with his British allegiances; so also is Carey's Jack Maggs, but the latter is able (even if only after years) to break the umbilical chord that still binds him to the original home.

It is here that the need to re-write the Manichean divide between the colonialist construct of Europe as the one source of light, virtue and humanity as against the dark sub-human world of the non-West becomes a necessary project. The novel shows the difficulties attendant on such a project—even if the Europe/Britain of the convict's experience has been the stuff of nightmare. Abandoned as an infant, Maggs is picked up by the riff-raff who live under London Bridge and is given into the reluctant charge of “Ma Britten” by the thief and receiver Silas. As a child he is inducted into a life of crime. The novel exposes the horrific underbelly of post-Industrial England—the foundations on which the greatness of her Empire was built:

English society was violently changing, under the stresses of industrialization, the growth of towns, and a soaring birthrate [...] between 1750 and 1770 the population of London doubled and by 1851 it stood at 18 million [...]. No mechanisms existed for the effective relief of mass unemployment; it was not a problem that England had ever before had to contend with on this scale. The Laws had been written for a different England. Parish relief and the workhouse were the primitive devices of a pre-industrial society; now they were overwhelmed. (Hughes, 1986: 25-26)

What Carey achieves in this text is a reconstruction of the despised figure of the banished convict as a far more impressive figure than the so-called English gentleman; dependent for his status on inherited wealth and no effort of his own. The reader is aware of the fragility of this status of the English gentleman, but for Jack Maggs the realization only arrives at the end of the narrative. While waiting for the ‘son’ he hopes has attained the status of gentleman by virtue of the money he has sent him from Australia, he looks back at the price he has paid for this, his own sufferings as a convict:

The flies might feast on his spattered back; the doublecat might carry away the third and fourth fingers of his hand; but his mind crawled forward, always, constructing [...] a house in Knightsbridge whose kind and beautiful interior he had entered by tumbling down a chimney [...]. Clearing the soot from his eyes he had seen that

which he later knew was meant by authors when they wrote of England and of Englishmen. (JM.383-384)

The 'gentleman' Maggs has laboured to nurture through his years of hard work in Australia is Phipps, a sexual exploiter of his 'servants, a liar, and finally even would-be murderer of the man who had been a foster father to him.

Carey's text, *Jack Maggs*, is set mainly in the imperial space, to which the ex-convict has stubbornly yearned to return, and does so after years of 'exile' in Australia. Yet this England emerges as indeed "one of the dark places of the earth" that Conrad speaks of in *Heart of Darkness*. (1988: 9) The wealthy homes with their riches of art, silver, books and their rituals of fine dining and cultured pursuits are set cheek by jowl with scenes of squalor and lives of abject and grinding poverty and it is the latter scenes that remain most deeply etched in the mind. He returns finally to Australia—recognizing it as his true home, the place which has given him family, prosperity, status. Carey's convict is not brought into the contact with the Aborigine which sparks the 'sea-change' of the convict of the other narratives explored—but it shows forth the breaking with the British allegiance as the crucial element in working the transformation of the figure of the monstrous convict of the Dickens text into the new Australian.

Carey's *Ned Kelly* re-writes the bushranger's life as a courageous protest against the persecution suffered at the hands of the instruments of British justice, the police. This text cannot be analysed here in any detail but must be cited as another work in which the convict, the outcast and rebel against the laws of imperial England is reconstructed as iconic Australian hero. The legend of Ned Kelly (like the story of Eliza Fraser/Ellen Roxburgh in White's *A Fringe of Leaves*) inspired a Nolan painting which exudes resonances which harmonises with the theme of this study (similar to the resonances commented on in the discussion of the painting of Jack Chance and Ellen together in the Australian bush): the Nolan painting of Kelly in his black armour riding out into the red and gold of the desert landscape to defy the minions of British law, appears as a natural force allied with the Australian world. The dominant red, black and gold colours of this painting are redolent with suggestive synergies, immediately recalling the dominant colours of the Aboriginal flag. The juxtapositioning of these two images (which were easier to perceive perhaps in the power-point presentation of this paper) can still be alluded to in this discussion and should, hopefully, evoke more 'food for thought' on the themes pursued in this paper.

To conclude, the 'sea-change' in the image of the Australian convict from "excrementitious mass" to the iconic figure of founding father of the nation can be exemplified through citation of the following detail from contemporary Australian life. Numerous websites today attest the importance of the Australian convict to Australian notions of identity. One—retrieved on Australia Day just past (January 26, 2010)—announces information on 50,000 more convicts as a special incentive to patriotic Australians: they are all invited to trace possible links to convict predecessors and indeed if they do not possess such a claim to privileged status, suggests that they set out to

acquire one even through a process of adoption. The 'sea-change' in the status of the Australian convict in the story of the nation could not be better attested.

Works Cited

- Carey, Peter (1997). *Jack Maggs*. St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press.
----. *The True History of the Kelly Gang* (2000). St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press.
- Conrad, Joseph (1988). *Heart of Darkness*. London: W.W. Norton & Co.
- Elliott, Brian (1979) ed. *The Jindyworobaks*. St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press.
- Fanon, Frantz. (1952, 2004). *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove Press.
- Gilmore, Mary (1963) ed. Robert D. Fitzgerald. Sydney: Angus & Robertson.
- Goldie, Terry (1989). *Fear and Temptation: The Image of the Indigene in Canadian, Australian and New Zealand Literatures*. Kingston, Ontario: McGill Queen's University Press.
- Grenville, Kate (2005). *The Secret River*. Melbourne: Text Publishing.
---- (2005, 2006). *Searching for the Secret River*. Melbourne: Text Publishing.
- Healy, J.J. (1989). *Literature and the Aborigine in Australia*. St.Lucia: University of Queensland Press.
- Hughes, Robert (1987). *The Fatal Shore: A History of the Transportation of Convicts to Australia, 1787 – 1868*. London: Collins Harvill.
- Lawson, Alan (2000). "Proximities: From Asymptote to Zeugma" in *Postcolonizing the Commonwealth; Studies in Literature and Culture*. Ed. Rowland Smith. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press: 19–35.
- "New Records of UK convicts sent to Australia go online,"(*B.B.C. News*. Accessed 24 Jan 2010. <news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/8477482.stm>
- Slemon, Stephen (1933). "Unsettling the Empire, Resistance Theory for the Second World." *World Literature Written in English*, 30.2 (1990): 30-41.
- Tucker, Martin (1933, 1953). *The Adventures of Ralph Rashleigh: A Penal Exile in Australia*, Sydney, Angus & Robertson. (1933).
- vanden Driesen, Cynthia (2009). *Writing the Nation, Patrick White and the Indigene*. Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi.
- White, Patrick *Voss* (1957, 1974). Ringwood, Victoria: Penguin.
---- (1976). *A Fringe of Leaves*. London: Jonathan Cape.
- White, Richard (1981). *Inventing Australia Images and Identity 1688 – 1980*. NSW: Allen & Unwin.

Cynthia vanden Driesen teaches and researches in the fields of Australian writing and other new literatures in English (Indian, African and Caribbean) at Edith Cowan University, Perth, Western Australia. Her publications, besides articles in a range of journals and presentations at international conferences, include eight books (four co-edited), the last being *Writing the Nation, Patrick White and the Indigene* (2009), Rodopi Press, NY/Amsterdam. Her most recent project, *Change, conflict and convergence:*

Coolabah, No.5, 2011, ISSN 1988-5946, Observatori: Centre d'Estudis Australians, Australian Studies Centre, Universitat de Barcelona

Australasian Scenarios, the collection of papers from the 2009 conference of the Association for the Study of Australasia in Asia (ASAA), co-edited with Ian vanden Driesen, is currently with publishers Black Swan, Orient Longmans India.