Poison in the Flour[1]

Kate Grenville's *The Secret River*[2]

—— ELEANOR COLLINS

ATROCITY, especially atrocity in your own country, does not make for a cosy read. Kate Grenville's *The Secret River* is a discomforting novel: compelling through long stretches, evocative, but also troubling. Much of the discomfort and trouble belongs to the history that is its subject-matter. There is a commingled distance and association, often a paralysis born of denial and guilt, in the general white Australian response to stories of colonial injustice and barbarity. This is a disabling emotional conflict that we might experience individually, and that is played out on a national scale in the so-called 'history wars'. As well as the discomforts of Australian history, I felt discomfort relating to narrative form on first reading *The Secret River*. I had nagging doubts about the realist historical novel and the way its conventions structure this particular story. Since then, I have reconsidered the narrative, looking through the lens of tragedy, which is a mode I tentatively recommend for understanding this work of fiction and also when confronting the history it dramatizes.

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[1] In a scene towards the end of *The Secret River*, Thornhill comes across an Aboriginal family who are dying from poisoning and thinks of his murderous neighbour's "green powder." Accounts of Aboriginal people's food rations being deliberately poisoned arise in almost all of the former Australian colonies. Their veracity is contested – like every aspect of this history – but they constitute a widespread, vivid, and persistent element of the early colonial story.

[2] For sharing ideas with me at an early stage in the writing of this essay, my thanks to Clara Tuite, Department of English and Cultural Studies, University of Melbourne, and her 2005 Honours seminar on the historical novel.

The plot of *The Secret River* draws on three powerful Australian myths, playing one off against the other two. First, we have the familiar, nostalgic narrative of the almost-innocent convict. William Thornhill is born into poverty, cold, and hunger in eighteenth-century London. He grows up at the cruel end of a merciless English class system, is neglected by his parents, abused by employers, and learns skilful theft as a means of survival. At fourteen, he becomes an apprentice boatman on the Thames, meaning he can make his way out of utter penury through years of hard work and eventually marry Sal, his love. But Thornhill's rise in fortune is short-lived: one harsh winter leaves him indebted. He steals a boatload of timber, and is caught and sentenced to hang. The sentence is commuted to transportation and he, Sal and their children are dispatched to New South Wales. Within this national myth, England is a land of arrogant gentry and unjust authority that produces, unwittingly, a better, fairer, harder-working Australia by sending here those subjects whose chief crime is need.

Once the Thornhill family is in New South Wales, the myth of the worthy convict segues gracefully into a second national myth: the McCubbin-esque story of the pioneer.[3] Thornhill works enterprisingly as a boatman between Sydney and the Hawkesbury, the frontier of settlement. He earns his pardon, then takes his family to a stretch of the river he has seen and coveted. They set about building an oasis of civilization in the wilderness. With meagre resources but massive determination, they define domestic space, plant crops, take on servants. This part of the novel has Crusoe-like aspects: it is a tale of surviving and building, of the self-made man (and woman), courageous in a dangerously unfamiliar landscape, working, risking, gaining reward. But the familiar flow and shape of the pioneer myth is regularly interrupted here by appearances of the Darug people, who already live on the Hawkesbury.

For the Thornhill family, these appearances are disruptive because 'the blacks' are unpredictable and frightening: they carry spears and do not respect boundaries, thus threatening life and property. For the reader of *The Secret River*, these interruptions challenge the legitimacy of the pioneer story, and its feeling of triumph. We have suffered alongside William Thornhill and are

[3] The painter Frederick McCubbin (1855–1917) was a prominent member of the Heidelberg School of Australian artists. His large realist canvases depicting settler hardship and bush life are national icons. See, for example, his sentimental triptych masterpiece, *The Pioneer* (1904) (National Gallery of Victoria), http://www.artistsfootsteps.com/images/McCubbin_pioneer.jpg

ready to revel in his hard-earned independence and growing prosperity. But awareness of prior landowners and their competing needs deflates the optimism otherwise promised by a tale of liberal individualist self-improvement. Once we know of the Darug, the Thornhills cannot build a home and gain the material comforts their pioneer story demands without also building narrative tension and a sense of impending violence. Our sympathy as readers with Thornhill and his problems becomes an increasingly awkward stance. One of the discomforts of *The Secret River* is the pressure of weighing the Thornhills' considerable suffering in an unjust English class system against the Darug people's unimaginable suffering in an unjust colonial racial system. Grenville almost certainly does not intend any equation, but there is a sense in the novel's structure that one system of harshness and lack has led directly to the other.

Thus the third national myth Grenville employs, unsettling the myths of the worthy convict and the toiling pioneer, is the fraught but insistent story of first contact. Stories of early encounters between Europeans and Indigenous Australians are a recurrent feature of Australian literature. Many of our acclaimed authors have given us variations on this theme: Thea Astley, Thomas Keneally, David Malouf – just to begin the list. We keep returning to this historical frontier, this boundary in time between 'before' and 'since then'. Stories of present-day encounter between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians are far less frequent, and far less consistent in their elements and themes. Perhaps there is a sense that the moment of origin holds an explanatory key to all that has come afterwards, that a return to origin might clarify the present, resolving its guilts and conflicts. Or perhaps we keep reworking this particular historical story precisely because it does not function as a national myth. National myth should unify. It should define and bind the nation, should give the idea of the nation coherence and validity. National myth tells a shared history – consider the American story of shared harvest that is celebrated every Thanksgiving. But the stories of first contact with which white Australian history must begin are almost always stories of division: of misunderstanding and fear, of brutality and suffering. Of poison in the flour.

Like national myth, the novel is a form of narrative that classically concludes with unity, at least with unity of understanding. The uncertainties, errors and miscommunications that create the plot of the classic novel are cleared up at its resolution, so that all the important characters, the narrator, and the reader are in alignment. All now share the same knowledge and the same perception of events. In contrast to this, *The Secret River* ends with an

image of profound separation and difference. 'Jimmy', the last Indigenous person left on William Thornhill's land, will not accept Thornhill's charity: indeed, barely acknowledges his presence. Thornhill doesn't know why, cannot fully grasp the import of what has taken place: he still cannot comprehend Jimmy. Neither novel nor nation can find unity in this encounter.

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Grenville has written an Australian historical novel before. *Joan Makes History* was published in the Bicentennial year. It taunts the conventions and authorities of written history, telling the story of Australia using the voice of a deliberately disruptive woman, Joan, who metamorphoses to be present at every significant event. Self-conscious play with form and literary convention is an integral and amusing part of Grenville's style. *Lilian's Story* (1985), which won *The Australian*/Vogel Literary Award, is a fictional first-person 'biography' of Bea Miles, a Sydney eccentric. *The Idea of Perfection* (1999), winner of the Orange Prize, is a romance about two unromantic people. Its heroine is an artist, a quilter, who works with pieces of well-used fabric to create new and stunning objects from the old. Grenville knows that she is herself remaking old forms.

Unlike these earlier works, though, *The Secret River* is a starkly, determinedly 'straight' narrative. Its realism feels disciplined. Other potential plot directions and other voices for the story emerge on the periphery but are not taken up. We stick with Thornhill, his family, his choices, his life-story and its relentless teleology. There is almost no play with history-telling here, no confessed doubt about the possibility of authentic narration, and little deliberate exposure of the hazy line between objective facts and subjective reproductions of facts. The narrative comes closest to reflecting on its own status in recurring references to characters making marks – on the page and the landscape. So, for example, at the age of sixteen, the apprentice boatman Thornhill is taught "his letters" by Sal. The description is characteristic: tactile, carefully detailed, sensual. Thornhill's clumsy illiteracy can only draw attention to its fluent portrayal:

> He could smell the fruity femaleness of her, a thing like the memory of strawberries left in the wood of the punnet, that sweet flowery fragrance. She leaned in to him and said, *No ink to start with. Just hold it – see? – like this*, and held up her own small hand, showing.

> When he tried, it was maddening, pernickety, unnatural. The way his hand worked with an oar made sense. His fist closed around it and his thumb kept it all in place. This holding of a feather was a contortionist's trick, pincering in with fingers and thumb, twisting the whole hand sideways, the quill rolling in his grip. Only his desire to please her made him persist.[4]

Unlike his parents before him, Thornhill learns to sign his own name, and he does so on the petition for his pardon. But his most significant markings are the lines made in dirt on the land he claims. The lines are in themselves the claiming:

> In the centre of the clearing he dragged his heel across the dirt four times, line to line. The straight lines and the square they made were like nothing else there and they changed everything. (134)

Thornhill's markings and claims compete with earlier markings left on the landscape: diggings and rock carvings. He arrives at this realization with indignation and follows it with quick denial. The always unequal conflict over whose 'illiterate' markings will be recognized, who will possess the land, raises a wider question about marking and the bringing into being of meaning. Who is forging the nation here: Thornhill, the pioneer settler who labours and builds; the Darug, who persistently resist erasure; or Grenville, the storyteller who crafts national myth? This subtle, marginal self-reflection in *The Secret River* contrasts starkly with the overt structural playfulness of *Joan Makes History*. *The Secret River*'s narrative is certainly knowing in Grenville's employment of our national mythology. But this knowingness is never disruptive. Questions about mark-making and legitimacy are not prominent. *The Secret River* never demands that we leave the level of Thornhill's story, or that we question its realism.

It is this containment, the disciplined refusal of self-consciousness in a distinctly conscious writer, that led to much of my discomfort when first reading *The Secret River*. It is a discomfort with the form of the historical novel, arising from the competing demands of history and of the novel. In narrative terms, *The Secret River* is told almost as 'straight' – chronologically, and within the dictates of realism – as an eyewitness account, yet a novel can

[4] Kate Grenville, *The Secret River* (Melbourne: Text, 2005): 33–34. Further page references are in the main text.

never have the force of immediacy or the singular purposiveness that propels personal, non-fictional narrative.

Grenville's discussion of *The Secret River* in interviews and at literary festivals has emphasized her quest for historical accuracy. Thornhill's story is based in part on the life of her own ancestor, Solomon Wiseman, a Thames boatman transported to Sydney. Wiseman earned his pardon, like Thornhill, and settled at Wiseman's Ferry. Grenville uses the language and detail from Wiseman's court transcript and from other colonial accounts and documents where possible:

> I did an enormous amount of research for this book. *The Secret River* isn't history but it's based solidly on history: just about everything in the book really happened and much of the dialogue is what people really said or wrote.[5]

She researched the quotidian experience of early-nineteenth-century London poverty and Sydney settler life in painstaking detail. Descriptions of food, boats, sleeping arrangements, the snatches of direct conversation: all read fluently, surely, and are compelling in their veracity. But I pause when a novelist, especially this novelist, stresses a work's truth above its fiction. The insistence on accuracy raises, unavoidably, the historical novel's most tedious, most empirical, question: where does the truth end and the fictionalizing begin? Which elements are fact, and which imagined? If this is a window onto history, am I seeing it as it *really* was?

Such questioning can only be reinforced here by the context of the 'history wars'. That phrase refers to recent intensely divisive debates in the Australian academy, parliament, and press about the extent of colonial violence against Indigenous peoples and about how this history should be written. Because *The Secret River* depicts atrocity, one side of the history wars will want to stress the novel's truth (Grenville used a documented account of a massacre as the basis for her own climactic scene); the other side will cast the book's conclusion as dramatic hyperbole. The realist historical novel can too easily entrap us in a boring binary of fact versus fiction, rather than exposing the mutual dependence of these terms and the inherently difficult relation between what 'really' happened and any attempt to narrate, interpret, and give meaning to what happened. Further, in the realist refusal to play with form

[5] Kate Grenville, "On the Historian Within," *Weekend Australian* (13–14 August 2005), Review: 2.

there is also the risk of granting special reverence, and thus distance, to this national myth of first contact and surrounding issues of race.

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The discomforts of form here, then, include a sense that 'historical fact' and 'imagined fiction' are separate, inducing a desire to find the line between. They also include a novelistic urge to pass ethical judgement on our protagonist. The novel is an ideal medium for creating a sense of subjectivity, of individual consciousness. Classic novels take us into the mind of their protagonists, giving us the illusion of witnessing their emotions and their decision-making. We see the texture, variety, and limitation of the characters' thoughts. This genre presents its protagonists' subjectivity in an ethical context, placing the reader in a position to observe and judge their choices. The novel is an eighteenth-century heuristic device: a means for teaching us by example or counter-example how to be in the modern world. It encourages us to judge and thus shows us how to think and behave 'reasonably'.

In *The Secret River*, we are immersed in Thornhill's consciousness. This point of view inevitably raises questions about his intention. In what sense, and within what latitude, does Thornhill make a choice about the novel's concluding violence? Does he understand what takes place as a massacre, an atrocity, an unpardonable crime? Such questions bring us back to the central impasse of the history wars. As a nation we cannot reach agreement about the degree of settler culpability for Aboriginal suffering. Issues of the settlers' comprehension and motivation are at the core of this debate. Inga Clendinnen comments on the patchy historical record of settlement violence:

> We know about a few massacres almost by accident or by luck [. . .]. [Our national historical] records are thick with tones of voice, references, assumptions, casual remarks that chill our blood. It didn't chill their blood.[6]

This telling observation reminds us of the dangers of judging across difference. There were oceans of cultural difference and misunderstanding between early European settlers and Indigenous Australians, but there is also considerable cultural difference between early European settlers and present-

[6] Quoted in Jane Sullivan, "Skeletons Out of the Closet," *The Age* (2 July 2005), Review: 1–2.

day readers of *The Secret River*. Do we judge Thornhill on his own terms or on ours?

In a number of interviews about *The Secret River*, Grenville has stressed that the aim of her fiction is not judgement but empathy. For instance, she spoke to Ramona Koval, on ABC Radio National's programme *Books and Writing*, about the antagonists in the history wars:

> You can set two sides up against each other and ask which side will win, the Windschuttles of the world or the Henry Reynoldses of the world [. . .]. Or you can [. . .] say, well, nobody is going to win [. . .]. What there can be, though, is understanding, actually experiencing what it was like, the choices that these people had [. . .]. The historians are doing their thing, but let me as a novelist come to it in a different way, which is the way of empathising and imaginative understanding of those difficult events.[7]

Empathy with the protagonist is a common feature of the novel, but, as noted earlier, a reader of the classic novel is placed in a position of empathetic *judgment* over the character. So some of my readerly discomfort here arises from the consistent adoption by the narrator of Thornhill's point of view, encouraging empathy, combined with the novel form's implicit invitation to weigh and judge. When terrible violence is described, the role of the reader, or witness, becomes disturbingly ambiguous.

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I found that *The Secret River*'s discomforts of form were eased when I began to consider it less as an historical novel and more as borrowing from the genre of tragedy. Of course, tragedy is traditionally a dramatic form; nevertheless, reading *The Secret River* through the different expectations brought to a tragedy, the different positioning of its viewer or reader, helped me discover a richer relation with this narrative, and perhaps also with the history on which it draws. I was led to consider *The Secret River* as a tragedy by Grenville's repeated use of the word 'tragic' in interviews. Settler violence, she said to Koval, does not emerge from evil so much as from "a tragic, tragic inability to communicate across a gulf of culture."[8]

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

[8] Koval, "Books and Writing."

The tragedy is a helpful form for presenting the cultural dissonance and horror of early European–Aboriginal contact because it assumes a degree of absurdity in individual human fate. Unlike the distinctly modern forms of the novel, history, and the historical novel, tragedy does not expect human affairs to be explicable through reason. George Steiner characterizes classical tragedy and its Hellenic world view. For him, the telling contrast is with Judaeo-Christian texts, in which he reads an assumption of justice and reason:

> The Judaic vision sees in disaster a specific moral fault or failure of understanding. The Greek tragic poets assert that the forces which shape or destroy our lives lie outside the governance of reason or justice […] To the Jew there is a marvelous continuity between knowledge and action; to the Greek an ironic abyss.[9]

In tragedy, choice does not neatly dovetail with full responsibility. Dramatic irony is produced when we watch a tragic hero choose a course of action deliberately, while we know he or she is blind to its full and terrible consequences. Here is a complication for any analysis of intention: conscious choice with unintended results. Error and explanation are not to be found simply or primarily in the tragic protagonist's mind – as they might be in the novel – but also in a powerfully chaotic metaphysical order of being that has little mercy for mere mortals. If we read *The Secret River* as a tragedy, assessing Thornhill's blameworthiness is no longer our primary concern: he is, by virtue of being a tragic hero, both entirely blameable and struggling exculpably amid overwhelming historical forces and conflicts much larger than himself or his choices. Thornhill's tragic flaw, his error, is not some hideous moral failing but is, rather, the limitation of an 'ordinary' person on an extraordinary historical threshold. If the meeting of two such different cultures were to be peaceful, great imagination would be required. We live for pages in Thornhill's head, listening to his interior voice, and through this close novelistic knowledge of his subjectivity we apprehend the scope of his insight and adaptability. He is clever: he can imagine a new life in a new place; but he is pragmatic rather than sagaciously humanitarian. He is intellectually ill-equipped for granting validity to a wholly different way of being. Given his limitations, a tragic resolution of the plot's tensions is inevitable. To grasp the legitimacy of the Darug and their claims, Thornhill would need a literary form like the novel, presenting their consciousness and culture in terms he under-

[9] George Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963): 6–7.

stood and thus claiming his empathy. But no such form can exist; there is no common language or cultural literacy, and there is no empathy.

Rather than judging, our task as readers and witnesses of tragedy is to feel. The conclusion of tragedy is not, as in the novel, about a balancing or resolving of ideas; it is about the release of emotion – what the Greeks termed 'catharsis'. *Kátharsi[s]* literally means purging or purifying. Is tragedy, then, a more comfortable genre for this painful history because it holds out the promise of release from guilt, a clearing-out of burdensome emotions? Perhaps white Australia should not be absolved of the burden of judging our past. Perhaps those minor characters in *The Secret River* who forge a peaceful existence with the Darug are an indication that Thornhill can and should be judged, that, regardless of the extraordinary historical forces in which he is caught, his decisions are personal. But Grenville says that history cannot now be altered, and real reparation is impossible, so our task must be to feel and understand. Lest this task should seem a copout, Terry Eagleton's recent reflections on tragedy remind us that this genre evokes and encompasses trauma as well as sorrow: "Tragedy may be poignant, but it is supposed to have something fearful about it too, some horrific quality which shocks and stuns."[10] Feeling may not be the easy option.

The genre of tragedy, in bringing us closer to feeling, offers distance from the eighteenth-century faith in reason and modernity that is so palpably present in the idea of nation, the trope of progress, and the form of the novel. Tragic drama traditionally tells the story of a great and prosperous individual who, through error and the machinations of fate, loses power and fortune. Loss is crucial. Thus, if we read *The Secret River* as a tragedy, we undercut its pioneer plot. Emphasis shifts away from the Thornhills' material progress from poverty to wealth. The wealth is rendered meaningless, because it cannot buy what is desired. Instead, the novel's trajectory is from hope to hopelessness. At the story's end, Thornhill is a poignant figure, bewildered by his own sense of irretrievable loss. In the growing tensions with the Darug, he sought certainty – much like late-twentieth-century landowners after Mabo[11]

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[10] Terry Eagleton, *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003): 1.

[11] 'Mabo' refers to a culturally and politically pivotal court case, *Mabo v Queensland*, which was decided by the High Court of Australia on 8 December 1988. The court ruled that the Queensland government could not retrospectively remove native

– but in grasping for it he gained greater confusion. He cannot understand why his otherwise perfect pioneer story lacks the expected confident conclusion. Perhaps the story of Australia is not one of pioneer optimism, of hard work forging a nation. Perhaps it is not a story of colonial escape from the British class system to a fairer, more innocent world. Perhaps, instead, it is a tragic, ironic story of limitation, cultural dissonance, and loss.

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Thornhill's boat is called the *Hope.* His moment of downfall as he travels on hope along the river of history could be regarded as the instant when he falls in love with a stretch of land. For the first half of *The Secret River*, Thornhill is sustained and driven by his love for Sal: a tender, beautifully written love. Through the second half of the book, the love for the land takes over:

> A chaos opened up inside him, a confusion of wanting. No one had ever spoken to him of how a man might fall in love with a piece of ground. No one had ever spoken of how there could be this teasing sparkle and dance of light among the trees, this calm clean space that invited feet to enter it. (106)

and

> He could not forget the quiet ground beyond the screen of reeds and mangroves and the gentle swelling of that point, as sweet as a woman's body. (121)

Grenville is at her most lyrical and Romantic when she describes the Hawkesbury and its surrounds for us. Thornhill's love of this landscape demonstrates his admirable, though tragically limited, capacity to embrace difference. For Sal, by contrast, 'home' and beauty are always located in England. When Thornhill tells Sal about the land he has seen, she laughs and says he had been so preoccupied she thought he had fallen for "some saucy moll" (122). But this new love of his is so strong, he is determined to hang on to it even against Sal's wishes. It leads him to commit violence she has warned against and, in an increasing symbolic confusion of the land and the woman, he tells himself this is for her safety. Then something precious is lost from the love that had sustained him: "He had not thought that words unsaid could come between

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title, creating anxiety among non-Indigenous land owners who demanded that the Australian government alter the law to provide 'certainty' about their land.

two people like a body of water" (324). Perhaps, after all, *The Secret River* is a love story. A tragic love story.

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