History, Fiction, and The Secret River

—— SARAH PINTO

ON A COLD SUNDAY MORNING in August 2009, Kate Grenville talked to a packed audience at the Melbourne Writers Festival about her new novel, The Lieutenant, the second in an historical trilogy. The story of The Lieutenant is, as Grenville explained, based in part on the life and writings of the colonial administrator William Dawes. Born in Portsmouth in 1762, Dawes is a fascinating historical figure of the British Empire in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, and is precisely the type of individual in whom historians of Empire are increasingly interested – a second-lieutenant in the Royal Marines in the American War of Independence, a member of the First Fleet, an astronomer, engineer, and surveyor at Sydney Cove, governor of Sierra Leone, anti-slave campaigner, and missionary and educator in Antigua until his death there in 1836.[1] As Grenville talked about her research and writing processes for The Lieutenant, it became abundantly clear that she, too, was fascinated by Dawes, particularly by his relationship with a young Indigenous woman, Patyegarang, from whom Dawes learnt the Eora language. Indeed, as she has in many discus-

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[1] This paints quite a rosy picture of Dawes, as does Grenville's novel. Cassandra Pybus, however, has recently argued that Dawes was less than admirable in his actions and character. See Pybus, "'Not fit for your protection or an honest man's company': A Transnational Perspective on the Saintly William Dawes," History Australia 6.1 (April 2009): 12.1–12.7. See also Inga Clendinnen, Dancing With Strangers (Melbourne: Text, 2003); Deidre Coleman, Romantic Colonization and British Anti-Slavery (New York: Cambridge UP, 2005); and Tim Flannery, "Introduction" to The Birth of Sydney, ed. Flannery (Melbourne: Text, 1999): 1–42.

sions of this particular novel, Grenville spent far more time examining and explaining the real-life Dawes than she did the fictionalized version of him, Daniel Rooke, whom readers will find in The Lieutenant. What was most noticeable in Grenville's discussion that morning, however, was her deep fascination with the records Dawes left behind.

Although a great deal of Dawes's papers have been lost, two notebooks from his time in Sydney Cove have survived and can be found in the Library of the School of African and Oriental Studies at King's College London.[2] These notebooks are important and intriguing historical sources, most particularly for their recordings of the Eora language and their insights into the early years of British colonization in Australia.[3] As part of her research for The Lieutenant, Grenville travelled to London to view and read the notebooks, and at the Writers Festival that morning she talked with amazement at what she found in them: namely, records of conversations between Dawes and Patyegarang that tantalizingly offered what Grenville described as direct access to the everyday past, in part because they were "not written for anyone that we know of."[4] Perhaps even more significantly, Grenville talked of the allure of the original notebooks as artefacts, particularly of a thumbprint she found on one of the pages, a thumbprint she excitedly thought might belong to Dawes himself.

As I listened to Grenville recalling her reaction to the original notebooks, I realized something: Grenville adores the engagement with the past and its traces that comes with history-making. Although she has been increasingly careful to differentiate her writings from those of historians – and, even further, to insist that the excursions into the past in her novels are necessarily fictional – it is clear that Grenville finds everything associated with the writing and making of history to be intensely compelling. She has talked lovingly in recent times of the long and slow slog of archival research, the important contextual insights of wide secondary reading, the gradual accumulation of detailed information about the past, and the strong desire to understand and know something of another time and place, all of which are commonly re-

[2] William Dawes's notebooks can also be found online at http://www.williamdawes.org/index.html

[3] Ross Gibson, "Event-Grammar: The Language Notebooks of William Dawes," Meanjin 68.2 (Winter 2009): 91–99.

[4] Kate Grenville, "Spotlight on Kate Grenville," Melbourne Writers Festival, Federation Square, Melbourne, 23 August 2009.

garded as features of historical investigation. "I'm certainly deeply embedded in history," Grenville commented in an interview marking the release of her earlier historical novel The Secret River. "History has me in its thrall."[5]

The release of The Secret River in mid-2005 elicited a great deal more public commentary than did The Lieutenant three years later. Nonetheless, I was a little surprised when Grenville returned to a discussion of the earlier novel, and the debates that surrounded it, during her session at the Writers Festival. And I was even more surprised by the way she talked about those debates, especially her discussion of the public responses of historians to her novel, about which Grenville seemed both shocked and hurt. In doing so, Grenville echoed sentiments she had expressed at the Sydney Writers' Festival three months earlier during another conversation about The Lieutenant:

> what I was sad about and angry about was that… what The Secret River was really about seemed to me an important issue – what does it mean to be a white Australian who is descended from that first lot of people who displaced Aboriginal people? But, unfortunately, because of those two historians [Inga Clendinnen and Mark McKenna], all discussion was monopolised by this thing of, you know, "how dare Kate Grenville write about history."[6]

Four years and another novel later – and with a third underway – The Secret River was still a topic to which Grenville was anxious to return. Without question, this is in part because interviewers and journalists consistently ask questions about Grenville's extended body of work, of which The Secret River is a particularly successful and prominent part. It can also be traced, however, to Grenville's ongoing attempts to clarify her literary and historical project in writing The Secret River, an explanation Grenville likely feels is yet to be heard.[7] If the response of the audience at the Sydney Writers' Festival to Grenville's (forceful) explanation quoted above is any indication – spontaneous and hearty applause – it seems Grenville's returns to The Secret River are also connected with an ongoing interest on the part of the reading public

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[5] Kate Grenville, quoted in Sally Blakeney, "A Writer's Life: Ideas and Perfection," Bulletin (12 July 2005): 86–88.

[6] Kate Grenville, "Kate Grenville in Conversation," Sydney Writers' Festival, Sydney Theatre (24 May 2009), http://www.swf.org.au/podcasts-2009

[7] The explanations and clarifications Grenville continues to make that she never intended to write history (or said that she had done so) in The Secret River are obvious and compelling examples of this.

both in the novel itself and the debates which followed its release. Which begs the question: what was it – and what is it – about this novel that has made it the focus of so much attention?

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Published in mid-2005, The Secret River is set in the early years of British colonization in Australia. From the very beginning, this was a novel with a substantial public profile – a profile that would only rise as sales increased, prizes were won, and controversy began to surround it. The novel itself narrates the life of its protagonist, William Thornhill, a character Grenville based on that of her own ancestor, Solomon Wiseman, a waterman who built his fortune on the Hawkesbury River after arriving in New South Wales as a convict.[8] The Secret River is what Stella Clarke termed "the novel as national confessional."[9] It revisits and revises mythologized accounts of pioneering triumphs on the frontier, replacing them with conflict, violence, and loss. After outlining Thornhill's early life in London, the novel gathers momentum with his arrival in New South Wales, accompanied by his wife Sal, in 1806. Working hard to overcome their poverty, William, Sal, and their children are increasingly forced to engage with the ongoing presence of Indigenous peoples throughout the colony, particularly once they take land on the banks of the Hawkesbury. The Thornhills' attempts to make the land they have claimed their own – to belong – lead almost inevitably to conflict with its Indigenous owners, and William is eventually left with little choice but to join a group of other colonizers in an attack. In the aftermath of the resulting massacre, the novel follows Thornhill into his comfortable but empty old age, where possession does not equate with belonging. Grenville's novel, then, concludes with a resounding sense of loss and lamentation.[10]

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[8] For full details on Wiseman, see Kate Grenville, Searching for the Secret River (Melbourne: Text, 2008).

[9] Stella Clarke, "A Challenging Look at the Familiar Territory of Old Australia," Weekend Australian (25–26 June 2005), Review: 8.

[10] The Secret River is "a tragic, ironic story of limitation, cultural dissonance and loss," according to Eleanor Collins. See Collins, "Poison in the Flour," Meanjin 65.1 (March 2006): 46. Collins's slightly revised article is included in the present volume (167–78 above). For an examination of loss and melancholy in the novel itself, see Sarah Pinto, "Emotional Histories and Historical Emotions: Looking at the Past in Historical Novels," Rethinking History 14.2 (June 2010): 189–207.

The Secret River was published during a time of significant public and political engagement with the wider project of Australian history. Indeed, the turn of the twenty-first century saw the emergence of a sometimes heated conversation about what was being done with and to the Australian past by governments, politicians, judiciaries, journalists, filmmakers, novelists, educators, museums, and, of course, historians.[11] Debates surrounding the release of the Bringing Them Home report into the removal of Indigenous children from their families, the need for a national apology to Indigenous peoples, the structure and content of the newly built National Museum of Australia, the teaching of history in schools, and the academic field of Aboriginal history itself were particularly prominent sites of this conversation. Although these and other moments of discussion – and, indeed, of contestation – might seem a little disparate, they were united by an engagement with a series of questions about the making of Australian history itself: Which Australian stories are being heard? How are these stories being told? Who is doing this telling? And what might it mean to narrate these histories in contemporary Australia? These are questions about more than simply what happened in the past; they are questions about the construction of historical knowledge in contemporary Australia, about what the history of Australia ought to look like. In many ways, it is a conversation that continues today, although perhaps with less prominence than in the recent past.

The Secret River spoke directly to the heart of this conversation, not least because its writing was prompted by its key concerns. The novel also provides an answer to the question of what Australian history – in this case, the history of the colonization of New South Wales – should look like: the narration of a past where much is lost and (some) white men must bear responsibility for the destructive consequences of Australia's colonization. Most significantly, however, discussions of the novel centred on the question of its contribution to the construction of historical knowledge in contemporary Australia.

In the aftermath of the publication of The Secret River – particularly once several Australian historians had joined in the public discussions of the novel

[11] For examinations of some of these conversations, see: Bain Attwood, Telling the Truth About Aboriginal History (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2005); Ann Curthoys & John Docker, Is History Fiction? (Sydney: U of New South Wales P, 2006); and Stuart Macintyre & Anna Clark, The History Wars (Melbourne: Melbourne UP, 2004).

– Grenville was increasingly at pains to make a distinction between her novel and histories of Australia's colonization: "The Secret River isn't history but its based solidly on history," she said two months after the novel's release in mid-2005.[12] By early 2007, and in the aftermath of intense criticism of her work, Grenville elaborated on her position:

> I don't think The Secret River is history – it's a work of fiction. Like much fiction, it had its beginnings in the world, but those beginnings have been adapted and altered to various degrees for the sake of the fiction.[13]

By the time of the Sydney Writers' Festival in 2009, Grenville's attempts at differentiation were no longer simply about the novel itself, but also about her own position as a writer: "I'm a fiction writer, I'm not a historian […]. I have never claimed to be writing history."[14]

Despite these and other disclaimers, there is no question that The Secret River was positioned and understood as a fictional history of colonization, not least because of the ways in which Grenville herself talked about the novel's background. As Mark McKenna rightly pointed out at the time of the debates, Grenville's ongoing public explanation of her extensive historical research meant that she couldn't help but make truth-claims for her novel.[15] Grenville consistently spoke of the extensive primary and secondary research she undertook in order to write The Secret River:

> I began with years of research. I suppose it was about a year and a half of research before I started writing. So I read everything I could read about everything that was relevant to the book, even obliquely relevant, including boats and ships.[16]

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[12] Kate Grenville, "The Forum: Kate Grenville on the Historian Within," Australian (13 August 2005), Review: 2.

[13] Kate Grenville, "The Question of History: Response," Quarterly Essay 25 (2007): 66.

[14] Grenville, Sydney Writers' Festival.

[15] Mark McKenna, "Writing the Past," in The Best Australian Essays 2006, ed. Drusilla Modjeska (Melbourne: Black Inc, 2006): 101.

[16] Kate Grenville, "Books and Writing with Ramona Koval," ABC Radio National (17 July 2005), http://www.abc.net.au/rn/arts/bwriting/stories/s1414510.htm

She talked of examining the Proceedings of the Old Bailey, London's Central Criminal Court in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; of visiting the Mitchell Library in Sydney, where a large number of records and documents about the formation of New South Wales are held; and of reading the work of academic historians, making particular mention of that of Henry Reynolds.[17] When it came to her writing process, Grenville talked of "subtly and invisibly" weaving this research into the novel, "between the lines."[18] Throughout this process of imagination, however, it was the "research material" that Grenville relied on for the novel's tone: "I made excuses to keep going back to the Old Bailey transcripts; what I wanted was to keep hearing that early nineteenth century tone."[19]

Grenville is not the only historical novelist – and The Secret River not the only historical novel – to implicitly make claims to truthfulness or historical veracity on the basis of research in this way. Indeed, contemporary Australian historical novels routinely include bibliographical notes outlining the research that underpins them, and authors sometimes make use of literary devices and techniques that foster the notion that their novels offer a kind of truth about their pasts. Grenville's discussions of the composition of The Secret River, however, were about more than just historical research; she also articulated what amounts to an historical methodology. Along with extensive archival and secondary research, Grenville outlined an approach to investigating the past where attempts to experience some aspects of the lived past became ways to access that past, as Susan Wyndham explained:

> She learned about the settlers' hardships by using lamb-chop fat to make a gloomy 'slush lamp,' eating dry cornmeal bread, chopping hard eucalyptus wood […] [and] was guided through the haunted Hawkesbury bush.[20]

This archival and experiential research forged a relationship between The Secret River and the real past, even with its fictional status. For Grenville,

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[17] Susan Wyndham, "A Woman with a Past," Sydney Morning Herald (9 July 2005), Spectrum: 20; Grenville, cited in Blakeney, "Ideas and Perfection."

[18] Kate Grenville, cited in Rosemary Sorensen, "River of Enchantment," Courier–Mail (2 July 2005), BAM: 8.

[19] Grenville, cited in Blakeney, "Ideas and Perfection."

[20] Wyndham, "A Woman with a Past." For a critique of this historical methodology see Inga Clendinnen, "The History Question: Who Owns the Past?" Quarterly Essay 23 (October 2006): 16–21.

then, the documents, archives, and experiences that constituted the research for this novel offered insights into the past that could be transcribed into the novel itself:

> I feel very passionately that this book is probably as close as we are going to get to what it was actually like […] I wanted the book to be based at every point on whatever historical veracity I could find. I haven't made it up, I just put a novelist's flesh on the bones of the documents.[21]

Accompanying The Secret River's engagement with the past was a wider project Grenville sought for the novel: not only to allow readers to "actually know some of the history"[22] of colonization, but also to allow for the possibility that knowledge of that past might have an impact on the present:

> There are no easy answers to all those questions about land rights and health care and appalling mortality rates [in Indigenous communities] […] They're all questions that are kind of too hard for everybody, and it seems to me, that in a situation like that, the only thing you can do is go back to the point where it all went wrong.[23]

These are precisely the type of projects that (academic) historians of national pasts – particularly of contested national pasts like Australia's – can often be found undertaking in their own work. It is little wonder, then, that The Secret River became the focus of so much specifically historical attention. Although the novel could have been understood and examined in terms of Australia's long lineage of fictional histories, or as further evidence of the explosion of interest in family history in contemporary Australia, there was (comparatively) little mention of either of these contexts in the public conversations that accompanied its publication. Instead, in the public debates about the book The Secret River came to be 'about' not just the history of the colonization of Australia but about the writing and making of Australian history itself, and the entrance of several historians into the conversations that surrounded Gren-

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[21] Kate Grenville, cited in Jane Sullivan, "Skeletons Out of the Closet," The Age (2 July 2005), Review: 1.

[22] Kate Grenville, quoted in Chris Brice, "Meet the Author: Kate Grenville, Dredging the Past," Advertiser Magazine (22 July 2006): 9.

[23] Kate Grenville, quoted in Diane Stubbings, "Picking Up the Dropped Stitches of Our History," Canberra Times (24 September 2005), Panorama: 12.

ville's novel took place within this context. The novel prompted the public contemplation of the ways in which history should be made and told, of what history should be. As such, the ways in which some historians responded to The Secret River reveal something about understandings of historical knowledge – of Australian history – in contemporary Australia.

Almost from the moment of its release, The Secret River was brought into an already established conversation about history-making in Australia. The novel was immediately placed within the context of Australia's so-called 'history wars', a series of controversies usually understood as disputes between and among historians about the validity of several grand narratives of Australian history.[24] "The history wars could flare up again […] with the publication of a new novel by Kate Grenville," began an article on the front page of the The Age in the week of the novel's release.[25] Grenville was subsequently asked where her "loyalty lies"[26] in the wars; the novel was directly compared to the work of historians like Henry Reynolds, Inga Clendinnen, and Manning Clark; and historians themselves were sought for comment on its history-making project. Keith Windschuttle was less than enthusiastic about the possibilities of the novel, arguing that battles over Australia's pasts had "gone beyond a case where a fictionalised account is going to make any impact."[27] Inga Clendinnen, however, was far more positive in her assessment, likening Grenville's methods to those of historians who "imaginatively create" the "plausible circumstances" of the past, and offering the novel a level of legitimacy: "It's the enterprise I think that is good. I would like to think it will extinguish the history wars, to a degree."[28]

It would be another six months, however, before historians began to engage critically with the novel and the discussions it prompted. Those historians who contributed to the public conversations – McKenna and Clendinnen were the most prominent, but they were also joined by Helen MacDonald, John Hirst, and Alan Atkinson, among others – are a relatively diverse group

[24] Macintyre & Clarke, History Wars.

[25] Sullivan, "Skeletons Out of the Closet."

[26] Wyndham, "A Woman with a Past."

[27] Keith Windschuttle, quoted in Sullivan, "Skeletons Out of the Closet."

[28] Inga Clendinnen, quoted in Sullivan, "Skeletons Out of the Closet."

of scholars working in the area of Australian history.[29] What they do have in common, however, is a very literary approach to historical writing; all have written books with appeal to a wider readership than academic or professional historians.[30] Indeed, all have written what McKenna himself might call literary histories.[31] These historians had much to say about The Secret River, and particularly about the way Grenville talked about her process of composition. What is most interesting about their criticisms of both Grenville and of her novel, however, is the picture they construct – a picture that is built against both novel and author – of the historical project in contemporary Australia.

First and foremost, the historians insist on a fundamental and immutable divide between history and fiction. In a thoughtful article prompted by – rather than speaking directly to – the Secret River debates in the Weekend Australian, for example, Helen MacDonald acknowledged that "histories and historical novels are not as distinct as they have come to seem." Nevertheless, for MacDonald there remains a clear division between the two, based not only on the type of research underpinning each discipline but also on the function of evidence within the reconstructions of the past that take place within them: "There is a point beyond which historians will not go, however, for history is an evidence-based discipline and, unlike novelists, historians are not free to invent the past."[32]

McKenna made a very similar point in his various contributions to the public conversations surrounding The Secret River. He was the first historian to engage in a substantial critique of Grenville's novel and project, part of a much larger argument about the decline of critical history in Australian public

[29] Although Clendinnen's research has been predominantly on Aztec and Mayan cultures, her history of first contact in Australia, Dancing with Strangers, brought her very much into the realm of Australian history.

[30] Examples include: Mark McKenna, Looking for Blackfellas' Point: An Australian History of Place (Sydney: U of New South Wales P, 2002); Clendinnen, Dancing with strangers; Helen MacDonald, Human Remains: Episodes in Human Dissection (Carlton, Victoria: Melbourne UP, 2005); John Hirst, The Sentimental Nation: The Making of the Australian Commonwealth (Melbourne: Oxford UP, 2000); Alan Atkinson, The Europeans in Australia: A History (Melbourne: Melbourne UP, 1997).

[31] McKenna, "Writing the Past," 109. I would like to thank Bain Attwood for pointing my thinking in this direction in response to an alternative version of this essay.

[32] Helen MacDonald, "Novel Views of History," Weekend Australian (25–26 March 2006), Review: 5.

life. For McKenna, the rise of the historical novelist as historical authority in contemporary Australia has been accompanied by a concomitant diminution in the authority and legitimacy of historians; Grenville and her Secret River, then, are a symptom of what he sees as a much wider malaise.[33] In such a context, maintaining the dividing lines between history and fiction could not be more vital, according to McKenna:

> Fiction has historical elements, history has fictive elements, but fiction should not be claimed as history. All writers and critics have an obligation to remember to distinguish between the two. Most of all, we owe this distinction to our readers.[34]

Clendinnen went even further than McKenna in her insistence on the significance of the division between history and fiction. Clendinnen's criticisms of The Secret River, particularly her interrogation of Grenville's historical methodology, was largely premised on an understanding of the differences between history and fiction. According to Clendinnen, history and fiction necessarily reside on opposite sides of a ravine that must stay firmly in view:

> You're allowed to play games if you're clearly on your side of the ravine […]. Thousands of people will read The Secret River and get some knowledge of their past. That's great – as long as it's kept in the fiction section.

Of course, Grenville has insisted that this is precisely where The Secret River belonged, and that she never intended her novel to be mistaken for history. What Clendinnen viewed as the blurring of the line between history and fiction in evidence in The Secret River's writing and reception, however, was for her a problem; not only does this render the novel "not history" but it makes it what Clendinnen goes so far as to call "anti-history."[35]

Clearly, the publication of The Secret River prompted a public assertion on the part of some historians of the fundamental difference between history and fiction; according to their formulations, neither can approximate to the other

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[33] See: Mark McKenna, "Comfort History," Australian (18 March 2006), Review: 15; Mark McKenna, "Writing the Past," Australian Financial Review (16 December 2005), Review: 1; McKenna, "Writing the Past," Best Australian Essays.

[34] McKenna, "Writing the Past," Australian Financial Review.

[35] Inga Clendinnen, quoted in Jane Sullivan, "Making a Fiction of History…," The Age (21 October 2006), A2: 12.

in any substantive way. In their eyes, the basis of this fundamental divide can be found in the relationship that only history can have to what these historians describe as the "real past." Indeed, the possibility of access to a real, authentic, and truthful past haunts the engagements of these historians' with The Secret River. As Stella Clarke noted at the time, this is in many ways a surprising feature of these articulations of the historical project, given the wide and ongoing discussions, both within and beyond the discipline of history, of the "constructed nature of truth" that have accompanied postmodern, poststructural, and postcolonial scholarship in recent times.[36] Nevertheless, the notion that we might differentiate between history and fiction on the basis of history's 'truthful' engagement in non-fictional historical writing were rarely made strongly.[37] Indeed, even Grenville herself has articulated this division, constructing history as a discipline with the potential to access more closely a real and available past in the process. For Grenville, then, historians and novelists have different interests: "Mine is to put flesh on history's skeleton; the historian's, which is equally valuable, is to burrow into the relics and archives and tease out some sense of reality of meaning from them."[38]

Alan Atkinson gestures towards this preoccupation with the real in a response to Clendinnen's Quarterly Essay that is largely concerned with the relationship between scholarship and journalism: "The task of teaching and of writing history is to persuade students and readers that the past is equally real

[36] Stella Clarke, "Havoc in History House," Australian (4 March 2006), Review: 8.

[37] Certainly, both McKenna and Clendinnen gesture towards the gap between history – a representation of the past – and the real or lived past itself that has often been the focus of postmodern or poststructural critiques; see, for example, Keith Jenkins, Re-Thinking History, with a new preface and conversation with the author Alun Munslow (London: Routledge, 2003); Alun Munslow, Deconstructing History (London: Routledge, 2nd ed. 2006); and, for a more Australian-centred discussion, see Penny Russell, "Almost Believing: The Ethics of Historical Imagination," in The Historian's Conscience: Australian Historians on the Ethics of History, ed. Stuart Macintyre (Melbourne: Melbourne UP, 2004): 106–17. These gestures, however, are by no means the focus of their discussions.

[38] Grenville, cited in Murray Waldren, "Award 'vindicates' writer's obsession," Australian (15 March 2006): 3. Interestingly, the paucity of historical evidence and information about the life of her ancestor, Solomon Wiseman, is one of the reasons Grenville offers for writing The Secret River as fiction rather than history. See Brice, "Meet the Author," Advertiser Magazine.

with the present," he writes.[39] Both Clendinnen and McKenna, however, made the relationship between history and the so-called real past far more explicit, and significant. The "ravine" of difference between history and fiction, according to Clendinnen, is based on history's "advantage" and "burden" of "dealing with the real." Unlike novelists, who are free to manipulate and manufacture events and characters at will, historians "are concerned with what men and women have actually done."[40] This is a sentiment echoed by McKenna, albeit with a slightly different focus: "Unlike the novelist, the historian is tied to the limits of the archive, to real contexts, places and time."[41] Taken together, these statements demonstrate the significance attributed to the ability to gain access to a real past claimed by these historians as unique to history and, presumably, as a result of the proper use of historical techniques of research and analysis. And further, according to these historians, it is this relationship that allows history – in sharp contrast to fiction – access to historical truth. As McKenna puts it,

> That fiction is capable of unearthing powerful insights and truths into our history is a given, but ultimately history, unlike fiction, is the only place where claims to historical truth can be tested and verified.[42]

The relationship outlined by McKenna and Clendinnen between the historical project and a real, authentic, or truthful past bestows on historians a particular responsibility to that past which simply does not apply to writers of fiction, historical or otherwise.[43] In contrast to historians, whose work is directed by the past, novelists like Grenville respond to contemporary imperatives in the composition of their fictional histories, directed in their writings not by the past or its sources, but by their own interests, as well as the (anticipated) interests of their audiences. John Hirst explained what he considered to be The Secret River's historical project in precisely these terms: as a proble-

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[39] Alan Atkinson, "The History Question: Correspondence," Quarterly Essay 24 (2006): 58.

[40] Clendinnen, "The History Question," 30–31.

[41] McKenna, "Comfort History."

[42] "Comfort History."

[43] For a discussion of the relationship between historians' responsibilities to the people of the past and people of the present, see Marilyn Lake, "On History and Politics," in The Historian's Conscience: Australian Historians on the Ethics of History, ed. Stuart Macintyre (Melbourne: Melbourne UP, 2004): 94–105.

matic example of the imposition of present-day concerns – in this case, what Hirst labels the "liberal imagination" – on and into the past. Grenville's discussion of her own historical methodology sees her "ponder what she would have done on the frontier"; as such, the "leading character in her novel is not an 18th-century waterman at all; it is herself."[44] Whereas historians have a responsibility to "account for, verify and defend the historical validity" of their histories, novelists are "ultimately not responsible to historical sources"; they are responsible instead to their readers.[45] Indeed, the novelist's "only binding contract" is "with their readers, and that ultimately is not to instruct or reform, but to delight."[46] In contrast, writers of history have a responsibility to the past: to refrain from manipulating historical sources around the needs or concerns of the present, and consequently to offer the past as it was. The moment the sense of this responsibility is lost is a moment of real concern, whatever the circumstances: "the risk is that historians' primary responsibility will be understood to be to the present and the future of the nation and not to the past," according to Clendinnen.[47]

This is not to suggest, however, that the historical project as it was articulated by these historians in their responses to the publication of The Secret River is entirely divorced from present-day concerns. On the contrary, there is a sense of responsibility to the present in these responses, and it is a responsibility that is framed by the truthful and faithful depiction of the past. For Clendinnen, for example, the writers of history have a responsibility to recognize and understand the kind of choices available to the people of the past in order to

> be better able to identify the real choices before us now […]. We have to know the world as it is if we are to change any part of it, and to map the span for human agency so we do not acquiesce in what we could change.[48]

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[44] John Hirst, "Forget Modern Views When Bringing Up the Past," Australian (20 March 2006): 10. For an extended version of the argument he put forward here, see his Sense and Nonsense in Australian History (Melbourne: Black Inc, 2006): 80–103.

[45] McKenna, "Writing the Past," Australian Financial Review.

[46] Clendinnen, "The History Question," 31.

[47] Clendinnen makes this comment with reference to the increasingly difficult funding environment faced by historians in the academy ("The History Question," 45).

[48] Grenville, "The History Question," 66.

McKenna ventured even further than Clendinnen, arguing that the specificity of contemporary Australia made the depiction of a real and truthful past – and resistance to the lure of fictional histories – all the more crucial:

> In Australia, a nation still so uncertain and divided about its past, in which history that is critical of the nation struggles to be heard over the constant din of national self-congratulation, we need to resist any tendency to embrace historical fiction as a substitute national history. To fail to do so is to snuggle up to a depoliticised and mythical past.[49]

For these historians, however, fulfilling this responsibility to depict the real past truthfully is possible only when distance between the historian and the past is maintained and protected. One of the strongest criticisms by these historians of Grenville's articulation of her novel's project, then, was the way she seemed to be attempting to imagine herself out of her present and back into the past. Going back, however, is impossible, as Hirst explains:

> Grenville cannot imagine how she would have behaved on the Hawkesbury frontier because unlike the Hawkesbury settlers she does not believe in savagery, European superiority and conquest. The pioneer settlers are not ourselves.[50]

This belief in the need for distance in the writing of history explains Clendinnen's criticisms of Grenville's discussion of empathy; in this formulation, empathy implies the kind of closeness that can only impede historical understanding.[51] In essence, this is the distinction these historians make between the versions of the past found in history and those found in fiction:

> History's truth is the chance to understand human experience as it can never be lived, from above and afar, looking back, understanding the human condition because we are not there, because we are not surrounded by the fog or immediacy of experience […] History relies on distance while fiction tries constantly to break that distance down, to create the illusion that the reader is there, and therefore knows what the past was like.[52]

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[49] McKenna, "Writing the Past," in Best Australian Essays, 110.

[50] Hirst, "Forget Modern Views." Clendinnen says something very similar: 'We cannot post ourselves back in time. People really did think differently then – or at least we must proceed on that assumption" ("The History Question," 20).

[51] Clendinnen, "The History Question," 20–23.

[52] McKenna, "Writing the Past," Australian Financial Review. For a discussion of distance and history, see the special issue of History Workshop Journal on "Historical

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The Secret River is one of the most significant historical novels to have been published in Australia in recent times, not least because of the persistence of the discussions provoked by it. Grenville's novel attracted so much attention because it offered a focus for a discussion of the historical project in Australia at a time when an interrogation of this project held so much importance. In debates about The Secret River, this project was cast in terms of a fundamental and identifiable division between history and fiction that rested largely on the claim that history's approach to the past enables it to speak with precisely the type of authority, legitimacy, and truthfulness needed in the mythologizing contexts of contemporary Australia.

McKenna has suggested that one of the consequences of Australia's history wars has been an erosion of the cultural authority historians previously held in relation to the past; the trustworthiness of historians has been diminished in contemporary Australia as a result, and history "has been the great loser" in this process. As a consequence, historians can no longer be relied on to speak truthfully about the past in public discourse. Instead, they are "cast in the partisan image of federal politics, as cultural warriors peddling rival versions of the truth."[53] It seems to me that the discussions of Australian history that accompanied the publication of The Secret River demonstrate that the history wars affected more than just historians; they have also had consequences for the ways in which the historical project might be understood in contemporary Australia. The assertion of a largely unquestioned relationship between historical knowledge and the real or the true establishes history as a rigidly bounded discipline tied directly and incontrovertibly to its sources and an accessible and available past. Within such a framework, there seems to be little space for the acknowledgement of – or, indeed, engagement with – the uncertainty and fragility of historical methods, knowledge, and understanding. In a sense, the limitations on this space can be seen in the very articulation of the historical project the present essay has sought to track, within which men-

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Imagination" 57 (Spring 2004). And, for a compelling look at the increasing importance of intimacy and proximity in historical writing, see Mark Salber Phillips, "On the Advantage and Disadvantage of Sentimental History for Life," History Workshop Journal 65 (2008): 49–64.

[53] McKenna, "Writing the Past." McKenna is drawing on the work of Curthoys & Docker and Attwood when he makes this analysis.

tion of the tenuousness of historical knowledge is dwarfed by the articulation of its truthful and certain relationship to the 'real' past. "To embrace uncertainty and ambiguity is the historian's special duty," according to Clendinnen. "But if history is to inform present choices – to make them both more intelligent and more compassionate, as I believe it can – it must abide by the iron rules of the discipline."[54]

In one sense, it is all-too-easy to regard these historians' critiques of The Secret River as relatively transparent attempts to reassert their own authority and legitimacy in the face of the onslaught of fictional histories – and fictional historians – of all kinds in contemporary Australia. So, too, it is tempting to dismiss their articulations of a (relatively) concrete and stable divide between history and fiction as tenuous at best in the face of the various ways in which the solidity of this division has been undone in poststructural, postmodern and postcolonial scholarship of recent decades. To do so, however, would be to miss something important about the debates surrounding Grenville's novel. Writing before the publication of The Secret River, Iain McCalman suggested that an "unexpected casualty" of Australia's history wars might be "a forced cooling of relations between fiction and history" accompanied by a need for historians to engage in experimental histories with more care than they might have in the past, sentiments that have been echoed and expanded by Ann Curthoys and John Docker.[55] McCalman's comments have in many ways been borne out in recent publications in Australian history that, while literary in tone, are based on such detailed and comprehensive archival work. The debates that surrounded The Secret River seem to suggest that something else has also been lost: an acknowledgement not only that it might be possible to situate historical work in Clendinnen's "ravine," but also that opening the space to do so might be productive, particularly given that this seems to be precisely the kind of space Aboriginal historians, writers, and activists have long argued warrants historical legitimacy.

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[54] Clendinnen, "The History Question," 67.

[55] Iain McCalman, "Flirting with Fiction," in The Historian's Conscience: Australian Historians on the Ethics of History, ed. Stuart Macintyre (Melbourne: Melbourne UP, 2004): 151–61; Curthoys & Docker, Is History Fiction?

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Studies at Ohio State University. His research interests include African literature, pan-Africanist intellectual history, cultural modernity, nationalism, and postcolonialism. He is the current editor of Research in African Literatures.

SUE KOSSEW is Professor of English at Monash University. She is on the editorial boards of the Journal of Commonwealth Literature and New Literatures Review and has published numerous journal articles and book chapters on postcolonial and South African literature. Her books include, as sole author, Writing Woman, Writing Place: Contemporary Australian and South African Fiction (2004) and Pen and Power: A Post-Colonial Reading of J.M. Coetzee and André Brink (1996) and, as editor, Re-Imagining Africa: New Critical Perspectives (2001, with Dianne Schwerdt) and Critical Essays in World Literature: J.M. Coetzee (1998). She is currently co-editing a volume of essays entitled Strong Opinions: J.M. Coetzee and the Authority of Contemporary Fiction.

KATE LIVETT is a lecturer in Literature and Communications at ACU National in Sydney. Her PhD was on fetishism in the work of Gertrude Stein, and she has published also in the areas of cultural studies, gender studies, and animal studies.

ELIZABETH MCMAHON teaches in the School of English Media and Performing Arts at the University of New South Wales. She has published extensively on Australian literature and is currently engaged in a large research project on Australia's island imaginary. With her colleague Brigitta Olubas, she edited Women Making Time: Contemporary Feminist Critique and Cultural Analysis (2006) and Remembering Patrick White: Contemporary Critical Essays (2010). She is also the co-editor of Southerly, Australia's oldest literary journal.

SARAH PINTO is a Lecturer in the School of Historical and European Studies at La Trobe University, Melbourne. Her research interests are in the fields of historical representation, emotion, gender and sexuality studies, and she is currently working on a project on the remembrance of British settler colonialism in settler societies.

BRIGID ROONEY teaches in Australian literature at the University of Sydney. She has published essays on a range of writers, including Christina Stead, Patrick White, Helen Garner, and David Malouf, and is the author of Literary Activists: Writer–Intellectuals and Australian Public Life (2009).

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