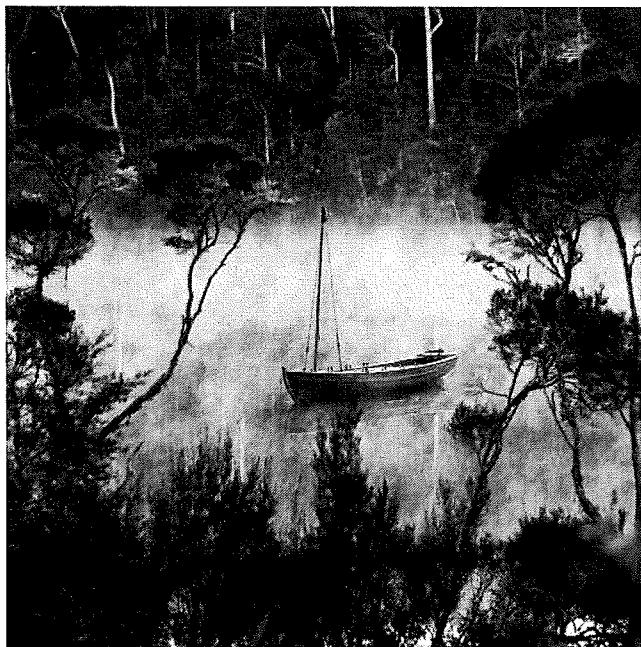


The Secret River Novel Study



Year 11 ATAR Literature

Ms. Dorinda Walsh

Background

Chapter summaries: structure

Narrative conventions:

- Setting
- Characters
- Conflict
- Resolution
- Point of view

Language techniques:

- Symbols, etc.

Themes

The Secret River by Kate Grenville

Research and write notes on the following topics.

1. Convict and transportation to New South Wales (origins, crime committed, numbers, etc.)
2. Life on the hulks (length of journey, conditions, men and women, destinations in Australia, deaths)
3. What happened to convicts on arrival?

The Secret River by Kate Grenville

4. Emancipists and claiming land (conditions, entitlements, sites, types of farming, etc.)
 5. Aboriginal tribes in NSW (tribal groups, numbers, culture and lifestyle, food sources)
 6. Clashes between Europeans and Aborigines on the Hawkesbury River (causes, casualties, outcomes)



Photo - David Karonidis

Kate Grenville

Kate Grenville is one of Australia's most acclaimed writers, internationally recognised and a winner of the Orange Prize for Fiction – Britain's most valuable literary prize. In her most recent novel, *The Secret River*, she has tapped into her own history as much as that of early Australia and produced a work that has been acclaimed by critics. The book, taken from a story of a Grenville ancestor, takes modern Australians into the barely documented world of settlement beyond Port Jackson. Kate Grenville spoke for The Sydney Institute on Tuesday 15 November 2005

SECRET RIVER –

SECRET HISTORY

Kate Grenville

Many thanks to Gerard and Anne for asking me to address The Sydney Institute. It's very appropriate that we're meeting in the Mitchell Library, because it was here that *The Secret River* began, in the drama of discovery among the archives.

The book started innocently enough, as nothing more than a search into my family's past. My mother had told me stories about the first of our family to come to Australia - my great-great-great grandfather was a lighterman on the Thames, pinched a load of timber and was transported for the term of his natural life. Within six years of arriving here, he'd become a free man and "taken up land" on the banks of the Hawkesbury River. He went on to make buckets of money, built a fine stone house, and called himself "the King of the River".

Once I started looking, it was surprisingly easy to find out quite a bit about his early life in London and his crime. Old Bailey trials were taken down in shorthand, and transcripts are online now. I learned – to my relief – that his crime had been nothing worse than ordinary theft of the "fell off the back of the truck" sort.

From apprenticeship, baptismal and other records, I was able to reconstruct his London life and walk the very streets and wharves where he'd been. There was an extraordinary sense of history coming to life under my very feet, and suddenly he was a man with a family, a society, a world of neighbours, in-laws, friends and enemies. Standing in the street in Bermondsey, south London, where he'd lived, I was profoundly glad that he hadn't been a very good thief. If he'd got away with his crime, I realised I'd have been born into this world of mean narrow streets shadowed by breweries and tanneries.

The picture of his life in Australia was much sketchier. I could find plenty of information about his business wheelings and dealings, but not much else. The landscape where he lived was the most powerful element of his Australian life – the country around Wiseman's Ferry is still wild. It's easy to imagine what it must have been like to be a settler there in 1815.

Wiseman himself was interesting enough to a descendent, but not compelling material for a novel. The idea that there might be a larger story to tell came upon me gradually. The landscape itself had a lot to do with it. The bush around Wiseman's Ferry is full of relics of Aboriginal habitation – trees still bearing scars showing where shields and canoes were prised out of the bark, grooves in creek-beds where stone axes were ground to a sharp edge, and of course the many rock engravings of animal and human figures. Walking around this country, I realised that it might be empty now, but at one time it had been intensively used and inhabited. What I naively thought of as "wilderness" had, in effect, once been the living-rooms and dining-rooms, the workshops and churches, of the Darug and Darkinjung people.

From that idea it was a small step to imagine how it must have been to sail up that river and step ashore on land that you were claiming as your own. All around, the forest and cliffs would have watched you. That feeling, so common in the bush, that there's someone just out of sight, invisible when you turn to look, would not have been an illusion in Wiseman's day, but reality. And there was a possibility that that person, just out of sight beyond the trees, would have been aiming a spear at you.

Suddenly that bland phrase in the family story - "he took up land" – started to split open. I began to see that it was not so much that Wiseman "took up" land, as that he simply "took" it. What had happened there, on that point of land by the river? What had it been like, that very first day, as the Aboriginal people came out of the bush towards the Wiseman family? Had it been friendly (as of course I hoped) or mutually distrustful, even violent?

I was afire to know – but my search was a frustrating one. There was no information – none that I could find, anyway – about Wiseman's relationship with the Darug people around him: nothing, not even a passing reference. This could mean that nothing happened: either that the Darug had gone from that part of the river by the time he "took up" land there, or that he found a way to co-exist with them.

Or it could mean that things happened – but things that it was in no-one's interest to write down.

As I scoured the records, it became clear that I would never know for sure. There was certainly violence on the Hawkesbury at around that time. In 1815 it got so bad that Governor Macquarie declared martial law and gave settlers permission to fire on Aboriginal people more or less at will. Whether Wiseman was involved, though, remained unknown.

But as my research took me far beyond my family story, into the larger story of black/white relations in early Australia, and as the project became a novel, the real man – my ancestor – faded from view.

He was replaced by a fictional construction called William Thornhill, and telling his story became an obsession for the next few years.

Like my ancestor, William Thornhill began his life beside the Thames, was sent here as a convict, and prospered. Beyond that any resemblance ends. As the writing progressed, my fictional construct Thornhill took form as a man of strong feelings, quick to anger: a hard man, but one with a fierce love for his wife and children. His wife stepped out of the shadows of the past and introduced herself, too: Sal, a woman whose life had been turned upside down when her husband had been sent to the end of the world and she had followed him. A spoiled only child, she had become a strong woman out of the necessity of her life. She was shrewd, passionate and honourable - eaten away with homesickness, but slowly coming to understand the new place.

These two people, along with six children and a crowd of minor characters, took up habitation within me as well as on the banks of the Hawkesbury. The story I wanted to tell was of people thrown into a situation unlike anything they'd had to face before, and for which nothing in their experience could have equipped them.

They were confronted by choices that must have seemed impossible. The Thornhills, like most of the other freed convicts, couldn't go back to their life of grinding poverty in London. Who in their right mind would choose that, when staying in Australia meant wealth and a place in the new society? But in staying here they were on land that belonged to other people - people who were willing to fight and kill for it. There was no getting away from that fact: the choice they had to make was how they dealt with it.

Reading letters, journals, newspapers, official documents and histories of the time, it was clear that settlers responded to that choice in very different ways. Many found ways to co-exist peaceably with the Aboriginal people. Others regarded them as not quite human, and shot them for sport. Between these extremes were most settlers: ordinary people like the Thornhills, wanting nothing more than to get on with making a life for themselves.

The pressures that might push a person towards one response or another was the heart of the story I wanted to tell. Fear, compassion, government policy, peer pressure, miscommunication, self-interest - all these went into the mix.

I did an enormous amount of research. This book isn't history, but it's solidly based on history. Most of the events in the book have a basis in the documentary record. They didn't necessarily take place on the Hawkesbury, or at the time Wiseman lived there, but some version of them did really happen. Some of the dialogue is even taken directly from the written sources.

But I didn't want to write a historical novel of the deadeningly information-packed didactic kind. I wanted this to be a historical novel that would feel to the reader as if it were unfolding in real time, in the present of the reading experience. I wanted readers to be able to smell and touch and taste the life of those characters. To do that, I had to feel what it was like to be at the bottom of the English class system with no hope of ever rising. I had to imagine what it was like to be illiterate. I needed to know what the texture of daily life was like – what did those first settlers eat? The books told me they ate salt pork, hominy and pease – but what did those things taste like? What was a bark hut actually like to live in? What happens – not in general, but specifically, moment-to-moment – when a spear or a musket ball enters a human body?

To answer these questions I made and ate “hominy” and “pease” (neither exactly gourmet fare, I can assure you), tried sleeping in the bush near Wiseman’s Ferry at night without a mosquito net (impossible) and quizzed my GP friends about penetrating injuries (not for the faint-hearted).

It became important to speak to descendants of the Darug people, if I could. I approached them diffidently, unsure of how they would feel about the story I was telling. They were generous with their time and knowledge and encouraged me to continue. They were informative about many things I hadn’t found in the written record – for instance the importance of the “daisy-yam”, a staple part of the Aboriginal diet, but removed by the settlers and replaced with corn.

Above all, I wanted to know the individuals, to get into their heads and their hearts. In all their variety of personalities, they must have been like people I knew and like myself – not heroes and not devils, but just human beings, stumbling from one small decision to the next and in so doing, without really planning it, creating the shape of their lives. As I wrote, I kept coming back to the central question: what would I have done in their place?

It’s not always comfortable to ask that question, because none of us can be sure of the answer. But my writing of the book was driven by a feeling that there’s unfinished business in our history – it’s probably why the “history wars” go on making headlines and why family research is booming. There’s no going back and replaying the hand that history dealt us, but we can go back and tease the story out so we can feel what it was like to live through it. Doing that helps to understand the past, and understanding the past is essential to any attempt to disentangle the puzzles of the present.

In writing this fiction, I didn’t have a message to push or an axe to grind. I wasn’t interested in judging any of these characters, only in getting inside their lives. I hoped to create an experience for a reader in which they could understand what that moment of our past was really like. The great power of fiction is that it’s not an argument: it’s a world. Inhabit it for a while and you’re likely to come out a little changed.



Charles Dickens's novels are still popular today despite the fact that they were written in another context.

theory of forms

Plato's theory that concepts and ideas exist outside the world of the senses

Literature thus had a very serious purpose. As we saw in chapter 1, new critics like Leavis saw 'good' literature as being literature that would help individuals withstand the questionable morals of a mechanised and industrial society: it would make them a better person. Texts that were believed to do this, that expressed the values that were considered good, desirable, worthy and true, and that had stood the test of time, such as the works of Shakespeare, were admitted into the canon.

Generally, the values of the canon reflect a Christian view of the world and Christian values. The theologians of the Early Church, called the Church Fathers, were strongly influenced by the ideas of the Greek philosopher Plato (c. 428–c. 348 BC) and there is a strong strain of Platonism in Christianity. Plato's **theory of forms** is extremely important in this regard. Plato believed that concepts had an existence outside the tangible world; for example, he would say that we all carry in our minds an idea of what a table is – a kind of 'ideal' table – which we use to recognise and identify the tables that we encounter in the real world. This image is constructed from what we have seen of real tables and is timeless and absolute. In other words, there is a world of ideas or archetypes for the things that are in the physical world. From this, it follows that

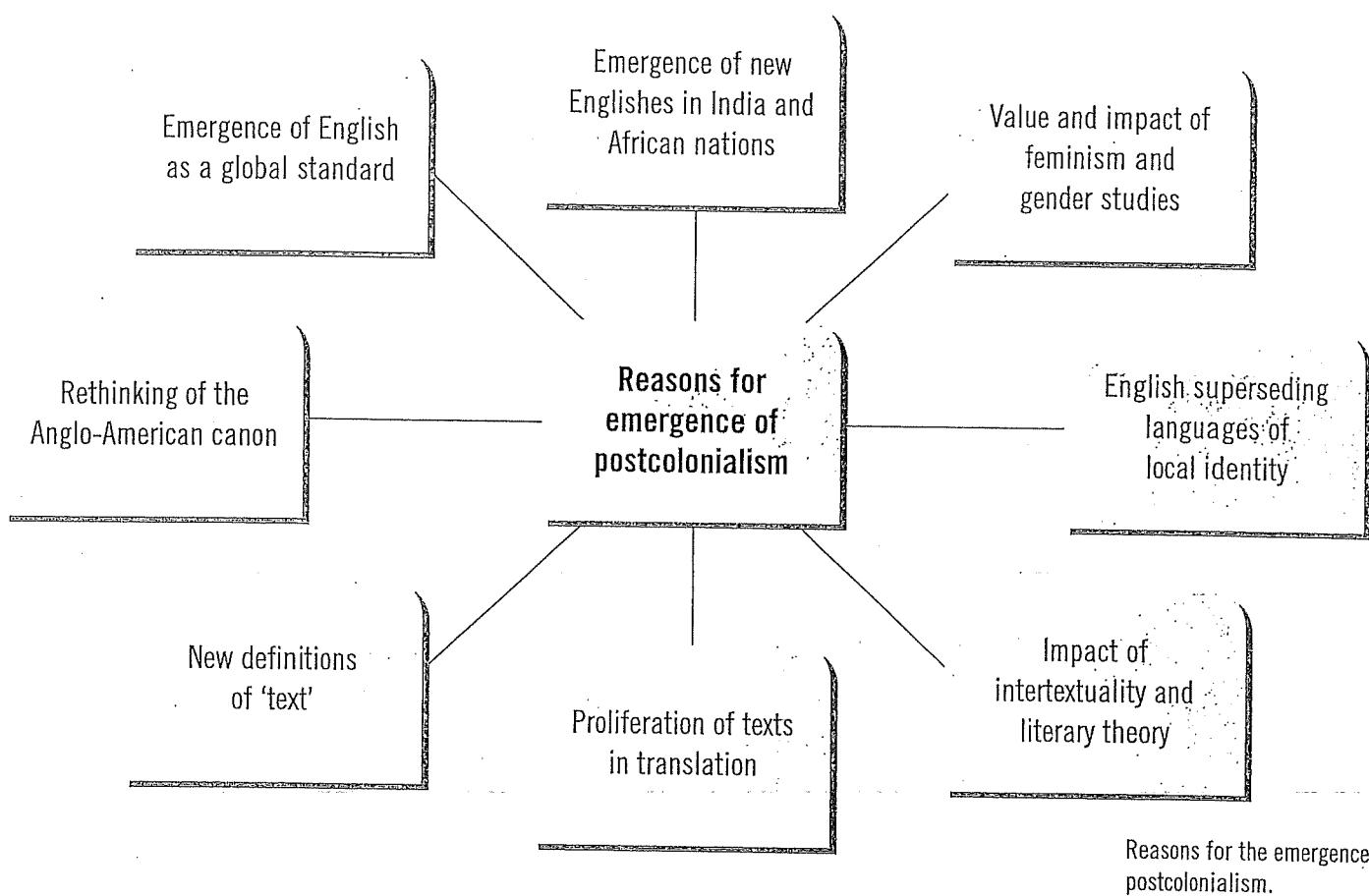
humans, too, have an 'ideal' self – a core self that is unchanging and timeless, often called the soul. In the Platonic (and Christian) worldview, the world that we see is like a stage set: a greater reality lies beyond. This worldview naturally has implications for how we value – and what we value.

As society has become more diverse, the concept of the canon has been challenged. A culturally diverse world requires the study of works that reflect its diversity. Not everyone is Christian; not everyone is a man; not everyone is English. We cannot take for granted that a reader or viewer subscribes to a common set of values. If anything characterises our age, it is difference. It is necessary to reconsider what is deemed worthy and relevant for study. As a result, the ambit of 'worthy literature' has widened to include popular texts like film, non-fiction, television shows, songs and electronic texts, and texts composed by members of traditionally marginalised groups, such as indigenous writers.

Postcolonialism

From the 15th century through to the early 20th century, the powerful nations in Europe set up colonies in 'new worlds': in the Americas (e.g. Spain, Portugal, France and Great Britain), in Africa (e.g. Great Britain, France, Belgium and Italy), on the Subcontinent (e.g. Portugal and Great Britain), in Asia (e.g. Great Britain, France and the Netherlands) and in the Pacific region (e.g. Great Britain and Spain). These colonial empires began to break up or were dismantled after World War II.

Postcolonialism is an exploration of the phenomena, problems and challenges of colonisation and, as such, offers a radical and significant critique of the assumptions and values of the Western literary canon. It has become an important and major theoretical paradigm in the last thirty years. Postcolonialism challenges us to consider other times and other places and how they have been, and continue to be, represented. From whose perspective have we seen such times and places? How might they be seen differently? Whose voices have been silenced?



Traditionally, colonisers have been represented as superior to the colonised. This has usually been done through binary opposition. Consider the following pairings as examples: cerebral/sensual, civilisation/nature, civilised/savage, Christian/heathen, experience/innocence, familiar/exotic, reason/feeling, sexual repression/sexual freedom, science/superstition, white collar/blue collar. Postcolonial texts challenge the binary divide and reveal the complexity of people, culture and place. Older texts are read through a new postcolonial frame of reference and new texts give voice to those previously silenced.

The language of these new texts is, however, usually the language of the coloniser. One of the casualties of colonisation is indigenous language. Consider the number of countries in Africa, for example, whose official language is now English or French. Official policies of assimilating indigenous peoples within a Western culture, as was the Australian government's policy during a large part of the 20th century, and insisting that they learn the language of the ruling Western power have dissipated or destroyed these peoples' ability to pass on their myths, legends, histories and dreamings to younger generations.

English as the language of neocolonialism

While empires and colonies may be generally a thing of the past (although the effects of empire and colonisation live on), our increasingly globalised world is subject to a new colonialism, a **neocolonialism**, in the form of the dominance of the English language. The English language carries with it a great deal of cultural baggage. It is associated with Great Britain's imperial past, with Shakespeare and other writers of the canon of English literature, and with educated elites in non-English-speaking countries. It is also the language of powerful forms of popular culture (e.g. Hollywood films); the language in which international finance, trade and commerce is conducted;

neocolonialism

The use of economic power, political pressure or other means, such as language, to influence or control another country, especially former colonies or countries of the developing world.

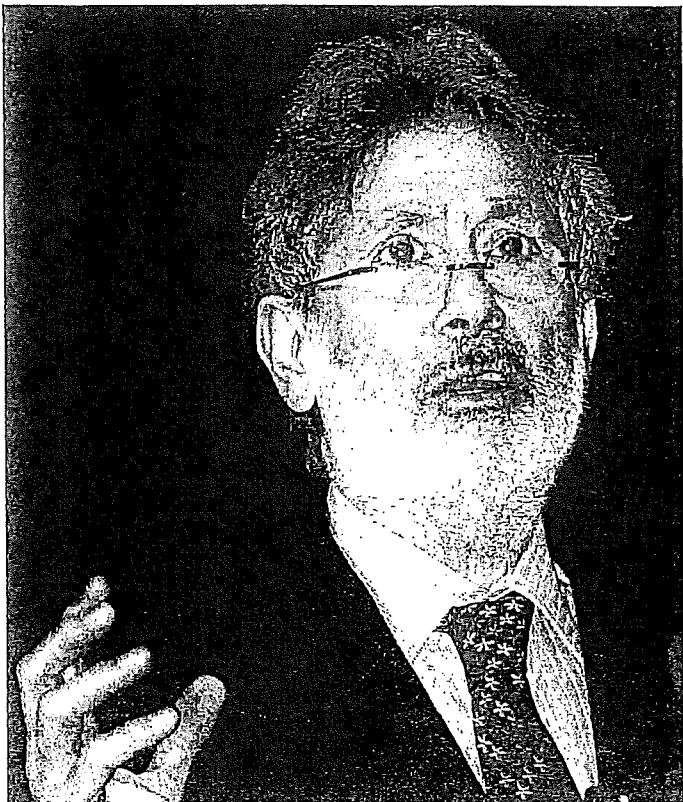
and, with French, one of the official languages of the United Nations. English language texts dominate the World Wide Web and English language computer jargon permeates the language of IT worldwide. Owing to this, it is the second language of millions of people across the planet.

Edward Said and the ‘other’

In 1978, the Palestinian author Edward Said wrote the influential text *Orientalism*. In it, he appraised the West’s construction of the oriental ‘other’. For Said, the Western

world constructed stereotypes about the culture of the East as a way of dealing with a culture they did not understand. As a result, stereotypes of the East that constructed it as an ‘exotic’ place became accepted as self-evident ‘facts’. He argued that, by defining the ‘other’, the ‘exotic’, the ‘oriental’ and so on in opposition to the Western ‘norm’ – the unexotic and the occidental – Western discourse condescends and seeks to dominate and control other cultures and peoples. Consider, for example, Western treatments of the ancient Egyptian queen Cleopatra. If we consider all existing representations of Cleopatra, both written and visual, we see that she is made to embody both the fears and desires of the West. She is associated with sensuality, emotion, excess, exoticism and, as such, is a threat to the very masculine, ‘rational’ and imperial power of Rome.

Since the appearance of *Orientalism*, other postcolonial theory and writing has made an impact on the appraisal of the composition of culture and meaning. It has also influenced people who identify themselves as marginalised and has assisted them in reclaiming their ‘voice’ within the dominant discourse.



Edward Said.

Key studies in postcolonialism

| Text | Ideas/concerns |
|--|--|
| 1980: J Kristeva, <i>Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art</i> | Defining ourselves through what we are not; examination of the self as a united, coherent and unchanging entity; difference, separation and segregation |
| 1982: C Norris, <i>Deconstruction: Theory and Practice</i> | Tensions between the rejection of the dominant Western discourse of human rights and the colonised peoples’ desire for Western democratic political systems that support justice, equality, reason and freedom |
| 1989: B Ashcroft et al., <i>The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures</i> | New texts in which previously colonised peoples try to imagine their world before colonisation or try to forge new, often conflicting, identities |
| 1993: E Said, <i>Culture and Imperialism</i> | The definition of ‘central’ and ‘marginal’ in a society and how these concepts are constructed |

| Text | Ideas/concerns |
|---|---|
| 1993: G C Spivak, <i>Outside in the Teaching Machine</i> | The figure of the 'subaltern' (a person who is marginalised and dependent on the oppressor for survival); questions of whether anyone can speak on anyone else's behalf and whether non-marginalised people should be involved in the composition of texts about the marginalised |
| 1997: H L Gates & N Y McKay (eds), <i>The Norton Anthology of African American Literature</i> | Ethnocentrism as a type of racism; nationalist fever and national pride as tools of neocolonialism |

Adopting a postcolonialist perspective

In appraising a text within the paradigm of postcolonialism, there are a number of questions we should first ask ourselves:

- *Personal identification.* What is our status as members of a privileged group? Does our position involve overt/covert participation in a particular phase of post-colonialism or neocolonialism?
- *Cultural identification.* What is our position as members of specific cultural groups, as defined by race, ethnicity, religion, socio-economic status, gender and sexuality? (Is a white heterosexual male able to sympathise with the plight of an African-American lesbian subject?)
- *Language values.* Do we value some versions of English more than others? What has led to this?

Once we have understood our own position, we can examine the text:

| Area of focus | Question |
|-------------------------|--|
| Categorisation of texts | Does the text belong to a: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • particular canon • particular genre • literary tradition • clearly defined paradigm? |
| Compositional details | Who wrote the text? When and for what reason? What ideology or paradigm is privileged in this text? How does the text use language to contest or perpetuate the status quo? |
| Representation | Consider the characters in the text who are found on the periphery because of ethnic, social, class or ideological reasons. Why are they there and how different are they from the characters who are at the centre of the text? |
| Ethnography | How far does the text use or subvert ethnic stereotypes? |
| Ideology | What are the assumed values of the text and to what extent are they assumed societal values? |
| Exoticism | Does the text use a mode of composition that is not part of the Western literary tradition? Why was the text's mode of composition used? |
| Recomposition | How could you recompose aspects of the text in order to eliminate aspects that you may not like? |

Chapter summaries: structure

| Setting | What happens here? |
|--|--------------------|
| Strangers Pages 1-6 | |
| Part One: London Pages 7-71 | |
| Part Two: Sydney Pages 73-123 | |
| Part Three: A Clearing in the Forest Pages 125-185 | |
| Part Four: A Hundred Acres Pages 187-234 | |
| Part Five: Drawing a line Pages 235-270 | |
| Part Six: The Secret River Pages 273-309 | |
| Thornhill's Place Pages 311-334 | |

"Strangers" - Representations

| Representation | Quote | Technique and analysis |
|---|---|--|
| Will as grieving | Now, standing in the great sighing lung of this other place and feeling the dirt chill under his feet, he knew that life was gone. | |
| | A sharp stab like a splinter under a nail: the pain of loss. | |
| Transportation to Australia as worse than death | He might as well have swung at the end of the rope | |
| Communication | | Message from both men is one of hostility, intimidation and power. |
| Australia as a prison | There was no need of lock, of door, of wall: this was a prison whose bars were ten thousand miles of water | |
| Australia as threatening or hostile | Trees stood tall over him | |
| | He would die here under these alien stars, his bones rot in this cold earth | |
| Australia as unfamiliar, hostile | There was no Pole Star, a friend to guide him on the Thames, no Bear that he had known all his life; only this blaze, unreadable, indifferent | |
| | When he got up and stepped through the doorway, there was no cry, no guard: only the living night | |
| Indigenous people as beautiful and powerful | The parched starlight from the sky fell upon his shoulders | |
| | Upright in his hand, the spear was a part of him, an extension of his arm. | |

| Representation | Quote | Technique and analysis |
|-------------------------------|--|------------------------|
| | He wore his nakedness like a cloak | |
| Australia as dangerous | [The forest] could hide a hundred black men with spears, a thousand, a whole continent full of men with spears and that grim line to their mouths. | |
| | Every muscle was tensed, anticipating the shock in his neck or belly, his band going to the place, the cold moment of finding that unforgiving thing in his flesh. | |
| Australia as massive | Through the doorway of the hut he could feel the night, huge and damp...beyond that the soughing of the forest, mile after mile | |
| | ...nothing more than a flea on the side of some enormous quiet creature. | |
| Will as family man | ...and behind him, hardly hidden by that flap of bark, were those soft parcels of flesh: his wife and children. | |
| | He had nothing but that, and those helpless sleeping humans in the hut behind him. He was not about to surrender then to any naked black man. | |

Setting: time, place, atmosphere

| Setting | Quote, page | Summarise your response |
|-------------------------|--|-------------------------|
| Strangers | | |
| Atmosphere | "Only Thornhill could not bring himself to close his eyes on this foreign darkness." | |
| Cultural context | He wore his nakedness like a cloak, upright in his hand, the spear was part of him, an extension of his arm." | |
| | A different place – fewer people, more open ground of new land "mile after mile". | |
| | He would die here under these alien stars. | |
| London | | |
| Atmosphere | Houses, "growing out of the very dirt they sat on...the shambles, the glue factories, ...filling the air with their miasmas." | |
| Imagery | "He had a sudden dizzying understanding of the way men were ranged on top of each other, all the way from the Thornhills at the bottom up to the king, or God, at the top, each man higher than one, lower than another." | |
| Atmosphere | Wind "sliced through the worn-out wood, "whole face red, swollen, stone-like." | |
| Sydney | | |
| Place | Neighbours bring kettle and a smouldering stick. They are filthy, ill-clothes, drunk, smelly. The man warns them to "look out for the poxy savages, matey... They's partial to a tasty bit of victuals like your boy there." | |
| Atmosphere | Sal is crying and smiling. "the touch of their hands was all the words they needed." | |
| Place | "They had pushed through into another geography altogether. | |
| | "Their hut swarmed with creature they had never seen before: bold lizards...sticky black flies, lines of ants... mosquitos...bed bugs." P. 87 | |
| Atmosphere | "There was a place out of a dream, a fierce landscape of chasms and glowering cliffs and a vast unpredictable sky." (p. 101) | |
| Atmosphere | He realises "how a man might fall in love with a piece of ground." ..." It was a piercing hunger in his guts: to own it. To say <i>mine</i> in a way he had never been able | |

| | | |
|--|--|--|
| | to say <i>mine</i> of anything at all. He had not known until this minute that it was something he wanted so much. | |
|--|--|--|

A Clearing in the Forest

| | | |
|------------------------|--|--|
| Place | "Sometimes he thought there was a haze of smoke rising up between the trees, but when he looked harder it was not there." | |
| | "Is this it then, Will, she said. Is this the place. It was not really a question." | |
| Personification | Difficult landing. "He had to fight the feeling that the place was mocking him...in a frenzy of longing." | |
| Atmosphere | "My own, he kept saying to himself. My place. Thornhill's place. But the wind in the leaves up on the ridge was saying something else entirely." | |
| Atmosphere | Then he saw that he was being watched by two black men. They stood square on to him, fearlessly. The moment was theirs." | |

A Hundred Acres

| | | |
|-------------------|---|--|
| Atmosphere | "Things beginning to do smoothly." P. 189 | |
| | "We got to steer it narrow...Keep them happy, but don't let them take advantage. And they'll be gone by and by, with their roaming ways." | |
| | "They like it here by the river same as we do." | |

Drawing a line

| | | |
|--|---|--|
| | They hack down every tree. Grub out every bush. Roll every rock away and fence the hut in. | |
| | "A fence told a man how far he had travelled, and beyond the last length of fence he could see where he might go next." | |
| | | |

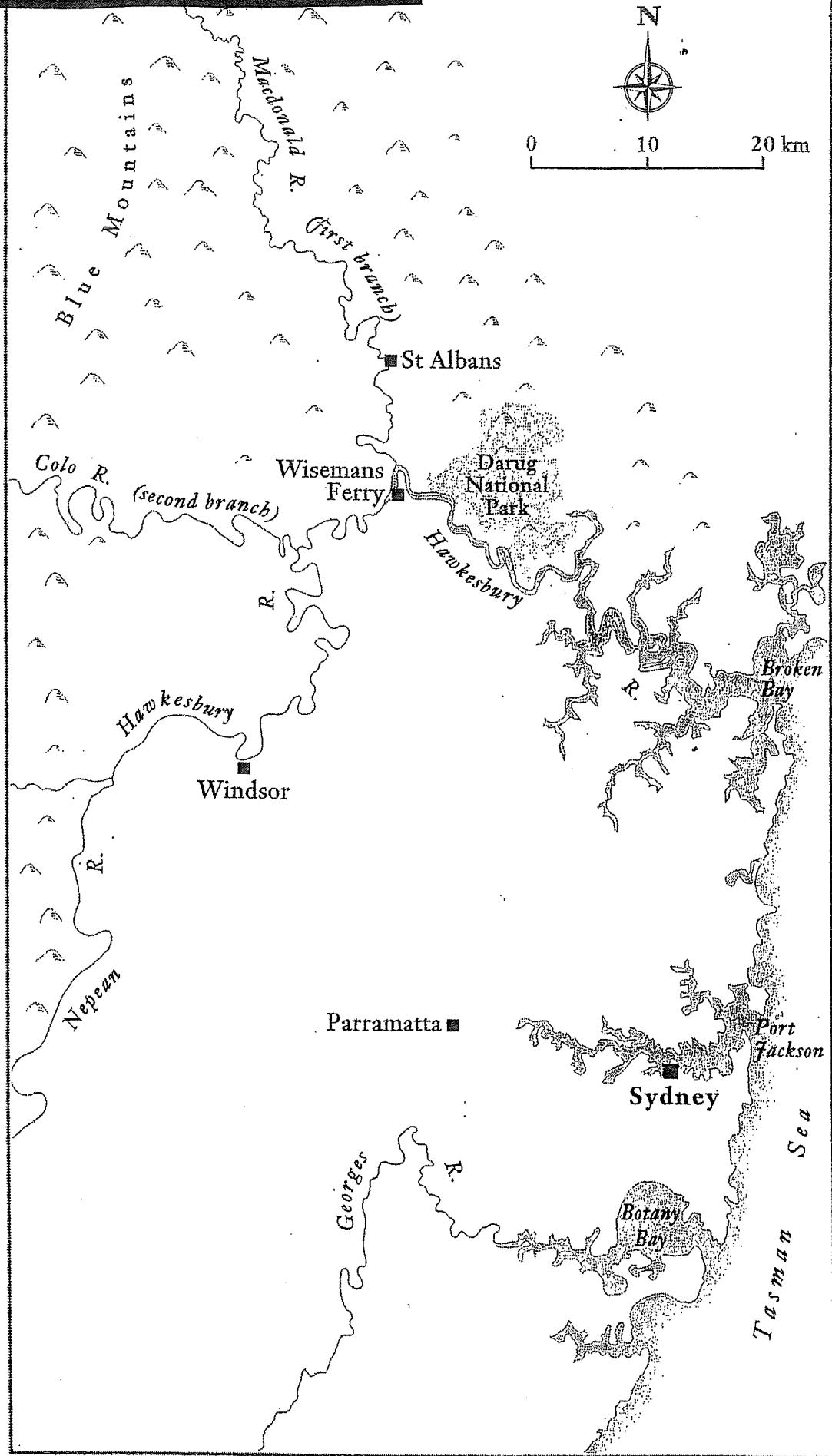
The Secret River

| | | |
|--|--|--|
| | "You're a fool if you think that, Will Thornhill. It ain't if but when." | |
| | "And a great shocked silence hanging over everything." | |
| | | |

Thornhill's Place

| | | |
|-------------------|--|--|
| Atmosphere | Thornhill now has £1000 cash, 300 acres, fine house with stone lions, boots, etc. 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. | |
| | | |

THE SECRET RIVER



Characters

Characters are constructed by speech, action, appearance and other's responses. Complete the table.

| Character | Quote and page number | Reveal aspect of character? |
|----------------------|--|-----------------------------|
| William Thornhill | Internal thoughts “...He had been comforted by telling over the bends of his own Thames. The Isle of Dogs, the deep eddying pool of Rotherhithe...: they were all as intimate to him as breathing.” | |
| | Others say Greedy little bugger you was.” | |
| | Description Time with friends “snatching cockles”, “scrabbling in the mud at low tide for pennies tossed by laughing gentlemen.” | |
| | Description Thornhill “had a way with the gentlemen, a loud cheery thing that he did, that rode above the plaintive cries of the others. <i>This way!</i> He roared.” | |
| | Internal thoughts “He could imagine how he would grow into himself in the warmth of such a home.”; It was a feeling of having a place.” | |
| | Internal thoughts The gentry had as many tricks as a rat to dun a poor waterman.”; “Trusting gentry was not something he did twice.” | |
| | Internal thoughts “The rage warmed him and filled him up. It was a kind of friend.” | |
| | Internal thoughts “A chaos opened up inside him, a confusion of wanting.” | |
| | “He could not turn his back on this place...It would feel like giving up a child.” P. 271 | |
| | “He felt he might become someone other than a human, someone who did not do things in this sticky clearing that could never be undone.” p. 300/308 | |
| | “Finally, he had to recognise that it was no human, just another tree, the size and posture of a man. Each time, it was a new emptiness.” p. 333 | |

| | | | |
|----------------------------------|--------------------------|--|--|
| Sal (Sarah) Thornhill | Others say | His wife sleeping ‘sweet and peaceful against him’; her hand “still entwined in his.” | |
| | Description | Sal’s home had “glass in the windows” and “always a loaf of bread in the cupboard.” | |
| | Appearance | Her smile “lit up everything around her.” | |
| | Others say | He loved to watch that mouth.” | |
| | Actions | Sal teaches William to read and write. | |
| | Actions | “When they were on the bottom rung of the ladder of accommodation, with only the street itself below them, she still kept looking for something cheaper but better, moving their few things while Thornhill was out on the river.” | |
| | Speech | “We got each other; each other and all them fleas, that; We won’t never be lonely here...Will we?” | |
| | Internal thoughts | Her humour only darkened by and thickened by this other thing that had always been there waiting to be needed: stubborn intelligence as unyielding as a rock. | |
| | Speech | “He is not assigned to me, he is my husband.” | |
| | Description | She proved canny at the inn-keeping game, using the charm of her smile...while she poured another tot of Mr King’s Jamaica.” | |
| | Description | She never ventured beyond the few streets of the township”; “On the top of that small rise she turned away from the wild forest and looked back down the hill at the settlement.” | |
| | Internal thoughts | “Thornhill had never seen Sal happier, even in her giddy girlhood. The children,,,were an attachment to life in some way that he would never know.” | |
| | | p. 183 | |

| | | | |
|-------------------------|----------------------------------|---|--|
| Thomas Blackwood | Others say | A man of few words: "a rough dignity", p. 94 | |
| | Description | "it seemed that Blackwood had arrived at accommodation with the river, but it was private, and he would not be drawn on it." p 95 | |
| | Appearance | "He did not remember ever having seen Blackwood grin before." | |
| | Speech | "Ain't nothing in this world just for the taking,"; "A man got to pay a fair price for taking,"; "Matter of give a little, take a little." | |
| | Speech | I see you looking...That back there...That ain't no good" | |
| | Speech | "Damn your eyes Smasher" Blackwood shouted, seizing one of the oars, his voice enormous between the cliffs. | |
| | Speech | "I got all I need up there, and none of the aggravation I can do without." | |
| Smasher Sullivan | Others say | "Burns the shells for the lime...Plus does a lot of mischief besides." (Blackwood) | |
| | Speech | "Look what I done." | |
| | Description | "A speck of imported green...crooked hut." | |
| | Speech and inner thoughts | "My word it does a man's heart good to have a yarn." In that smile was a guileless boy on whom life had now laid its mark." | |
| Alexander King | Others say | | |
| Sagitty Birtles | Speech | "It's like the bleeding flies, ain't it...Kill one, ten more come to its funeral." p. 162/8 | |
| Long Bob, Jack | Others say | | |
| Dick Thornhill | Others say | "That child born at sea between one world and another was a solemn creature with a dreamy face in which Thornhill could not see any echo of his own." | |
| | Speech | "It's them savages. Planting them things like you would taters." | |
| Dan Oldfield | Others say | "You had best call me Mrs Thornhill, Dan." They had power over him and "something in them both was enjoy it." p. 174 | |
| | Internal thoughts | "Thornhill surprised at "his own pleasure" in bullying. "He had not known that he had it in him to be a tyrant." | |
| Collarbone | Description | Collarbone begs Thornhill to buy him a quick death. And he raises the bribe for Mr Executioner. | |
| Richard and Mary | Description | But it was a sad house...as if looking inward to his dead sons." | |
| | Speech | Mr Middleton "saved him". He takes | |

| | | | |
|--|--------------------------|--|--|
| Middleton | | Thornhill on as apprentice but warns him "No thieving, mind. Finds sewing for the sisters. | |
| | Internal thoughts | Mr Middleton takes William to Watermen's Hall for his bending. "Thornhill felt breathless too, with the possibility of a future better than anything he could have hoped." | |
| | Description | Mr Middleton was a good master. | |
| Ma and Pa Thornhill William's siblings: Rob, Mary, Lizzie, James, Matty, John, Luke | Others | The father was always looking for work: He is "angry", "crept about half asleep, always weary", "long wet rattling cough." | |
| | Description | Mother thieves and the children assist: "...by then the Thornhills were gone like a lot of rats up the alley." | |
| | Inner thoughts | Expectation that the six-year-old sister looks after the little ones "more motherly to him than his mother" | |
| | Others say | Mother to Rob: Better if you had died and been done with it!" | |
| | Inner thoughts | When William aged 13, his mother dies. "...her face lit by the sweet yearning smile of that long-ago girl." | |
| William and Sal's children: Willie, Dick, Bub, Johnny, Mary, Dolly | | | |
| Spider Webb | | Calls the blacks "vermin". p. 164 | |
| Mrs. Herring | Speech | "As for the black, I give them when they ask...They help themselves now and then, I turn a blind eye." p. 166 | |
| | | Nearest thing to a surgeon. | |
| Parson Loveday | | "Something of a gent" "out of place amongst these men", shows scar from spearing. p. 165 | |

| | | | |
|------------------|-------------|---|--|
| Devine | | | |
| Whisker Harry | | | |
| George Twist | | | |
| Black Dick | | "No,...this me...my place....Sit down hereabouts." | |
| Captain McCallum | Description | "He had been taught to think in terms of an army taking up a position and confronting another army" | |
| | Speech | "I would not expect you to have had experience of a full-trained corps of soldiers." | |
| | Speech | "This colony rests on a knife edge, men." | |
| | | | |

Sum up representation of settlers (note Grenville's use of animal or insect comparisons), and the Indigenous characters.

Binaries and discourse in Kate Grenville's *The Secret River*

The underlying ideology - a set of ideas and values that supports a social system or way of living – that underpinned Australian colonial society was of Europeans as a superior group and Indigenous as inferior. The language used by the settlers to describe the Aboriginal people demonstrated this belief system. Grenville's novel however, written in 2006, reflects contemporary Australian values of multiculturalism, equality and egalitarianism. How does it both present colonists' attitudes and values and wholeheartedly reject them? Let us examine the binaries encapsulated in the novel of: **savage/civilised; human/animal or insect; and rational/physical body** and how Grenville undermines these oppositions clearly.

Word bank: Challenge or contradict

| | | | | |
|-----------|-----------|------------|-------------|-------------|
| refuse | repossess | reposition | reconfigure | deconstruct |
| dismantle | displace | intervene | undermine | subverts |

Activity

1. What are the settler myths and their perceptions of the Indigenous?
2. Grenville establishes the settler myths of difference (between Indigenous and settler groups) through character dialogue and actions. Which character most expresses the idea of difference? Provide two examples.
3. Settlers believed in the myth of their own superiority (as more intelligent, more hard-working, more rational, more civilized and can justifiably be put in charge of the other). How is this revealed in the novel? Provide two examples.
4. Will's understanding of the Darug tribe changes, particularly after his secret visit to watch their corroboree and his knowledge of their farming and hunting techniques. What does he learn that changes his view of them as more civilized?
5. Grenville blurs the boundaries of savage/civilized by showing us Will's awareness of the Darug tribe. She also represents the white settlers as less than civilized and savage. Provide two examples of this representation of the Europeans.
6. Grenville represents the Indigenous as powerful and able physically. Provide two examples.
7. How does Grenville dismantle the binary linking Europeans with the rational and Indigenous with the physical body? Provide two examples.
8. Characterisation of Dick and Blackwood are offered by Grenville as alternatives to that of Smasher and Will Thornhill. What do they represent?
9. The final binary of insect or animal/human is undermined in Grenville's description of the settlers. Provide two examples (167- 170).
10. Will learns to see the difference in the Darug people, (as individuals, p 205-206). In many ways he represents a modern-day attitude? Explain with two examples.

Settlers and Indigenous - ideas, customs, social behaviour

| Cultural practices | Settlers | Indigenous |
|---|-----------------|-------------------|
| Attitudes and behaviour towards the “other”/ | | |
| Personal property | | |
| Clothing | | |
| Hunting | | |
| Farming | | |
| Family relationships | | |
| Relationship with the natural world or environment | | |
| Sum up representation | | |

Conflict and resolution

| Between? | Resolution | Links to themes |
|---|------------|-----------------|
| White settlers, Sal and Will, and Aboriginal group | | |
| Sal and Will | | |
| Blackwood And Smasher | | |
| Settlers and the environment, farm | | |
| Will's Internal conflict | | |
| Class system in London and Sydney | | |

Point of view

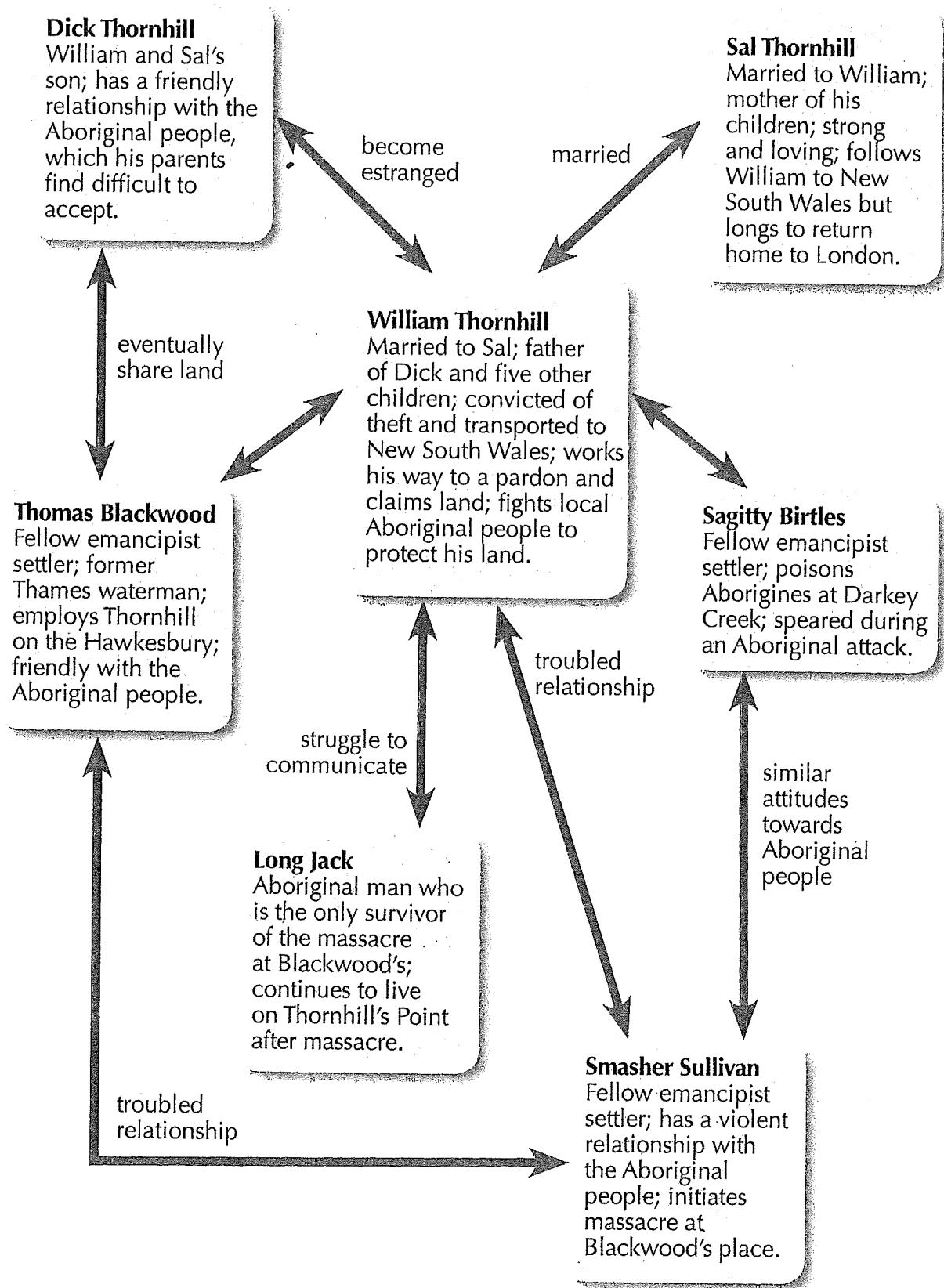
| | |
|-----------------------------|-------------------|
| Third person limited | When used? |
| | |

Symbols

Explain the role of symbols in the novel.

| Symbol | When used? | Why used? |
|----------------------------------|---|-----------|
| Daisy yams | "Old man picks up daisy roots from fire. Easts one. Holds some out to Thornhill who refuses calling it "monkey food" | |
| Homes of Blackwood and Thornhill | | |
| Marks on tree | | |
| Thornhill Point | "He thinks of Sal packing up the place. Imagines Thornhill's Point melting back into forest. Will set up house in Sydney or Windsor, maybe one day back to London. But thinks "nothing would console him for the loss of that point of land the shape of his thumb." His own place. | |
| River | | |
| | | |

CHARACTER MAP



Language techniques

Pick an example of writing and explain how and why it works.

| Technique | Quote/page number | How this shapes reader response or affects meaning made from text? |
|-------------------------|--|--|
| Metaphor | He was nothing more than a flea on the side of some enormous quiet creature." p. 4 | |
| Dramatic irony | "Be off, the man was shouting "Be off". It was his tone exactly.". p. 6 | |
| Symbol | "There was no Pole Star, a friend to guide him on the Thames...only this blaze, unreadable, indifferent." p. 4 | |
| Personification | The thought of that point of land became a private thing, a bead of warmth in his heart. | |
| Emotive language | Even the plants struggle in "damp sour fields", "boggy places", "stagnant water". | |
| Touch imagery | "The cold moment of finding that unforgiving thing in his flesh." P. 6 | |
| Metaphor | "It felt merely an unthought process of nature, a seed bursting out of the dirt or a flower unfurling from the bud." | |
| Visual imagery | "We are just about so our stomachs are flapping on our backbones, Will; That is the fact of it." | |
| Metaphor | "Reduced to an animal, head down and mind blank...There was a great emptiness in him, which was the space where hope had been." | |
| Syntax | "The problem was simple: fear did not pay the rent." | |
| Simile | "In Newgate that soft hopeful part of him was hardening over, becoming lifeless like stone or shell. It was a kind of mercy." | |
| Metaphor | "Her love and strength gave him heart, were a kind of wealth, he saw, that others did not have." | |
| Imagery | "He was struck by the power of the words. There was nothing going on in the court but words, and the exact words, little puffs of air of the mouth of a witness, would be the thing that saw him hanged or not." | |
| Imagery | "...black loops and swirls of the cripple's clerky hand, so different from Sal's careful letters. He despaired that his life depended on such flimsy things." | |

| | | |
|--------------------------|--|--|
| Metaphor | “...then came from all the streets around, cheered to watch this black insect of a man capering before them, a person lower in the order of things even than they were.” | |
| Analogy | “William Thornhill, Adam in Paradise, breathing deep of the air of his own new-coined world.” | |
| Emotive language | “That place was a dream that might shrivel if put into words.” | |
| Maritime metaphor | His hands already aching. Worried that his body won’t submit to his will. “A man’s life seemed a cruel race: to get himself and his family above the high water mark, safe from tides and contrary winds, before his body gave out.” | |
| Irony | “The slaps on the man’s skins were like slow ironic applause.” p. 147 | |
| | Thornhill decides a line has to be drawn with the Aborigines. He heads towards the smoke. “All the same he felt naked.” | |
| | “They were clothed in their skins, the way Sal was clothed in her shawl and skirt.” | |
| | “It seemed important to act the part of host. That way, they were his guests.” | |
| Simile | “Authority radiated from this naked old man like heat off a fire.” | |
| Simile | Child “...hand like a pale starfish on her black thigh.” | |
| Sound imagery | “shout, angry blur of dogs barking, strangled noises of them gagging as the chains jerked at their neck, din, small” | |
| Metaphor | Clothed as he was, he felt skinless as a maggot...those soft parcels of flesh. | |
| Simile | “... a sweet place with scattered trees and grass, as green and tender as a gentleman’s park even in this summer season.” p. 106 | |
| Imagery | “No one had spoken to him of how there could be this teasing sparkle and dance of light among the trees, this calm space that invited feet to enter it.” | |
| Personification | p. 106 “He almost laughed aloud, seeing it as just a shape of his own thumb, nail and knuckle and all.”, p. 106 | |

Themes

| | |
|--|--|
| Home and belonging | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> “There were no signs that the blacks felt the place belonged to them. They had no fences that said <i>this is mine</i>. No house that said, <i>this is our home</i>. There were no fields or flocks that said we have put the labour of our hands into this place.” Thornhill and Willie dubious about shrivelled seeds. Their lack of farming knowledge. Thornhill’s pride as he ignores Willie and plants seed. “Ain’t nothing to me if it’s dead or alive, he said breezily. Long’s it says William Thornhill got here first.” |
| Hard work | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Thornhill wonders why they “Not putting none by?...For tomorrow, like?”, p. 101 Blackwood’s response: “Why would they? River ain’t going nowhere.” “Two things drove him...Thinks of the contract ‘like a snake that could turn on a man and strike him dead.” |
| Conflict | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> They are in conflict with their dreams: Sal of returning to London, Thornhill wanting to own his own land. “We grab this change, Sal...No...I ain’t coming at it, Will, and that’s flat.” He realises after seeing the rock carving: “This place was no more empty than a parlour in London, from which the master of the house had just stepped into the bedroom. He might not be seen, but he was there.” |
| Redemptive power of stories | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> One of the pleasures of those murmured times was telling each other about their future.” “Then we’ll be right to go back. Home.” Hers had an altogether different end, but the miracle was that it had the same beginning. Thornhill reflects that NSW has taken on a life of its own: “It was a machine in which some men would be crushed up and spat out, and others would rise to heights they would not have dreamed of before.” |
| Communication | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> They have never disagreed on anything that mattered before. He wants to explain. She can’t imagine it and doesn’t want to. Thornhill realises that coming so close to the noose; “That changed a man forever.” |
| Clash of civilisations | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> “Don’t spear me, there’s a good lad.” Old man speaks at length. “...gestured with a fluid hand down the river, up and over the hills, did a flattening thing with his palm...” Attempts to communicate and Thornhill begins to “feel like an imbecile.” “The man spoke loud and hard, and gestured with the hand that had slapped Thornhill. In any language, anywhere, that movement of the hand said, <i>Go away</i>. Even a dog understood <i>Go away</i> when he saw it.” “They had never kept secrets from each other before, or had thoughts they did not share.” Old man angry, points towards river flats holding up bundle of roots. Thornhill “longed for words.” They nod to each other. A conversation had taken place. Inquiry? Answer? “They stared at each other, their words between them like a wall.” |
| Aboriginal culture | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> “In the world of these naked savages, it seemed everyone was gentry.” |
| Disorientation of the immigrant | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> “She had never spoken of her loneliness. And he had not thought to ask. It was part of that area of silence between them.” She walks them through streets of Home. Thornhill contributes so does Dan. Uncertainty. “London...was becoming just another story, its exact shape gone fluid.” |

The Secret River

About the author

Kate Grenville was born in Sydney in 1950 and currently lives there with her family. She is an honorary associate in the English department at the University of Sydney, and holds degrees from universities both in Australia and overseas. She has also worked as a teacher of creative writing, a journalist and a film editor. She is most recognised for her works of fiction, although she has also published non-fiction and often writes newspaper columns and semi-academic articles.

Works

Grenville's first book, *Bearded Ladies* (1984), was a collection of short stories. This was followed by seven novels: *Lilian's Story* (1985) and *Dreamhouse* (1986), which were both made into films; *Joan Makes History* (1988); *Dark Places* (1994); *The Idea of Perfection* (1999); *The Secret River* (2005); and *The Lieutenant* (2008). Many of these novels explore women's roles in society and in history. Some are based on true stories of contemporary or historical characters who have fascinated Grenville. In *Lilian's Story*, for example, Grenville takes her inspiration from the life of Bea Miles, a well-known Sydney eccentric in the 1940s and 1950s.

As well as novels and short stories, Grenville has written four non-fiction books about the writing process. Two of these, *The Writing Book* (1990) and *Writing from Start to Finish* (2001) are practical writing guides, and make use of Grenville's experience and knowledge as a writing teacher. *Making Stories* (1993), written with Sue Woolfe, discusses the work of a range of other Australian authors. These books demonstrate Grenville's interest in analysing the processes involved in creating fiction, an interest which also motivates *Searching for the Secret River* (2006), a writing memoir describing her experiences of researching and writing *The Secret River*. As well as publishing such works, she often participates in panels at writers' festivals and academic conferences, discussing the role and responsibilities of the writer.

Reception

Grenville's work is well respected both nationally and internationally. She won several awards for her early works, including the Australian/Vogel National Literary Award for *Lilian's Story* and the Orange Prize for Fiction (UK) for *The Idea of Perfection*. *The Secret River* was shortlisted for numerous awards including the Man Booker Prize and the Miles Franklin Literary Award, and won several of these including the Commonwealth Writers' Prize and the Community Relations Commission Award in the New South Wales Premier's Literary Awards. Despite winning many awards, however, *The Secret River* is also a controversial novel, generating much public debate about the rights and responsibilities of novelists working in the genre of historical fiction.

The controversy surrounding *The Secret River* did not dampen Grenville's enthusiasm for fictionalising Australian history, and her next novel, *The Lieutenant*, was another work of historical fiction. Set slightly before *The Secret River*, *The Lieutenant* is based on the story of William Dawes and, like *The Secret River*, re-imagines colonial settlement and frontier contact between settlers and Aboriginal people.

Guardian book club

• John Mullan is professor of English at University College London

We often talk as if "sympathy" were the sure symptom of a reader's satisfaction, the evidence of a character - usually the "hero" or "heroine" - brought successfully to life. Kate Grenville's *The Secret River* initially seems as if it were indeed keen to elicit sympathy for its protagonist. Yet she sets out to win the reader's allegiance for an unusual purpose. She structures her narrative so as to obtain sympathy for a character who, we eventually realise, is going to do something unforgiveable.

A short prologue headed "Strangers" warns us of a conflict to come. William Thornhill, transported as a convict to Australia in 1806, is passing his first night in the penal colony of New South Wales. Unable to sleep, he leaves his hut and suddenly finds himself confronted by a man "as black as the air itself", holding a spear. He shouts at him, as if he were a stray dog. Silently the man disappears into the surrounding forest. It is a cameo of fear and aggression. It foreshadows a future confrontation.

After this opening, part one of *The Secret River* takes us back in time to London at the end of the 18th century to see the young Thornhill, born into near-destitution, struggling to survive. We already know, of course, where he is destined to end up. The account of the first 30 years of Thornhill's life, of the poverty of his family and his struggles to make good, seems designed to win our sympathy. Through no fault of his own, he loses his promising future as a Thames waterman, takes to petty theft and only narrowly escapes the gallows. Instead he is sentenced to transportation, though his wife, Sal, and their children are allowed to travel with him.

Sympathy is not just the consequence of a hard-luck story; it is the product of a narrative method. Though narrated in the third person, this story is told entirely from Thornhill's point of view. The narrator has unimpeded access to his thoughts: "He knew . . . he saw . . . he remembered". Much of the narrative is in free indirect style, adopting the habits of thought and speech of the character himself. Even when not directly reporting Thornhill's thoughts, it uses his idioms. It is this intimacy with the novel's protagonist that will become discomfiting, as we come to share what he keeps secret from his wife.

He thinks that he is protecting her from horrors. Soon after his arrival he encounters another "emancipee", Smasher, who proudly brandishes the severed hands of an Aboriginal whom he has caught stealing from him. As Thornhill rows away he looks back through a telescope and sees what he at first thinks is "a beast hung up for butchering", but then understands is "the body of a black man", hanging from a tree, horribly mutilated. He tells his wife nothing about this. Later he finds out that Smasher and a fellow settler have captured an Aboriginal woman whom they keep chained and rape at their pleasure. He sees the woman, and therefore we are made to see her too, but he will tell no one. Imagining telling his wife, "even thinking the words in his own mind - filled him with shame". The narrative's word for what he has seen is also his word. "He had done nothing to help her. Now the evil was part of him." This, too, is free indirect style, the character's verdict on himself.

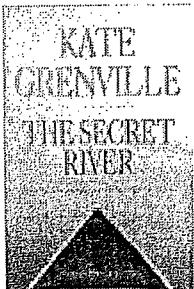
Fiction often attempts to draw the reader into the mind of a character who acts badly. It is unusual, however, for a novel to work hard to win your sympathy for a central character, only to destroy that sympathy. Now you see the point of the novelist's peculiar decision on what to call him. Thornhill's wife is "Sal", the two useless yet potentially murderous ex-convicts he takes on as servants are always called "Ned" and "Dan", yet the novel always calls Thornhill by his surname, never friendly enough to use his first name.

The very blurb on the novel's cover warns us that Thornhill will finally have to make a terrible "decision". This reflects the sense of foreboding that the novel engineers. From the prologue onwards, the threat of violence hangs over it, implicit in the white settlers' obsession with the mysterious "blacks". "They all going to be real sorry," says the repellent Smasher, after he has been punched by Blackwood, an ex-convict who secretly lives with an Aboriginal woman and has had a child by her. Sal predicts "trouble", and the reader predicts it too. The sense of some impending catastrophe is almost painful; you know that it will be seen through Thornhill's eyes, and you suspect that this will require his involvement.

Thornhill makes his decision. In its aftermath, like some plebeian Macbeth, he just washes his hands vigorously, "over and over against each other, slippery with soap", while his wife chooses not to ask any questions that might challenge him to a lie. "He had his answers ready." But he does not need them. She lets the choices into which the novel has led him remain untalked of. What has happened becomes "a little shadow; the thing not spoken of". But the marriage accommodates such silence. He betrays our sympathy and, as experienced novel readers, we might expect him to be punished, but even this solace is to be denied us.

The Secret River by Kate Grenville

May 14, 2011 by musingsofaliterarydilettante



After being wowed by Kim Scott's *That Deadman Dance* (see my review here), I thought it would be interesting to revisit another celebrated colonial-era 'first-contact' novel: Kate Grenville's *The Secret River*. It is the story of poverty-stricken Thames waterman William Thornhill, convicted to hang for the theft of Brazil wood, and his wife, Sal. Thornhill escapes hanging only to be transported to New South Wales and after being assigned to his wife and making some progress in the 'Camp' that would become Sydney, builds a successful shipping business ferrying goods and produce to and from the farms on the Hawkesbury River, north of Sydney. This is the 'secret river' of the novel's title: [p100]:

Thornhill strained to find that secret river. In every direction, the reaches of Broken Bay seemed to end in yet another wall of rock and forest. A man could sail for days and never find his way into the Hawkesbury.

(As an aside, this is not only lyrical writing, but also historically accurate: when the first explorers set off from Sydney to explore Broken Bay they completely missed the main river so hidden was its course.)

It is on his first trip up the river, helping an older lighterman, Thomas Blackwood, that Thornhill spies a plot of land which he calls Thornhill's Point, and a yearning for it is kindled, a longing to own a piece of land that would be beyond him in London. All he had to do was pitch up and take it – oh, and convince his Missus that it was a good idea. There were a lot of stories in Sydney about troubles with the aborigines on the Hawkesbury so she is quite nervous about moving there. So too is Thornhill.

Right from the start Grenville has Thornhill facing up to the aborigines, even if it is old 'Scabby Bill', an old native who dances for a sup of rum in Sydney. There is a sense that

things will not work out well. Thornhill thinks, [p5]: "There were worse things than dying: life had taught him that. Being here in New South Wales might be one of them."

Grenville's writing is evocative; her sense of place is exacting. Thornhill grows up in grinding, stomach-aching poverty in London, where the [p9] "light struggled in through small panes of cracked glass and the soot from the smoking fireplace veiled the walls." Have a look at those word choices(!): struggled, small, cracked, soot, veiled: his life reeks of cold, hunger, and want.

He admires Sal and enjoys being in her house, [p17]: "It was easy to wish to belong to this house ... He could imagine how he would grow into himself in the warmth of such a home. It ... was the feeling of having a place."

This theme of having a home, something of his own, feeds his desire to set up on the secret river. There, Thornhill and Sal – as well as their burgeoning brood of children – come into the realm of a hardy bunch of white-settler neighbours, although the closest is an hour away. Some of these are intent on eradication of the natives, people like Smasher Sullivan and Sagitty Birtles. Others, like Blackwood, are more than sympathetic to the natives. Blackwood has had a daughter to an aboriginal woman. Tensions are already high between these various factions, and whenever they get together talk quickly turns to the question of the latest 'depredations' of the natives.

One of the great plot elements here is Sal's great reluctance to leave Sydney and take up land on the Hawkesbury. They come to an agreement: she would give him five years and then they would return to London. The deal sets up great tension. We know he wants to stay and she wants to leave. What will give?

Thornhill plants corn on his land, in part to say to all-comers, 'this is my land.' In the process he rips out the yam daisies that are a staple for the local aborigines. This theft of food supply is an oft-repeated early flashpoint in colonial settlements around Australia, and is thus very realistic.

Elsewhere, historical accuracy has been questioned. Much has been made of the climax of the book as well as how believable it is for Smasher to get away with his constant acts of depravity against the natives. Aboriginal Law works on a 'payback' system. Whilst aborigines had a collective system of guilt in which the perpetrator's family members could be substituted for ritual payback, aborigines picked out the guilty where they could. Watkin Tench, a first

fleet lieutenant, told the death of the governor's game keeper, who it seems, was speared for payback for his presumed killings of aborigines. It stretches credulity, say critics, that Smasher was not subject to payback by the local aborigines, particularly as he lives by himself. Such are the dangers of historical fiction! It seems that, for some, it is not good enough writing a gripping 'story', a work of historical fiction must be believable in every sense of the history of the time. I'm in two minds about this. Stories should 'ring true' but at the end of the day they are fiction. Grenville was at pains to point out that *The Secret River* was a work of fiction and not history. Smasher is an evil man but a good fictional character, just as Blackwood is a good character. They each serve their purpose in building the conflict that drives the story.

What Grenville does brilliantly is make us sympathise with a character who will end up doing something unspeakable. Some point to the unusual novelistic end where Thornhill goes unpunished for his deeds. Yet Thornhill is punished: one of his sons, Dan, who grew up on the river and swam with black children and learned some of their ways, like how to make fire, deserts Thornhill and goes to live with the broken Blackwood. This estrangement pains Thornhill. But what pains him even more is his searching of the ridge-tops at the end with his looking glass, trying to spot an aboriginal still living in the wilds. One gets the feeling that had he his time again he would have made another choice. It's not the punishment society should meter out to him, but it is a never-ending suffering all the same.

Thornhill and Sal are left altered by the events: [p324-5]:

They were loving to each other still. She smiled at him with that sweet mouth. He took her hand to feel its narrowness in his own and she did not resist. Whatever the shadow was that lived with them, it did not belong to just him, but to her as well: it was a space they both inhabited. But it seemed there was no way to speak into that silent space. Their lives had slowly grown around it, the way the roots of a river-fig grew around a rock.

Also eloquent are the many descriptive passages of the Australian environment, from the bush around Sydney to the river landscape of the Hawkesbury. Thornhill's first night in Sydney is spent listening: [p3]:

Through the doorway of the hut he could feel the night, huge and damp, flowing in and bringing with it the sounds of its own life: tickings and creakings, small private rustlings, and beyond that the southing of the forest, mile after mile.

A month or two back I read Grenville's *Searching for the Secret River*, her memoir of the process of writing the book. (I'd recommend the book for anyone who wants to 'see behind the curtain' so-to-speak; for anyone else, it might break the spell.) One of the interesting sections in that book was a chapter on how hard she had to work to get the dialogue right. She ended up taking advice from Annie Proulx who talked about the rhythm of the dialogue, how altering word order and using the odd old word changes the 'sound'. Grenville writes in *Searching*:

... I decided that my job as a novelist wasn't to reconstruct the authentic ... eighteenth-century vernacular. My job was to produce something that sounded authentic.

She sourced dialogue from Old Bailey Court Sessions which are now online. The dialogue comes in short bursts, in italics, subsumed within paragraphs. Characters often talk around things rather than in a direct manner. It's a very interesting re-creation of 18th century dialogue. Mostly I found it convincing, (although the repeated 'Damn your eyes' became a little tiresome!)

It is interesting that Grenville refers to her protagonist throughout the book as 'Thornhill' rather than 'William', something she repeated for her character Rooke in her wonderful follow-up novel *The Lieutenant* (see my review). I wonder why this is? Is it because she didn't want us to get too close to Thornhill, or is it simply a choice based on the way people were known in 1800? If you have any insight, let me know.

When I first read *The Secret River* I thought the London section a little long. This time round I thought the pacing was excellent. (It's funny how we change our minds on some things with a second reading.)

The Secret River has elements of similarity with *That Deadman Dance* – the dwindling sources of food, the blundering settlers, the clash of cultures, the demise of the natives – but Scott's novel is elegiac and offers a sense of possibility and hope. *The Secret River* is a very different animal. Both are excellent. Let's hope that we can build not as William Thornhill does – covering the fish carved by the aborigines in the rock with his stone-walled home – but as Bobby Wabalanginy would have us do, with a sense of togetherness.

The Secret River won the Commonwealth Writers' Prize and the NSW Premier's Literary Award, and was shortlisted for the 2006 Man Booker Prize (won by Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (see my review here); for mine, *The Secret River* is the better book).

PERSONAL HISTORY

Kate Grenville's enthralling new novel continues her emotional and ethical inquiry into our colonial past, writes Stella Clarke

KATE Grenville's new novel, *Sarah Thornhill*, is not really the romance the jacket suggests, with its sepia-tinted heroine gazing off into Arcadia. This marketing belies Grenville's reputation as a writer with a tough and pragmatic approach to the past. While there are gratifyingly romantic elements in this enthralling novel, they are underlaid by a discourse of remorse for atrocities committed against Aboriginal populations during colonisation. In *Sarah Thornhill*, Grenville examines themes of guilt and conscience that are of continuing significance for Australians today.

This focus will not surprise those familiar with Grenville's award-winning and controversial 2005 novel *The Secret River*. *Sarah Thornhill* completes a loose trilogy of beguiling explorations of Australian settler history, which also includes her acclaimed 2008 novel *The Lieutenant*.

Sarah is the daughter of William Thornhill, the complex figure at the centre of *The Secret River* who, in the process of establishing his estate on the supposed terra nullius of the Hawkesbury River in NSW, chose a

Sarah Thornhill
By Kate Grenville
Text Publishing, 295pp, \$39.95 (HB)

In *Sarah Thornhill*, there are two poignant and delicately rendered love stories; Sarah moves on when the first one founders. Romantic love, however, is not the point of this novel. Coming to maturity, Sarah confronts the crimes of her father.

Born into the colonial situation, Sarah has played no part in its brutalities; nevertheless, she is assaulted by conscience. She is as innocent as those who, today, tackle the issue of saying sorry.

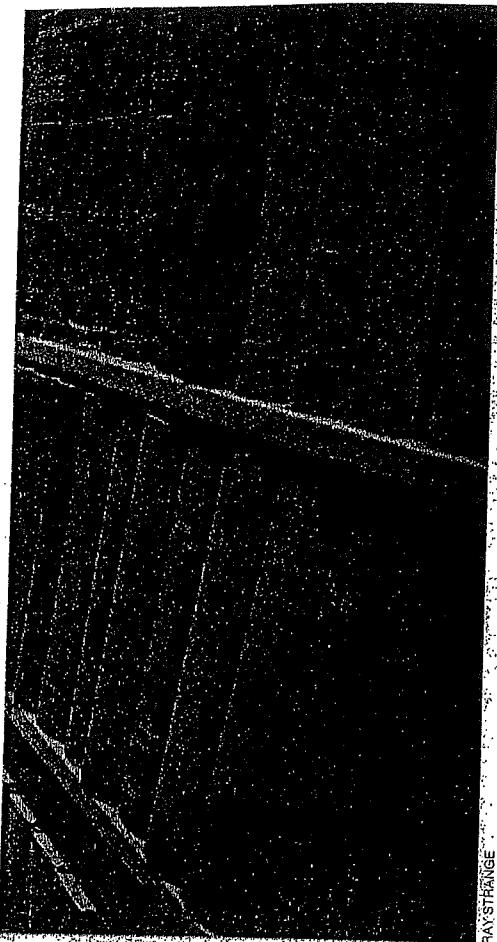
Her father has built a fortress of privilege, comfort and respectability, but she finds this legacy conceals a shameful burden. Sarah's story is based on apocryphal fragments of Grenville's family lore and scraps of information barely identifiable as documentation.

The novel is simply and beautifully narrated. Sarah tells it as it might be thought or spoken, in bits of sentences. She is illiterate but highly observant, sensitive to the splendour of her surroundings on the Hawkesbury River. Staying within the limits



arrival is crushing. Traumatised, Sarah moves on with her life. She marries a decent, well-bred Irish settler, moves away from the Hawkesbury, and learns to love him. Just as Sarah's story appears, fairly happily, to resolve, another gathers pace. William Thornhill has commanded Jack to fetch his orphaned, half-Maori grandchild from New Zealand and bring her to his grand home. The little girl is renamed Rachel by Sarah's stepmother, who is intent on erasing her origins. Rachel endures a fate akin to Matrimma in Richard Flanagan's 2008 novel *Wanting*. Tragically, Sarah fails to protect Rachel. Although she can have no control over the past, in Rachel's case she succumbs

over the past, in Rachel's case she succumbs



Vivid fiction... Kate Grenville

Sarah's story is not, then, about young love thwarted but the failure, during colonisation, of a larger love. It asks where ignorance ends and complicity begins. In her acknowledgments, Grenville notes that history has become a dangerous word for her to utter and emphatically states that this is fiction, not history. Yet is it that simple?

This novel revisits the fascinating, troubling territory of the history wars. It rows out on to the secret river of contemporary Australian anxiety (still running high, for example, in Sarah Maddison's *Beyond White Guilt*, reviewed in these pages on July 2) and navigates a fictional tributary.

THIS NOVEL REVISITS THE FASCINATING, TROUBLING TERRITORY OF THE HISTORY WARS

Grenville's three novels have been deluged by commentary on her treatment of the Australian past, over and above discussion of their merits. She found herself on perilous ground following the success of *The Secret River*, when historian Mark McKenna pilloried her for historical hubris, along with critics like me for not being critical. Following my riposte in this newspaper (*Havoc in History House*, 2006) the controversy ballooned (see Grenville's website at www.kategrenville.com).

In recent years, a forest of journalistic and academic work has rehearsed and extended the original spat. (Just last year, for example, Rodopi Press published Australian National University academic Kate Mitchell's *Australia's "Other" History Wars: Trauma and the Work of Cultural Memory in Kate Grenville's The Secret River*.) The novel, with associated commentary, turned up on educational curriculums. In the history v fiction debate, Grenville is totemic.

Why go back, then, to the ambitious,

ruthless emancipist, William Thornhill, and the horns of his prickly dilemma? Why not just cut the history out of the fiction? Grenville's range extends well beyond historical fiction, as in the Orange award-winning *The Idea of Perfection* (1999). She is, apparently, driven by the same compulsion that gnaws at other commanding writers, such as Flanagan, Pulitzer prize-winner Geraldine Brooks and recent Miles Franklin winner Kim Scott (*That Deadman Dance*).

For them, historical fiction is not just about dramatising the past but about tackling a contemporary "culture of forgetting", acknowledging history's "secret river of blood" (terms used in Australia's "Other" History Wars).

Grenville and Flanagan have convict ancestors; they take history personally. Scott is of Aboriginal descent. These authors are mindfully engaged in dialogue with the colonial past. Such fiction is a valuable form of emotional and ethical inquiry.

It is histories that are Grenville's concern. Sarah's story shows how unknown individual stories fill the past and create the present. Stricken Sarah, appalled by knowledge of her father's inhumanity, believes "there is no cure for the bite of the past". However, the act of storytelling offers hope for a fuller understanding. Scott, in response to his Miles Franklin win, said: "There is a lot of reconciling — particularly reconciling ourselves to a shared history — that is yet to happen."

Grenville's vivid fiction performs as testimony, memory and mourning, within this collective, post-colonial narrative.

Stella Clarke has lectured on cultural and literary studies in Britain and Australia.

In The Weekend Australian Magazine today: Kate Grenville talks to Miriam Cosic.

Grenville is a guest of the Melbourne Writers Festival (until September 4) and Brisbane Writers Festival (September 7-11).

The novel shifts from Australia to New Zealand and, perhaps, deeper into fantasy, Sarah is called on to make reparation. Her father's "cold charity", coldly received, will not suffice here. Sarah forces herself to leave her own baby and undertake the treacherous voyage to meet Rachel's grieving Maori relatives, where she will publicly call herself to account for the child's mistreatment. Rather than deny, repress and forget, Sarah chooses to bear witness, accept and confess. It is an act of profound contrition, which achieves a measure of absolution. This final movement, combining Maori with Aboriginal suffering, makes the book begin to feel like therapy for a settler civilisation made neurotic by its discontents.

Fact sheets

Terra Nullius

In 1770 Captain James Cook landed in Botany Bay, home of the Eora people, and claimed possession of the East Coast of Australia for Britain under the doctrine of 'terra nullius'

According to the international law of Europe in the late 18th century, there were only three ways that Britain could take possession of another country:

1. If the country was uninhabited, Britain could claim and settle that country. In this case, it could claim ownership of the land.
2. If the country was already inhabited, Britain could ask for permission from the indigenous people to use some of their land. In this case, Britain could purchase land for its own use but it could not steal the land of the indigenous people.
3. If the country was inhabited, Britain could take over the country by invasion and conquest- in other words, defeat that country in war. However, even after winning a war, Britain would have to respect the rights of indigenous people.

Strangely Britain did not follow any of these rules in Australia. Since there were already people living in Australia, Britain could not take possession by "settling" this country. However from the time of Captain Cook's arrival the British Government acted as if Australia were uninhabited. So, instead of admitting that it was invading land that belonged to Aboriginal people, Britain acted as if it were settling an empty land. This is what is meant by the myth of terra nullius.

Source:

The myth of terra nullius NSW Board of Studies, 1995
Reproduced in the Sydney Morning Herald, 26 October 1996
Racism. no way. CESCEO

Theme: Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders - Australian history and race relations

Feature: The Hawkesbury

Date posted: 1 Sep 2015 Author: STC Production: The Secret River



Bay.

- The body of water that sits at the heart of The Secret River is the Hawkesbury, north of Sydney. Here are a few key facts about the mighty waterway:
1. The river is also known as Deerubbin, which means "wide, deep water".
 2. It contains five islands (in order, heading downstream): Milson, Peat, Spectacle, Long and Dangar.
 3. It starts at the point where the Nepean River meets the Grose River, and runs for 120 kilometres to Broken
 4. Land next to the Hawkesbury has been used for thousands of years by the Darkinjung, Dharug, Eora and Kuring-gai Aboriginal people.
 5. The Hawkesbury River was named so by Governor Phillip in June 1789, after Lord Hawkesbury, the president of the Board of Trade in Britain. Three years later, further expeditions to explore the Hawkesbury and Nepean rivers established that they were in fact the same river.
 6. Europeans began living along the river by 1794.
 7. Today, parts of the river are visited daily by a river postman service, which delivers mail and supplies to hard-to-access sections of the river and is now a tourist attraction.

The Secret River, 1 Feb – 20 Feb 2016, Roslyn Packer Theatre

YEAR 11 LITERATURE – NOVEL STUDY

THE SECRET RIVER by KATE GRENVILLE

Respond to the following questions on Kate Grenville's novel *The Secret River* as thoroughly and concisely as possible. The questions follow the order of events in the text. Answer in dot points if you prefer.

Prologue: Strangers

- 1.What purpose is served in having this Prologue?

Part One: London

2. In five or six points, describe William Thornhill's childhood and family life in London. (pp 9 – 25)
3. Who is Sal and what is her background? How does she come to live with the Thornhills and how does she help them, particularly William? (pp16– 19,33 – 39)
4. Who is Mr Middleton and why is his character significant? (pp16, 25 – 28, 41 – 45)
5. What problems does Thornhill encounter as a ferryman? (pp37 – 40, 49 -)
6. How and why do Thornhill's criminal activities begin? What crime does he commit which results in his arrest? (pp 14, 46-49,52-58)
7. How does Sal help Thornhill whilst he is in prison? What is the outcome of this help?(pp 60-65, 67-69)

Part Two: Sydney

- 8.Describe the town of Sydney which greets Thornhill. (pp 75-81)
- 9.What does Thornhill's life as a convict entail? (pp 83 – 87)
10. What work does Sal initiate for her family in Sydney? (p 85)
11. How would you describe the relationship between Thornhill and the Indigenous inhabitants at this stage of the narrative? (pp 90 – 93)
- 12.Who is Thomas Blackwood? What is your initial impression of his character? (pp 94, 99 – 108)
13. How has life changed for the Thornhills by 1808? (pp 96 – 98)
14. Describe the character of Smasher Sullivan. Discuss how the reader is positioned towards him and why. (pp103 – 104)
15. Why does Thornhill think back to "The Promised Land"? What actions does this prompt? (pp 107 – 112)
16. Why does Blackwood leave the packet trade and what does Thornhill do as a result? (pp112 – 123)
17. What themes and/or ideas have been introduced by the end of Part Two?

Part Three: A Clearing in the Forest

18. What immediate problems arise for the family when they arrive at "Thornhill's Point"? (pp 134 – 142)
19. What are the reactions of Thornhill and the Aborigines to each other on first contact?(pp142 – 148)
20. How does Sal approach this new life and the living conditions?(pp 149 – 152)

21. What is Smasher's reason for visiting the Thornhills after four weeks? (pp 156 – 159)
22. Identify the other river settlers who visit the Thornhills and explain what you consider to be their intention. What atmosphere is created? (pp 162 – 169)
23. What happens at the wharf when Thornhill goes to choose and collect his convict servants? (pp 172 – 176)

Part Four: A Hundred Acres

24. What is the potential trouble readers are alerted to in the opening pages of Part Four?
25. How would you describe the interaction between Thornhill and the Aborigines at this stage of the narrative? (pp 195 – 197)
26. How does the relationship between the two parties develop? (pp 198 – 203)
27. How would you describe Blackwood's attitude to the Aborigines and the land? (pp 205 – 210)
28. How is Dick Thornhill different from other members of his family and what is the result of this? Why? (pp 210 – 219)
29. Why does Sal continue to sing "Old London" songs to the children? (p 220)
30. Describe the Indigenous people's lifestyle. What are the obvious differences between their lifestyle and that of the settlers? (pp 226 – 230)
31. What is the significance of Smasher and the oysters? (pp 230 – 234)

Part Five: Drawing a Line

32. What begins to change for the Thornhills?
33. Why is Thornhill convinced they will be attacked and how does he react? (pp 234 – 250)
34. Thornhill's return to Smasher's place presents a very confronting scene. What does this foreshadow? (pp 250 – 253)
35. What news does Smasher deliver to the Thornhills and others? What is the reaction to this? (pp 253 – 265)
36. How does the tension rise to a climax from the failure of Captain McCallum's expedition to the start of the massacre of the Aborigines by the settlers? (pp 265 – 303)

Thornhill's Place

37. Describe "Thornhill's Creek".
38. What is Thornhill's status in the community?
39. What is the significance of: i) the lions on the gateposts (refer p 19)
ii) green slippers for Sal? (Refer pp 30 – 31)
40. Why does Thornhill sit for hours at the end of each day looking through his spy-glass? (pp 330 – 334)

ABORIGINAL HISTORY TIMELINE

- 60000 -70000 BP Possible first arrival of people from south-east Asia.
- 50000 -60000 BP At a site in Arnhem in the Northern Territory, a rock shelter was used by people with stone tools who used red ochre, probably to prepare pigments for rock painting or body decoration.
- 5000 A new, small-tool technology is developing in south-eastern Australia. By 3000 BP* the technology has spread as far as Cape York.
- 1451 Dutch documents record the journeys of Macassan trepangers (those seeking sea-cucumber) to 'Marege', as the Macassans called Australia. They introduce tobacco and canoes.
- 1770 Lieutenant James Cook claims possession of the whole east coast of Australia by raising the British flag at Possession Island in the Torres Strait, just off the northern tip of Cape York Peninsula.
- 1788 Captain Arthur Phillip raises the Union Jack at Sydney Cove and white colonisation begins. The Aboriginal population is estimated to be more than 750,000, across the continent.
- 789 Less than a year after the arrival of the First Fleet, over half the Aboriginal population living in the Sydney basin have died from smallpox.
- 1824 Conflict between non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal people in the Bathurst district of central western NSW becomes so serious that martial law is proclaimed from August to December.
- 1830 In what has become known as the 'Black War' Governor Arthur tries unsuccessfully to drive all the remaining Aboriginal people in eastern Van Diemen's Land on to the Tasman Peninsula. It is spectacularly unsuccessful in rounding up people but is a precursor to Aboriginal people later accepting George Augustus Robinson's suggestion to move to a Flinders Island settlement, before final repatriation to Tasmania in 1847.
- 1834 Western Australia's Governor Stirling leads twenty-five mounted police against Aboriginal people following attacks on the white invaders, British colonisation of Western Australia having begun in 1829. Official records show fourteen Aboriginal people are shot in what's now called the 'Battle of Pinjarra'; Aboriginal testimonies suggest that far more.
- 1838 The first Aboriginal Protectorate was established for Port Philip in Victoria.
- At Myall Creek near Inverell in NSW, twenty-eight Aboriginal people are shot by twelve non-Aboriginal men. Seven of the murderers are hung in December and there is public outrage that European men should be convicted for the murder of Aboriginal Australians.
- 1869 The Aboriginal Protection Act 1869 is passed in Victoria, giving the Board for the Protection of Aborigines an extraordinary level of control over Aboriginal people's lives.
- 1894 Bunuba man, Jandamarra, a skilled stockman who worked with the police chooses his people over the colonisers. He leads an armed insurgency in the Kimberley. An outlaw to some, a hero to others, his guerrilla war against police and pastoralists lasts for three years.

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| 1918 | The Aborigines Ordinance in the Northern Territory combines the 1910 Act (SA) and the 1911 Ordinance (Cth), giving the Chief Protector wide-ranging powers over Aboriginal people. |
| 1926 | Aboriginal people are murdered by police following the spearing of a pastoralist in what's now called the Forrest River Massacre. Two policemen were charged but the case was dropped due to lack of evidence. The 1927 Royal Commission to Inquire into Alleged Killing and Burning of Bodies of Aborigines in the East Kimberly is established. Subsequently, governments were pressured to improve the circumstances of Aboriginal people. |
| 1927 | The West Australian state government declares central Perth a prohibited area for Aboriginal people. Aboriginal people could only enter with a 'native pass' which was issued by the Commissioner of Native Affairs. This lasts until 1954. |
| 1949 | Aboriginal people who served in World War II gain the right to enrol to vote under the Commonwealth Electoral Act. |
| 1962 | The Commonwealth Electoral Act is amended to give Aboriginal people the right to enrol to vote in all states except Queensland (WHICH OCCURS IN 1965.) |
| 1966 | The Commonwealth government signs the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination. |
| 1967 | A referendum is held in May to change clauses in the Federal Constitution which discriminate against Aboriginal people. Nearly 91 per cent of Australians vote 'yes' for change, and as a result Indigenous people are included in the Census and legislation concerning the welfare of Aborigines passes from State to Commonwealth government |
| 1972 | The Aboriginal Heritage Act is declared in Western Australia. The Whitlam Government freezes all applications for mining and exploration on Commonwealth Aboriginal reserves. |
| 1975 | The Senate unanimously pass a resolution put by Senator Bonner which acknowledges prior Indigenous ownership of Australia, and provides compensation for dispossession of land. |
| | The Racial Discrimination Act is passed by the Whitlam Government. It overrides state and territory legislation and makes racial discrimination unlawful. |
| 1976 | Aboriginal law and land rights are finally recognised in the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act. Recognition of land ownership is extended to 11,000 Aboriginal people. |
| 1996 | <i>Bringing Them Home, the Australian Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families,</i> marked a pivotal moment in the controversy known as the Stolen Generations. |
| 2008 | The Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, moves a motion in federal parliament of Apology to Australia's Indigenous Peoples with specific reference to the Stolen Generations. |
| 2010 | Noongar man Ken Wyatt becomes the first Indigenous member of the House of Representatives in the federal parliament. |

* BP = before present

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INTRODUCTION



The Australian estate

This book describes how the people of Australia managed their land in 1788. It tells how this was possible, what they did, and why. It argues that collectively they managed an Australian estate they thought of as single and universal (see Definitions).

The Australian estate was remarkable. No estate on earth was on so much earth. Including Tasmania, Australia occupies 7.7 million square kilometres, and straddles great diversity. Its southern neighbour is the Antarctic, its northern third is in the tropics. Cape Byron in the east is 4000 kilometres from Shark Bay in the west, and the land between includes Australia's most productive farmland and its biggest deserts. Southeast Cape in the south is 3700 kilometres from Cape York in the north, yet both support rainforest. Moving inland from the coast, annual rainfall can decline by an inch a mile (15 mm/km), although rain rarely falls predictably anywhere. Over most of the continent highly erratic rainfall is what is predictable. Europeans have yet to get the hang of this. They know that seasons are not always seasonal, and in the north they recognise a Wet and a Dry, but in the south they mark the four seasons their ancestors brought from Europe. This convention recognises temperature but not rainfall, yet rain is central to managing the Australian estate.

The book rests on three facts about 1788.

1. Unlike the Britain of most early observers, about 70 per cent of Australia's plants need or tolerate fire (ch 3). Knowing which plants welcome fire, and when and how much, was critical to managing land. Plants could then be burnt and not burnt in patterns, so that post-fire regeneration could situate and move grazing animals predictably by selectively locating the feed and shelter they prefer.
2. Grazing animals could be shepherded in this way because apart from humans they had no serious predators. Only in Australia was this so.

3. There was no wilderness. The Law—an ecological philosophy enforced by religious sanction—compelled people to care for all their country. People lived and died to ensure this (ch 4).

The Law prescribed that people leave the world as they found it. 1788 practice was therefore conservative, but this did not impose static means. On the contrary, an uncertain climate and nature's restless cycles demanded myriad practices shaped and varied by local conditions. Management was active not passive, alert to season and circumstance, committed to a balance of life.

The chief ally was fire. Today almost everyone accepts that in 1788 people burnt random patches to hunt or lure game. In fact this was no haphazard mosaic making, but a planned, precise, fine-grained local caring. Random fire simply moves people's guesses about game around the country. Effective burning, on the other hand, must be predictable. People needed to burn and not burn, and to plan and space fires appropriately (ch 7). Of course how a pattern was made varied according to terrain and climate: heath, rainforest and Spinifex each require different fire. Yet in each the several purposes of fire remained essentially the same. A plant needs fire to seed, an animal likes a forest edge, a man wants to make a clearing. Means were local, ends were universal. Successfully managing such diverse material was an impressive achievement; making from it a single estate was a breathtaking leap of imagination.

Edward Curr glimpsed this. Born in Hobart in 1820, pioneer squatter on the Murray, he knew people who kept their old customs and values, and he studied them and their country closely in the decades of their dispossession. After 42 years in Victoria he wrote, 'it may perhaps be doubted whether any section of the human race has exercised a greater influence on the physical condition of any large portion of the globe than the wandering savages of Australia'.¹ He knew that linking 'wandering savages' to an unmatched impact on the land startlingly contradicted everything Europeans thought about 'primitive' people. He deliberately defied a European convention that wanderers barely touched the land, and were playthings of nature.

Some researchers still think this (appendix 1). They give ground grudgingly on whether Aborigines altered the land. They argue or assume that nature alone made the 1788 landscape, perhaps via lightning fires.² There is no evidence that lightning caused most bushfires in 1788, nor that it could shape plant communities so curiously and invariably as to exclude human fire impacts. Today lightning fire estimates vary from 0.01 per cent in western Tasmania to 30 per cent in Victoria, the latter an overestimate compared to 7–8 per cent for southern Australia and at most 18 per cent in

the north. Only for western Queensland (80 per cent) does any researcher think lightning the major cause of fire.³ Today's 'relatively low frequency of lightning strikes in Australia'⁴ was even lower in 1788, because people lit so many fires then, leaving less fuel for lightning to ignite. If lightning fire distributed Australia's plants, outside towns and farms the distribution pattern should be similar now and in 1788. It is not.

Other researchers pioneered a growing awareness that 1788 fire was important to plant distribution, and might explain it. Although early observers like Thomas Mitchell and Ludwig Leichhardt knew that Aborigines fired grass to attract game, not until the 1960s did researchers begin to sense system and purpose in Aboriginal burning. From different perspectives RC Ellis, Sylvia Hallam, Bill Jackson, Rhys Jones, Peter Latz, Duncan Merrilees, Eric Rolls, Ian Thomas and others showed how extensively 1788 fire changed the land.⁵

Where possible people worked with the country, emphasising or mitigating its character. Sometimes this was all they could do. Mountains, rocks, rivers and most swamps were there to stay. Yet even in these places people might change the country. They dammed rivers and swamps. They cut channels through watersheds (ch 10). They used fire to replace one plant community with another.

What plants and animals flourished where related to their management. As in Europe land was managed at a local level. Detailed local knowledge was crucial. Each family cared for its own ground, and knew not merely which species fire or no fire might affect, but which individual plant and animal, and their totem and Dreaming links. They knew every yard intimately, and knew well the ground of neighbours and clansmen, sharing larger scale management or assuming responsibility for nearby ground if circumstance required.

They first managed country for plants. They knew which grew where, and which they must tend or transplant. Then they managed for animals. Knowing which plants animals prefer let them burn to associate the sweetest feed, the best shelter, the safest scrub (ch 8). They established a circuit of such places, activating the next as the last was exhausted or its animals fled. In this way they could predict where animals would be. They travelled to known resources, and made them not merely sustainable, but abundant, convenient and predictable. These are loaded words, the opposite of what Europeans once presumed about hunter-gatherers.

A key difference between how farmers and how Aborigines managed land was the scale of 1788 enterprise. Clans could spread resources over large areas, thereby better providing for adverse seasons, and they had allies, sometimes hundreds of kilometres away, who could trade or give refuge. They were thus ruled less by nature's whims, not

THE BIGGEST ESTATE ON EARTH

more, than farmers. It is unwise to think of 'normal seasons' in Australia, but in seasons which suited farming, 1788 management made resources as predictable as farming, and in times of drought and flood made them more predictable. Mere sustainability was not enough. Abundance was normal.

This was a tremendous advantage. It made plants easier to concentrate, to burn, to let fallow, to make park-like, to share. It made life comfortable. Like landowning gentry, people generally had plenty to eat, few hours of work a day, and much time for religion and recreation. A few Europeans recognised this (ch 11), but for most it was beyond imagining. They thought the landscape natural and they preferred it so.

They did not see, but their own records show how carefully made, how unnatural, was Aboriginal Australia. It is time to look again.

Three rules directed 1788 management:

- Ensure that all life flourishes.
- Make plants and animals abundant, convenient and predictable.
- Think universal, act local.

These rules imposed a strict ecological discipline on every person. A few non-Aborigines have begun to think this worthwhile, but even on a district scale, let alone all Australia, none can do it.

How Aborigines did it is the story of this book.