Representations of Irishness in contemporary Australian fiction

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ABSTRACT. Australian history generates great fervour in intellectual and political circles in present-day Australia, and Ireland's contribution to the making of the continent is a hotly debated issue. This essay deals with Irishness in contemporary Australian fiction with a 19th century setting. The representations I will be exploring concern the Convict, the Bush-ranger, and the Catholic. I have put these three figures in ascending order, according to the degree of Irishness that they tend to carry with them in contemporary Australian fiction. If we are dealing with a convict; then the character may or may not be Irish; if a bush-ranger, then he is more likely than not to be Irish; if the character is Catholic, then he is certainly Irish.

Key words: Australian fiction, Irishness, post-colonial literature.

RESUMO. Representações de ser irlandês na ficção australiana contemporânea. A história da Austrália causa grandes debates intelectuais e políticos na Austrália contemporânea e a contribuição irlandesa na construção e no desenvolvimento do continente suscita muitas discussões. Esse artigo analisa a qualidade de ser irlandês, na ficção australiana contemporânea, tendo o século XIX como pano de fundo. Discute-se a representação do detento, do mateiro e do católico, colocados em ordem ascendente na medida em que encarnam o grau de qualidade de irlandês que cada um carrega na ficção australiana. Se o personagem é um detento, pode ou não pode ser irlandês; se é um mateiro, provavelmente é um irlandês; se o personagem é católico, com certeza é irlandês.

Palavras-chave: ficção australiana, qualidade de ser irlandês, literatura pós-colonial.

Australia's convict and bush-ranging past

Up to World War II, the bias in intellectual circles was in favour of an Australian past that was respectable – one related to the discoveries of goldmines in Victoria and to the highly profitable sheep farming, and with as little reference as possible to the 'convict stain' of the Australian race, as this was a cause of deep embarrassment to their descendants. This changed radically by the 1950s, when historians such as Russel Ward and Vance Palmer wrote of the convicts as the founding fathers of an Australia where socialism would blossom as it had not done anywhere else in the world.

The convict and bush-ranging past as a definitive Australian experience found its way into the first histories of Australian literature written in the 1960s, when the rise of Commonwealth Literature helped bring these into being. This resulted in further interest in Australia's convict past. It was at that time that Marcus Clarke's *For the Term of his Natural Life* (1874) became the most famous novel of the 19th century, making the convict experience the cornerstone of Australian Literature.

The figures of the Convict and the Bush-ranger, and the link these have with Catholicism in Australia, are still very significant topics in contemporary Australian writing. The figure of the Black or aborigine is equally important, although I will not be focusing on this character in this essay. The English found it very hard to secure Australia as a prison, particularly as the labour of the convict was in such high demand. The result was that there were many runaways – or bolters, as they were known – who survived in the bush by stealing what they needed from respectable landholders. These often-employed 'ticket-of-leave' men and women who had come to New South Wales as convicts, had served a part of their sentence and were now working for a landholder until their full prison sentence was served. These labourers and domestic servants had a great deal of sympathy for bush-rangers, and often supplied them with their needs from their master's stores. In his book *The Fatal Shore,* Robert Hughes records that in the 1820s, a certain Alexander Harris noted that bush-rangers would freely join the cedar-cutters' jamborees around the rum keg, without any fear of being denounced to the mounted police. This protection came partly from fear of reprisals, but mainly "because having been prisoners themselves, it was a

point of honour among the sawyers (cedar cutters) to help them as much as they could" (Hughes, 1987, p. 237).

By the late 1820s, the sympathy between ex-convicts and Bush-rangers had become the stuff of bush ballads. One of the most popular runaways was a Dubliner, John Donohoe, who had been sentenced to life transportation in 1823. Much of the popularity associated with Ned Kelly, who ranged the bush in the 1860s, goes back to his fellow Irishman, Donohoe. Hughes points out that

> [...] the Emancipist and convict majority felt that Donohoe posed no threat to them. He was a figure of fantasy, game as a spurred cock, a projection of that once-subjected, silent part of their own lives into vengeful freedom, thrown against the neutral gray screen of the bush. The legends of his freedom relieved Australians' dissatisfaction with the conformity of their own lives, and this has been the root of the cult of dead Bush-rangers ever since (Hughes, 1987, p. 240).

In Peter Carey's *True History of the Kelly Gang,* Ned Kelly speaks of the support and help he received as a bush-ranger, from people who lived

> [...] a hard life in the rocky foothills of the ranges they were no better than they should be they knew what it were to have the police harassing them the squatters squeezing them enclosing all the common land for private use (Carey, 2001, p. 262).

Catholicism in Australia

Convicts and bush-rangers frightened respectable 19th century settlers, and were often associated with Catholicism. The fear of Catholics in Australia dates back to the late 18th century, when events in Ireland came to a head with the French landing at Bantry Bay in 1796, and the ensuing fighting against English rule. Many Irish were transported in the wake of this rebellion.

Robert Hughes reproduces a memo written by the Evangelical missionary Reverend Samuel Marsden – also known as 'the Flogging Parson' – a memo written and sent to his church superiors in London.

> The number of Catholic Convicts is very great [...] and these in general composed of the lowest Class of the Irish nation; who are the most wild, ignorant and savage Race that were ever favoured with the light of Civilization; men that have been familiar with [...] every horrid Crime from their Infancy. Their minds being destitute of every Principle of religion & Morality render them capable of perpetrating the most nefarious Acts in cool Blood. As they never appear to reflect upon Consequences;

> but to be [...] always alive to Rebellion and Mischief, they are very dangerous members of Society [...] [If Catholicism were] tolerated they would assemble together from every Quarter, not so much from a desire of celebrating Mass, as to recite the Miseries and Injustice of their Banishment, and Hardships they suffer, and to enflame one another's Mind with some wild Scheme of Revenge (Hughes, 1987, p. 188).

Free colonists also voiced a great deal of concern. Elizabeth Paterson wrote to a friend in 1800 that English families were in

> [...] an uncomfortable state of anxiety [...] [at] the late importations of United Irishmen [...]. Our military force is now very little in comparison with the number of Irish now in the colony, and that little much divided. Much trouble may befall us, before any succours can arrive [...] other ships with the same description of people are now on their voyage to this place (Hughes, 1987, p. 190).

Novelist David Malouf has written about the fear of Catholics in Australia in his Boyer Lectures.

> For Australian Protestants the great fear was that they might wake up one morning and find they had been outnumbered, that this great continent had fallen overnight to Rome and to Mariolatry (Malouf, 1998, p. 22).

The treatment of Convict, Bush-ranger and Catholic in contemporary Australian fiction is tied to the 'History wars' between different political camps. Since the 1980s, Australian history has become an increasingly embattled field – with the left aiming for an Australian republic and a more Asia-oriented political and economic strategy; and the right standing for the retention of the closest possible political, economical, and cultural ties with Britain and the West. The first position can be seen in the work of contemporary novelist and committed Republican Thomas Keneally; the second position can be seen more subtly in the work of Peter Carey and David Malouf, who both spent long periods of time away from Australia, and who seem to be more distanced from Australian party politics.

Thomas Keneally is the most Irish of Australian writers. He has written with great pride of his and his wife's Irish convict ancestry. He has also written about the Irish diaspora in the New World in a book entitled *The Great Shame – and the triumph of the Irish in the English speaking world* (1998). In his writing, he often underlines the Catholic religion of his characters – the strongest marker of Irishness in Australian fiction, so that some of his novels actually work through a specifically Catholic theology. This

is certainly the case with his novel *The Office of Innocence* (2002), where the main character is a priest and the central theme is confession and absolution. Of course, Keneally has also written about very different parts of the world – about the American civil war and about the Holocaust – he is the author of the world famous *Schindler's Ark* (1982). In his Australian novels, he tends to focus on Catholic characters such as Phelim Halloran, an Irish Trooper in *Bring Larks and Heroes* (1967), or rugby player Delaney in *A Family Madness* (1985).

Thomas Keneally actually studied for priesthood but never took orders, and went on to marry and have children. This explains his interest in Catholicism to some extent. I also believe, however, that he portrays Irish Catholic characters so fondly and so insistently in his novels because of his strong support for the Republican movement in Australia, a movement that is closely associated with Irish Australians, and which is very critical of what it sees as Australia's bondage to Britain and the West.

David Malouf's position is different. He speaks of being Irish by virtue of being Catholic:

> But then to be Irish here did not always mean that you had Irish forebears. To be Catholic in those days was to be Irish, wherever you came from. My father's people were Melkites, Greek Catholics who recognise the authority of the Pope. Since there was no Melkite church in Brisbane when they arrived there in the 1880s (or anywhere else in Australia for that matter), my father and his six brothers and sisters went to the local Catholic church, St Mary's, and were sent to school with the nuns. Despite their name and background, they grew up as Irish as any Donahue or O'Flynn, taking on with the religion all the peculiar forms of Irish Catholicism, its pietism, its prudery, its superstitions and prejudice (Malouf, 1998, p. 19-20).

Malouf argues that before the 1960s, "the strongest of all divisions" in Australian society was "the sectarian division between Protestants and Catholics".

> When I was growing up in Brisbane, in the late 1930s and early 1940s, Catholic and Protestant Australians lived separate lives. They might have been living in separate countries. The division between them, the separation, the hostility, was part of the very fabric of living; so essential to life here, so old and deeply rooted, as to seem immemorial and impossible of change.
>
> Catholics and Protestants went to separate schools and learned different versions of history. Secondary students even went to different dancing classes, and when they left school they played football with different clubs […] People knew by instinct, at the

first meeting, by all sorts of tell-tale habits of speech and attitude, who belonged to one group and who to the other. And these divisions functioned institutionally as well as at street level. Catholics worked in some areas of the Public Service; Protestants in others. In Queensland, the Labour Party was Catholic; Protestants were Liberals […].

> […] Part of the bitterness behind all this was that Catholics were almost exclusively Irish, so that the division had an ethnic and historical element as well as a religious one. It was a continuation on new ground of the history of Ireland itself, based on ancient resistance to English invasion and tyranny, and on the English side on a fear of Irish subversion and a deep-rooted contempt for Irish superstition and disorderliness. All this created its own mythology (Malouf, 1998, p. 15-17).

Malouf has spoken of the "difficulty" of perceiving Australian history as a whole because of "an emotional or ideological investment" in questions of "why the colony was first founded, for example, or why the Aborigines died out so quickly after we came […]" (Malouf, 1998, p. 1). These are questions that Malouf explores in his recent fiction, but in ways that are not as straightforward as some critics expect. As Malouf remarked, *The Conversations at Curlow Creek* portrays the past in relationship with the present, "it's not the way it was in 1827, it's a way that 1827 appears in the significance it has in 1996" (Helen Daniel, 1996, p. 30).

I believe that Malouf is very keen on healing the division between Catholics and Protestants.

> The whole sorry business is worth recalling now for only one reason, and it is this. If Australia is basically, as I believe it is, a tolerant place, that tolerance was hammered out painfully and over nearly 150 years, in the long process by which Catholics and Protestants, the Irish and the rest, turned away from 'history' and learned to live with one another. For all its bitterness and distrust and resentment, the hostility, even in times of the greatest stress, had never turned murderous as it had been elsewhere (Malouf, 1998, p. 23).

Malouf's desire to unify the descendants of English and Irish settlers is tied to the question of land. Whether the white man in Australia comes from a convict or bush-ranging past, or from a free settler, sheep ranch owning family, the land was acquired from aborigines. Much has been written in the last twenty years about reconciliation in Australia, about the need for white people to makes amends to an indigenous population they expropriated and all but exterminated. The convicts were not the only first settlers – there were also a considerable number of free settlers, rich middle

class English people who bought huge tracts of land for sheep farming in the 19th century. Much of the land that the Left argues should be returned to the aborigines belongs to the descendants of affluent English settlers, like the family of novelist Patrick White, winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1973. The restitution of lands to aboriginal owners would weaken the position of English large-scale landholding families and strengthen comparatively landless Irish Republicans.

English or Irish, Protestant or Catholic, associating the white man with the convict and the bush-ranger re-creates him as a victim of injustice, rather than as an aggressor of society. This is most important in dealing with the question of aborigines and the restitution of the land to their descendants. Reading Malouf, critics such as Sheila Whittock have argued that Malouf's texts – Whittock refers to *Remembering Babylon* – excavate "historical guilt and moral failure", in the white man's relation to blacks (Whittock, 1997). I disagree and I suggest the main thrust of both *Remembering Babylon* and *The Conversations at Curlow Creek* is that for the Anglo-Celtic settler, soldier or convict, life was almost unbearably hard, and the toil and pain undergone by these fathers of the nation should be respected in the present.

In *The Conversations at Curlow Creek,* the description of the troopers' skirmish with the aborigines, which results in the death of Jed Snelling and an aborigine, is hardly described in terms that suggest guilt or moral failure. What happened to Snelling – speared in the neck by an aborigine – was "outrageous", "uncalled for", "crazy" and "useless" (Malouf, 1997, p. 12).

> Dealing with blacks was acceptable work. It was what they had signed up for, though they were not proud of what happened when Jed Snelling got killed. They had lost their heads […] It wasn't a good thing but it was the sort of thing that happened. Acceptable. Only for a few days afterwards they had felt low and panicky, too ready to justify to one another an occasion that had exceeded their instructions, which were to make a show […] (Malouf, 1997, p. 20).

Malouf's description does not allow the reader to accuse the whites of cruelty or of murderous intentions. Whether Australia had been settled or conquered was not a question that concerned the common people who lived through the conflicts with the aborigines. They had done what they had to do in order to survive.

Land, suffering, guilt

The Conversations at Curlow Creek recognises the pain caused to aboriginal people – but the novel is directed mostly against the notion that white Australians have no moral right to the land. Characters such as Langhurst, Garrety and Kersey, as well as Daniel Carney and the bush-rangers, suggest a history of settlement that is very remote from imperial privilege. Malouf creates a myth of Australia's origin in *The Conversations at Curlow Creek* which justifies the claim to the land on the part of the descendants of British settlers. At the same time, the novel urges whites to work at relationships with blacks. The making of Australian consciousness, the construction of the imagined community of the nation, requires a re-working of the relationship between the people and the landscape through a re-investigation of the past, which starts from the present need for reconciliation – particularly for Malouf – between Protestants and Catholics.

The figure of the convict and the Bush-ranger proffers many possibilities in highlighting the suffering and hardship of the founding fathers. Australian writers have highlighted the convict since Marcus Clarke's *His Natural Life.* This figure is typically innocent, thus: (1) Richard Devine in *His Natural Life* – falsely charged with robbery, victim of the revenge of his putative father when he discovers that Richard is not his son; (2) Jack Chance in Patrick White's *A Fringe of Leaves* – guilty only of a crime of passion when he murders his unfaithful Mab; (3) Maggs in Peter Carey's *Jack Maggs* – transported for burglary, after he has been bred as a thief by Ma Britten (Mother Britain); (4) Ned in Peter Carey's *True History of the Kelly Gang* – portrayed as a victim of the police and the English squatters they often protected; (5) Phelim Halloran in Thomas Keneally's *Bring Larks and Heroes* – a Trooper hanged for stealing provisions, after his attempt to rescue his secret bride Ann from the clutches of her master, Mr. Blythe.

David Malouf goes further in establishing the innocence of the convict in *The Conversations at Curlow Creek*. He focuses on the Irish political prisoner and subsumes other non-political and even non-Irish convicts (e.g. Garretty) and bush-rangers into this figure. Malouf sets this novel in the 1820s in Ireland and in New South Wales, and most of the characters are Irish.

The story of Daniel Carney is similar to that of the famous bush-ranger Ned Kelly, Australia's greatest folk hero. Ned Kelly is often seen as a political revolutionary and a figure of Irish Catholic

and working-class resistance to the establishment and to British colonial ties. It is claimed that Kelly's bank robberies were to fund the struggle for a "Republic of the North-East of Victoria", and that the police found a declaration of the Republic in Ned Kelly's pocket when he was captured. This has made him an icon of Australian Republicanism. The supporters of this cause include many Australians of Irish descent, most notably previous Prime Minister, Paul Keating of the Labour Party.

Writers who do not subscribe to the Republican cause are now almost as eager to claim Ned Kelly as an Australian icon – but instead of highlighting the Irishness, they would highlight the suffering of the convict and of the pioneer settler, thus justifying the position of the white man in general. Both David Malouf and Peter Carey spend much of their time away from Australia, and I think this makes them adopt a different, perhaps wider perspective than that of Thomas Keneally, who is so deeply immersed in the Republican movement. Malouf has definitely tended to defend Australia's tie to the West, and this emerges sharply in an essay entitled 'Made in England: Australia's British Inheritance', published in November 2003.

David Malouf has focused his fiction on the white founding fathers of Australia – Scottish in *Remembering Babylon,* Irish in *The Conversations at Curlow Creek.* He justifies the position of the white man in Australia by highlighting the hardships undergone by settlers and convicts. In *The Conversations at Curlow Creek,* he strengthens the position of the Convict by conflating it with that of the political prisoner.

The action of *The Conversations at Curlow Creek* takes the reader through the roughly thirty hours from the arrival of Michael Adair, an Irish officer in the British army to oversee the execution of Daniel Carney, a bush-ranger in New South Wales, to the carrying out of the sentence. The main events are the conversations between Adair and Carney, through which Adair learns to revalue his life, and his relationship with his beloved Virgilia. Having finished his present engagement in the army, and having obtained absolution for the loss of Virgilia's love, Fergus, Adair decides to return to marry her. Adair's last task in the army is this execution, which also fulfils his promise to Virgilia, as he has found the last whereabouts of Fergus.

Like some other Irish patriots, Fergus had escaped to Australia and joined a band of bush-rangers under the name of Dolan. Daniel Carney's and Michael Adair's conversations the night before

the execution of Carney are about the activities of the bush-rangers, some of whom, like Dolan, were political prisoners. The distinction between political prisoner and convict loses its importance in the 19th century, both because the criminal often had absolutely compelling justification for his crimes and because with the Irish insurgence of 1798, it was found practicable in many cases to drop the charge of treason and press charges related to property damage and assault. Robert Hughes explains:

> If every United Irishman had been indicted for treason, they could all have been hanged – but the jurors would still have had to go home to their villages and live among those who knew the accused. Juries avoided capital convictions, and, an Omagh magistrate reported, 'All the United Irish who were in on treasonable practices are only indicted for a lesser offence, so as to come under transportation; for that reason no objection lay against Jurors'[1].

According to Hughes

> This practice makes it hard to distinguish, on the face of recorded charges, between 'political' and 'social' rebels – if, indeed, such a distinction in time of revolution makes much sense. Many of the prisoners who went to Australia on charges related to property damage or assault were probably, in their own eyes, as much political prisoners as Joseph Holt, the farmer who rose to lead the Wicklow insurgents after some Protestant militia burned his house in May 1879 (Hughes, 1987, p. 186).

The elevation of "convict" to "political prisoner" draws maximum sympathy for the white man. In this extract, we see Malouf's Adair questioning the condemned bush-ranger to discover political motives for the bush-rangers' activities. Carney, however, keeps denying these and asserting a much simpler brotherhood of suffering.

> 'What do you mean?'
> 'Wasn't he maybe waiting for something else?'
> 'Like what, sir?'
> 'For someone to contact him. Some group, for instance'.
> 'Oh,' the man said, 'the Irish, you mean. That was just talk. There wasn't no gathering intended, if that's what you mean'.
> 'Are you sure?'
> […]
> 'Maybe he didn't want too many of you to be in the know'.
> 'You mean in case we got caught?'
> 'That would be one reason'.

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[1] Hughes quotes A.G.L. Shaw, Convicts and the Colonies; A study of Penal Transportation from Great Britain and Ireland to Australia and Other Part of the British Empire, published in London in 1966.

The man shook his head rapidly from side to side. He was beginning to be distressed. 'You're wrong, sir. You don't understand. There wasn't a man of us would have given 'im away. Not for any money,' he said passionately. 'Not for our lives'. […] 'An' if there was anything like that intended I would of known. Rebellion is a serious thing. Even I know that. We would of known. He would of told us'.

'But you were rebels already, weren't you?'

'I was a runaway. Maybe that made me a rebel, I don't know. Is that what they say? Am I to be hanged as a rebel?'

Adair shook his head. 'No,' he said, 'there'll be no talk of rebellion. But would you care so much?'

'No, sir, it'd be all the same to me. It'll be all the same as far as I'm concerned this time tomorrrer. It's just that it wasn't so. I was there. I know what it was'.

'So who was with him,' Adair persisted, 'before you?'

'Lonergan. McBride –'

'Wasn't McBride the first?'

'Yes sir, you're right in that, he was. They'd bin together a few months. Up north somewhere'.

'And suppose I told you that McBride was also a runaway –'

'He wasn't, sir. I'd have know if 'e was –'

'Not your ordinary sort of convict. A political. And that he was in contact with others, an Irish group up at Castle Hill. Did you ever hear any talk of that? Or see any letters?'

'I told you already, sir, I can't read'.

'I mean, did you see any brought? To McBride. Or Dolan. Or carried away again?'

Carney shook his head. He looked desperately unhappy (Malouf, 1998, p. 99-100).

In this extract we see references (although it is in their denial) to historical events in March 1804 at Castle Hill, when a badly planned Irish insurgence broke out, to McBride – a name that is intimately associated with Irish nationalism (John McBride married Maud Gonne in 1903). What is very interesting is the conflation of political prisoner and 'runaway' or bush-ranger. Daniel Carney does not care whether he is hanged as a rebel or as a criminal, as long as there is no suggestion that Dolan could have been using bolters and bush-rangers for an Irish political uprising.

Both Hughes' research in Australian history and Malouf's fiction justify the erasure of the distinction between political prisoner and convicted criminal. The erasure of this distinction makes it possible for Malouf to suggest a benign Ned Kelly / Robin Hood figure in Daniel Carney. This is also true of his followers, who are shown as caring a great deal for one another and for the poor.

There is more erasure of distinction in Malouf's

depiction of religion. His assertion in the Boyer lectures that up to the 1960s "to be Catholic […] was to be Irish" would incline readers to expect that he would highlight the Catholicism, particularly in a novel where almost all the characters are Irish. In marked contrast with Thomas Keneally, however, Malouf subsumes Catholicism into a very generic sacredness in his treatment of the theme of sin and redemption.

> The purification rite undergone by Daniel Carney is a climactic episode in the novel. Just before the execution, Daniel Carney is allowed to wade in Curlow creek, where he 'laved' his body 'from the grime, the caked mud, the dried blood of his wounds' and the water had borne it away to be absorbed in the land or carried out to the sea, 'the last of the world's muck is off' (Malouf, 1997, p. 199).

And at last it was enough. The man simply stood staring down at his clean feet through the running water. The last of the world's muck was off.

> Langhurst saw what it was then. Acutely aware suddenly of his own body, unwashed and stinking inside the prickly vest, the trousers stiff with dirt, of the dirt-balls between his toes, the dirt under his nails and ingrained in the cracks in his hands, the sully and stink of his armpits and groin, he thought: When all this is over I will go down and do what he is doing. I'll strip right off and wash. He felt already the clean touch of water laving over him, cold but clean, taking the dirt off, and had an intense desire to begin all over again with the freshness and sanctity of things (Malouf, 1997, p. 199-200).

Repentance, ablution, absolution – but the only mention of a priest in the narrative is when the Officer Adair first enters the hut and Carney thinks he might be a priest. Malouf's fiction underlines the hardship undergone by all Anglo-Celtic settlers and suggests their unity by erasing distinguishing features such as the Catholic religion.

Conclusion

David Malouf's desire for unity between Catholic and Protestant, Irish and Scottish, Welsh and English emerges clearly in the Boyer lectures. This ties in with his continuing defence of Australia's tie to the West. He is conscious of the role of history in politics, conscious of the systems that turn past events into present historical facts, and he does his part in his fiction to heal the rift between Protestant and Catholic in Australia and to defend the position of the white population there. Thomas Keneally, on the other hand, equally conscious of the power of the past, underlines Irishness through

Catholicism, to strengthen Republicanism in his country.

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