

Chapter 1 Ancestry, Memory and History

I am saying that the past continues to resonate in the present. We don't live in an entirely fresh experience. The past is always there, working on us in many ways. At an historical level, for instance, you and I are still very deeply affected by the French Revolution. And the people who don't understand that, don't even understand the story they are living inside. Mike [Langford, from *Highways to a War*], like all of us, is not just himself but a product of ancestors. Not only physical characteristics but the ancestors themselves recur in us, their spirits are inside us. And on the level of history, the revolutions and theories of 1848 produced the Vietnam War. Devereux [Langford's ancestor] is an Anglo-Irish gentleman who is a political prisoner of the English in Van Diemen's Land, because of his activism against British rule. He's espousing a cause which in 1848 was a lost cause. And Mike goes to his death partly because of his espousal of the lost cause of the Free Khmer. So he has repeated his great-grandfather's characteristics.¹

Ancestry is a way 'into history' which allows a personal and significant relationship with the past. The focus of this thesis is predominantly Irish ancestry in Australia: the hyphenated term 'Irish-Australian' encapsulates a particular synthesis through ancestry. This ancestral relationship is more or less constructed. Ancestral narratives, in this sense, do not represent or objectively define history; rather, they are situated between history and cultural memory in order to enable a personal relationship to the past. On the one hand they construct an objective, quantifiable relationship to the past; on the other they evoke an imaginative, primal identification with those who have gone before. This allows for a multi-dimensional understanding of the relationship between certain periods, and also encourages multiple perspectives and voices. In the texts which form the subject of this thesis, historical narratives are the formal elaboration of a 'Jungian reservoir of ancestral memory'.²

¹ Adrian Mitchell, 'An Interview with Christopher Koch', *Australian Literary Studies* Vol. 18, No. 1 (1997), p. 72.

² Noel Henrickson, 'Christopher Koch's Otherland', *Quadrant*, April 1997, p. 62.

Irish-Australian Ancestry: From History to Identity

Ancestry is by definition grounded in a definite context, in this case that of the Irish in Australia. This ancestry is based on a distinctive migration experience which synthesises personal history, family history, migration history and national history. By its nature ancestry requires a distance, a certain quality of absence; for this reason, ancestors must usually be at least two or three generations distant to be able to be considered ancestors as such.³ Thus, ancestry implies a historical relationship by definition: ancestry is not possible without some historical research, or at least an awakening of historical consciousness. Furthermore, ancestry allows for a popular engagement with history, providing an access to the past which is potentially available to everyone.

Genealogy, despite low esteem among professional historians, probably constitutes the most participatory historical form of all. There has been a striking growth of interest in tracing one's ancestors and their histories. While there is nothing particularly Australian about an interest in family history, it has a distinctive form and purpose here ... in Australia, where immigration over long distances meant for many people the loss of contact with their parents and grandparents, and therefore access to knowledge about them and their forbears, the gaps are supplied through research.⁴

Curthoys' point is that ancestry, through genealogical research, allows more people than ever before to engage with history; it is, indeed, a way 'Into History'. While Curthoys wrote in 1987, she was noting a trend which continued to develop after she wrote, which is clear from the growth of ancestral narratives since that time.⁵ Indeed, many libraries now feature specialised family history departments, and Pierre Nora notes the modern obsession with collecting documents to preserve vanishing memories: 'There is hardly a family today in which some member has not

³ This evokes Walter Scott's definition of historical fiction as fiction which is set at least two generations in the past.

⁴ Ann Curthoys, 'Into History', in Ann Curthoys, A.W. Martin, Tim Rowse, *Australians From 1939*, Broadway, NSW: Fairfax, Syme & Weldon Associates, 1987.

⁵ Example of ancestral narratives in recent Australian novels include: Alex Miller, *The Ancestor Game*, Ringwood, Vic.: Penguin Books Australia, 1992; Richard Flanagan, *Death of a River Guide*, Ringwood, Vic.: McPhee Gribble, 1994; Peter Carey, *Oscar and Lucinda*, St Lucia, Qld.: University of Queensland Press, 1988; Drusilla Modjeska, *Poppy*, South Yarra, Vic.: McPhee Gribble, 1990; Sarah Morgan, *My Place*, Fremantle, WA: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1988.

sought to reconstruct the hidden ancestral past as fully as possible.’⁶ The revitalised significance of ancestry in Australian settler culture encourages a re-evaluation, or re-interpretation, of history itself in the light of recovered memory. Such a reinterpretation is fraught with difficulties if it does not confront the origins and heritage of settler culture.

It is precisely this reinterpretation of history which Wayne Hudson and Geoffrey Bolton address in their volume, *Creating Australia: Changing Australian History*.⁷ This involves a return to Richard White’s *Inventing Australia* thesis, and here White is given an opportunity to respond to some misunderstandings of his book, and to elaborate his ideas a little. Some saw White as an anti-realist, who saw no reality in the concept of the Australian nation. However, he merely claimed that the idea of the nation is a construct, responding to a cultural nationalism which simply equated all culture with the nation. He thus attempted to strike a balance between cultural nationalism and the claims of poststructuralist theories. ‘I was stranded somewhere in the middle, because while I was happy to borrow poststructuralist notions in examining the construction of something as nebulous as conceptions of Australia, I did not imagine or argue that all other aspects of the past – culture, experience – were equally nebulous’.⁸ The elaboration of White’s thesis involved the acknowledgment that some aspects of being Australian are more constructed than others; of course, ancestry is an important ingredient in such constructions, since it promotes specific identities.

White’s reappraisal is also more explicit about recognising multiple identities in Australian life.⁹ This means addressing differing ideas of what it is to be Australian, as well as important types of identity which do not fall under the national banner. In this way, Australian history has an important role in re-configuring identity on a number of levels. However, White is less explicit on how multiple identities can be reconciled with an idea of the nation. A concept like ancestry can provide the crucial link between history and identity because ancestry situates itself in relation to many types of histories, but also enables a concrete

⁶ Pierre Nora, ‘Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*’, *Representations* 26 (1989), p. 10.

⁷ Wayne Hudson and Geoffrey Bolton, *Creating Australia: Changing Australian History*, St Leonards, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 1997

⁸ Richard White, ‘*Inventing Australia Revisited*’, in Hudson and Bolton, *Creating Australia*, p. 15.

⁹ White, ‘*Inventing Australia Revisited*’, p. 17.

expression of identity. Historical thinking needs to account for both the multiplicity and particularity of experience, and it is this dialectic which ancestral narratives can negotiate.

Hudson and Bolton do have some difficulty reconciling multiple identities with particular material experience, but they also account for the plurality of Australian experience: 'Seekers after an Australian identity have often tended to undervalue provincial diversity, but it would be impossible to grasp the fullness of Australian experience without acknowledging ... the rural Tasmania of Christopher Koch'.¹⁰ Koch actually writes about Hobart as much as Tasmania's countryside, so categorising him as a 'rural' writer indicates an essentialism which locates Koch within a 'regional' framework. It would be more accurate to claim that Koch illustrates the relations and tensions between city and country, and how these entities play through the Australian imagination. Nonetheless, it is important that Koch is cited as an example of the diversity of Australian identity.

Ultimately, it is necessary to focus on particular instances of diversity: investigating history inevitably leads towards a renegotiation of identity. Ann Curthoys makes an important contribution here by examining Australian settler culture and how the 'whiteness'¹¹ of European-Australians influences their sense of identity. Her main argument is against use of the term 'Anglo-Celtic' to broadly define white Australians; she had felt the uselessness of the term acutely in a conference where she was asked to form a discussion group with others who shared the same cultural identity. 'Many of us did not feel that "Anglo-Celtic" in any way described our cultural identity; we wanted to construct such an identity because we thought we ought to, not because we had to, because it was truly a part of us. In that sense, "Anglo-Celtic" is scarcely an identity at all'.¹² What Curthoys is expressing is the lack of a conceptual language which can give shape to her cultural identity.

¹⁰ White, 'Inventing Australia Revisited', p. 3.

¹¹ Curthoys herself does not use the term 'whiteness', but the general context of her discussion involves reappraisals of ethnicity and race in settler cultures. See Noel Ignatieff, *How The Irish Became White*, New York: Routledge, 1995. In this way, ancestral narratives operate in the context of an 'intriguing controversy raging at the moment, in the physical, historical, social and political sciences as to whether there are races or not'. See Ivan Hannaford, *Race: The History of an Idea in the West*, Washington DC: Woodrow Wilson Centre Press, 1996, p. 4. This broader context is concerned with the origins of individuals and groups.

¹² Ann Curthoys, 'History and Identity', in Wayne Hudson and Geoffrey Bolton, *Creating Australia: Changing Australian History*, St Leonards, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 1997, p. 24.

As Curthoys suggests, the task of renegotiating Australia's multiple identities must involve historical discourse, and an attempt to move away from what Franz Fanon called the 'settler logic' of colonising and nation-building.¹³ In this way identity is informed by historical consciousness, and ancestry is one way to make this link. 'The passion for genealogical research and knowledge expresses a desire to construct a sense of belonging and continuity that for Australians of British and/or Irish descent, especially amongst working-class people, is frequently extremely elusive'.¹⁴ This recognition of the interaction between the personal and the historical is instrumental for this thesis, which nonetheless needs to focus on one particular aspect of settler culture.

While Curthoys dispenses with the term 'Anglo-Celtic' because of its conceptual inadequacy, she does not propose any more useful terms to express her cultural or national identity. Such terms should take account of the particularity of experience: 'Irish-Australian' is much more useful. In the task of (re-)creating Australia in the context of Irish migration, the function of ancestry is to emplace the individual within history and contribute to a process of identification.. Kathleen Simmons notes this: 'A sense of Irish identity through cultural memory ... can be perceived in the writing of Irish-descended Australians of the present and recent past'.¹⁵ Notably, two of her subjects are Keneally and Koch, whose historical novels use ancestry to reflect on issues of personal, national and diasporic identity in Australia.

Irish ancestry in Australia inevitably involves some element of construction, although it also has a biological basis in genetics.¹⁶ Curthoys argues that within the 'Anglo-Celtic' majority, 'identity is now being actively, anxiously sought rather than comfortably assumed'.¹⁷ This striving accounts for the activity in family history and genealogy, and this activity contributes to an Irish-Australian cultural identity. Another example of this energy and activity was the foundation of a new

¹³ Curthoys, 'History and Identity', p. 31.

¹⁴ Curthoys, 'History and Identity', p. 33.

¹⁵ Kathleen Simmons, 'Irish Cultural Memory in Australian Writing since World War Two', in Tadhg Foley and Fiona Bateman (eds.) *Irish-Australian Studies: Papers Delivered at the 9th Irish-Australian Conference, Galway, April 1997*, Sydney: Crossing Press, 2000, p. 224.

¹⁶ This biological basis for ancestry has been investigated by genetic scientists such as Bryan Sykes, *The Seven Daughters of Eve*, London: Random House, 2001. Notably, this popular-scientific approach focuses on how people might identify with their pre-historic ancestors.

¹⁷ Curthoys, 'History and Identity', pp. 32-3.

periodical at the beginning of 2000. *Tain* stands for The Australian Irish Network, which the editor argues already existed in various forms, so ‘The task of the magazine is not to create the network but to help bring it to a new level of critical and constructive self-awareness’.¹⁸ The aim is thus to promote a more self-conscious Irish-Australian identity.

Ultimately, a hyphenated term like ‘Irish-Australia’ implies some degree of construction. The important thing is to balance the analysis between this question of construction and the material reality of particular communities. Furthermore, this evocation of theories of nation gestures towards a significant aspect of Keneally’s writing: in constructing his Irish ancestry in Australia, he is representing the nation and expressing his nationalist sentiments.

Ancestral Narratives as Sites of Memory

In the first ten pages of Pierre Nora’s ‘Between Memory and History’, the author mentions ancestry no less than four times in the light of the modern commandment ‘thou shalt remember’.¹⁹ Ancestral narratives function as sites of memory (*lieux de memoire*) due to the coexistence of the three aspects of embodied memory – material, symbolic and functional – and ‘as such are created by the interaction between memory and history, an interaction resulting in mutual overdetermination’.²⁰ Ancestral narratives are material in terms of their textuality; they are symbolic because they represent the past and a sense of personal origins; and they are functional because we reflect on them in order to maintain and develop our individual and collective identities. This is how ancestral narratives function as sites of memory.

Nora’s discussion is in light of what he calls the ‘acceleration of history’: the loss of a traditional sense of memory and its replacement with an objectified kind of ‘historicised memory’.²¹ In this context, discussions of cultural memory are

¹⁸ Val Noone, ‘Editorial’, in *Tain: The Australian Irish Network*, 1:1, p. 2.

¹⁹ Nora, ‘Between Memory and History’, p. 10.

²⁰ Nora, ‘Between Memory and History’, p. 14.

²¹ Nora, ‘Between Memory and History’, p. 10.

certainly prominent, and 'may seem trendy'.²² Contemporary theories of memory proceed from the early influences of writers like Frederic C. Bartlett and Maurice Halbwachs, who emphasised the importance of collective as well as individual memory.²³ The nexus between the two has been investigated in various contexts, including the Holocaust and Canadian history and literature.²⁴ However, for the purposes of this thesis, the most relevant work is that which explores the role of memory in family history and Australia.²⁵ Such work foregrounds the practice of looking to the future with an eye on the past, and the construction of identity which goes along with it.

This dual vision of past and future takes on special significance within postcolonial contexts. Chris Healy shows how this approach can help individuals and societies move beyond the legacies of colonialism.

This is a book with strong hopes for history and social memory ... It is a gesture towards learning to inhabit landscapes of memory which are, in part, landscapes littered with ruins; some archaic and others nightmarish, some quaint simulations and others desperate echoes. I imagine such a landscape of memories not as a homeless place for lost souls but a ground from which new flights of historical imagination might depart and to which they might return, differently.²⁶

Healy envisages a distinct form of post-colonial redemption, a way to overcome the traumas of colonial subjugation and the legacies of colonialism. He explores history and social memory in the Australian context, and the ways in which the two interact.

²² Marko Juvan, 'Thematics and Intellectual Content: The XVth Triennial Congress of the International Comparative Literature Association in Leiden,' <http://clwebjournal.lib.purdue.edu/clweb99.html>, accessed: 17/6/05.

²³ Frederic C. Bartlett, *Remembering*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1932; Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory*, New York: Harper Colophon, 1950. See also John E. Craig, 'Sociology and the Related Disciplines Between the Wars: Maurice Halbwachs and the Imperialism of the Durkheimians' in P. Besnard and L.A. Croser (eds), *The Sociological Domain*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983, pp. 263-89.

²⁴ See, for instance, James Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust, Memorials and Meaning*, Yale: Yale University Press, 1993 and Peter Novick, *The Holocaust and Collective Memory: The American Experience*, New York: Bloomsbury, 1993; Roxanne Rimstead (ed.) *Essays on Canadian Writing*, No. 80, Fall 2003 Special Issue: Cultural Memory and Social Identity.

²⁵ William Hirst, David Manier, Ioana Apetroia, *The Social Construction of the Remembered Self: Family Recounting*, in J. Snodgrass and R. Thompson (eds), *The Self Across Psychology*, New York: NYAS, 1997; Kate Dorian-Smith and Paula Hamilton (eds), *Memory and History in Twentieth-Century Australia*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994.

²⁶ Chris Healy, *From the Ruins of Colonialism: History As Social Memory*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, pp. 1-2.

Significantly, he does not relegate memory to the status of a derivative and inferior form of history, with its reliance on fact and claims to truth. Through memory, all people engage with history, rather than just the elite. 'Most of us do not walk around endlessly expressing our being-in-history yet we are all memory workers, recalling and forgetting, selecting, ordering and erasing memories.'²⁷ This resonates with the 'secular' notion of ancestry which this thesis has already explored, and echoes Curthoys' 'democratic' idea of ancestry as well as Koch's approach: 'I'm not going to pretend that as an Australian I'm some newly-minted creature that has no northern hemisphere ancestry, no folk-memory.'²⁸

Healy offers an excellent example of how an apprehension of ancestry interacts with memory and national history. He discusses Sir Joseph Carruthers, who devised specific strategies to create a nationalist Cook, an icon of genesis. One of Carruthers' strategies was

to articulate Cook within a genealogical narrative ... Such a biological plot occurs widely in settler societies ... George Arnold Wood ... shared this sense of history as a biological, racial and eugenicist story when he wrote: 'As a child cannot be too careful in choosing his grandfather, so a country cannot be too careful in choosing its discoverer; and a country with the ideals of New South Wales could have made no more happy choice.' ... I think late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Australian narratives of inheritance, with their patriarchal and juridical connotations, have to be read as part of the formation of a nationalist Australian history. Cook was both founding father and national progenitor, and hence a metaphor for the national polity ... In his singular and mysterious antipodean acts he brought into being new spaces on which history would henceforth be inscribed.²⁹

Articulating Cook within a genealogical narrative is a form of both memory-work and history-making, specifically in a nationalist context. What Healy does is to suggest how ancestral narratives mediate between history and memory, enabling a shift away from institutionalised history in the study of ancestral narratives.

²⁷ Healy, *Ruins*, p. 5.

²⁸ Koch, in Candida Baker, *Yacker 3: Australian Writers Talk About Their Work*, Sydney: Pan, 1989, p. 193.

²⁹ Healy, *Ruins*, p. 29.

This is a similar task to that undertaken by Paul Carter in *The Road to Botany Bay*.³⁰ Carter demonstrates how space becomes place through the processes of mapping, naming and narrative which accompany colonialism. The individual subject (or historian) does not ‘objectively’ observe the place, but experiences it as a cultural palimpsest which retains traces of previous occupancy and human experience, and which is not necessarily ‘seen’ by the ‘seer’. Carter points to the fallacy of imperial perception: ‘In a theatre of its own design, history’s drama unfolds; the historian is merely an impartial onlooker, simply *repeating* what happened’.³¹ Against this imperial history, which obscures the observer by casting (usually) him as a detached, omniscient ‘I’, Carter proposes spatial history as ‘a prehistory of places, a history of roads, footprints, trails of dust and foaming wakes. Within its domain fall the flight of birds, the direction of smoke, the lie of the land. Against the historians, it recognises that our life as it discloses itself is dynamic, material but invisible’.³² This notion of spatial history is useful for many reasons. First, it allows a theoretical approach to the situation of Europeans in Australia, a palimpsest built up through waves of migration and layers of ancestors. It is able to account for the particular experience of the Irish in Australia, who brought their own notions of place to the southern continent. Spatial history gives a significant role to the onlooker: ‘For, like the traveller whose gaze is oriented and limited, it makes no claim to authoritative completeness. It is, must be, like a journey, exploratory. It suggests certain directions in historical texts, leaves others for others to explore’.³³ As a non-linear form of history it enables a ‘secular’ conception of ancestry across historical periods; ancestry does not have to follow a rational, linear model but can operate via imaginative identification. Thus, ancestral narratives are journeys into and through historical space, with the potential to challenge and transform imperial histories.

Australian histories of place written in the shadow of *The Road to Botany Bay* also depict an approach to history which is relevant to ancestral narratives. Authors who explore the past of a particular place do so from a distinctively subjective stance, and so they must consider the place of their own origins within wider

³⁰ Paul Carter, *The Road To Botany Bay: An Essay in Spatial History*, London: Faber & Faber, 1987.

³¹ Carter, *Road*, p. xv.

³² Carter, *Road*, pp. xxi-xxii.

³³ Carter, *Road*, p. xxiii.

historical and cultural processes. 'In an era when relationships with locality and community appear to be fragmenting, it seems essential to think in very broad ways about issues of rootedness and belonging: the ethical dilemmas, personal and collective, which must be resolved before a rightful place in the world can be assumed'.³⁴ This interplay between the personal and collective is precisely what ancestral narratives enact, and resolving the accompanying ethical dilemmas requires a sense of identification which is open to transformation. 'Perhaps it could not only show how the history of one region in Australia reflected the tensions and struggle in the national story, but also show the richness of history – a canvas that reveals much more than a singular tale of darkness or light'.³⁵ Just like spatial histories, ancestral narratives have the potential to narrate the past as rich and complex, rather than a simple veneer of representation.

Ultimately, the aim of postcolonial work is to shift away from a representative view of history, where the writing is assumed to represent the 'true past'. In this sense ancestral narratives are representations of the past. In Said's now-classic words, 'I believe it needs to be made clear about cultural discourse and exchange within a culture that what is commonly circulated by it is not "truth" but representations ... In any instance of at least written language, there is no such thing as a delivered presence, but a *re-presence*, or a representation'.³⁶ The problem is that these representations masquerade as truths, and gloss over the fact that representations in history and literature are deeply implicated in wider cultural and political processes. Ancestral narratives are crucially placed between memory and history, and some histories are ancestral narratives by default.

Robert Hughes: History from Below

The Fatal Shore is a subaltern history of Australian convict transportation. Robert Hughes's central aim is to give voice to the previously silenced actors of history

³⁴ Mark McKenna, *Looking for Blackfellas' Point: An Australian History of Place*, Sydney: UNSW Press, 2002, p 7.

³⁵ Martin Thomas, *The Artificial Horizon: Imagining the Blue Mountains*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2003, p. 13.

³⁶ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, London: Penguin, 1978, p. 21.

who have been pushed to the margins in favour of great military and political leaders.

The missing element in most accounts of the System has been the voices of the convicts themselves ... Accordingly I have tried ... to see the System [of transportation] from below, through convicts' testimony ... about their own experiences ... far from being a mute mass, the convicts did have a voice, or rather many voices. This book is largely about what they tell us of their suffering and survival, their aspiration and resistance, their fear of exile and their reconciliation to the once-unimagined land they and their children would claim as their own.³⁷

Although *The Fatal Shore* is not directly related to ancestral narratives, it is a revelation of convict ancestry for many Australians. It is an example of the fact that 'Memory is life ... subject to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting ... and capable of lying dormant for long periods only to be suddenly reawakened'.³⁸ This subaltern history reveals 'the Stain' and overcomes historical amnesia, but not through a 'victim-history'; it actually has a comic resolution which challenges the 'lash and chain' view of the penal days. This shows the potential for transforming the past, ultimately with a view to transforming national identity.

Two aims of *The Fatal Shore* are to overcome historical amnesia and to demythologise the convict past. Thus, Hughes aims to dismantle the stereotype of convict identity, with the ultimate intention of undermining the conventional past of Australian nationalist historiography.³⁹ Important sources for Hughes include examples of popular memory and the oral traditions of the convicts, such as folk ballads which give us an insight into the lives of subaltern historical actors and how they viewed their situation. This emphasis on popular memory is reminiscent of folklorists such as Bill Wannan.⁴⁰

Although it stands as influential piece of memory-work, *The Fatal Shore* does not contain an explicit ancestral narrative. Hughes does not openly claim to be

³⁷ Robert Hughes, *The Fatal Shore: A History of the transportation of convicts to Australia, 1787-1868*, London: Collins Harvill, 1987, p. xiv.

³⁸ Nora, 'Between Memory and History', p. 3.

³⁹ This kind of past casts transportation as an instance of British colonialism and brutal tyranny; it leads to the kind of critical nationalism exemplified by John Pilger which is also inspired by his ancestry. See John Pilger, *Heroes*, London: Jonathan Cape, 1986.

⁴⁰ See especially Bill Wannan (ed.), *The Wearing of the Green: The Lore, Literature, Legend and Balladry of the Irish in Australia*, Melbourne: Lansdowne, 1965, as well as Bill Wannan (ed.), *Tell 'Em I Died Game: The Stark Story of Australian Bushranging*, Melbourne: Currey O'Neil, 1963.

telling the story of his own ancestors as he needs to remain an omniscient historian. This is perhaps a manifestation of the reticence of professional historians embodied in Patrick O'Farrell, who sought to explain how 'I come to be writing a history of the Irish in Australia, without seeing it as ancestor worship'.⁴¹ However, Hughes's attempt at critical distance is often betrayed, such as in the dedication to his godson, 'a seventh-generation Australian', which underscores the abstract sense of family connections operating in *The Fatal Shore*.

While the book is not an ancestral narrative as such, it can be read as an ancestral narrative in reverse. The proposition of this thesis is that ancestral narratives operate between memory and history in order to construct and transform various identities. What *The Fatal Shore* does is to draw on both the memory and the history of convict transportation in order to shed light on the ancestral experiences of many Australians. The ancestral narrative of the entire nation is relayed indirectly, as in many of Keneally's early novels.

This relevance is clear from Hughes's own reflections in the Introduction. In his characteristic literary style, he argues that 'The general public never lost its curiosity about these "dark" years in which so many of its roots lay tangled ...'⁴² This evocation of 'roots' is a direct reference to ancestry: Australians have a deep connection to the past through their ancestors. Like the experience of slavery for African-Americans, the experience of transportation is a common one for the ancestors of many European Australians, especially the Irish in the Eastern States. Furthermore, Hughes refers often to the Stain, although he presents it as a primarily historical concept, a way to describe the repression or demonisation of memory which explains the scarcity of historical accounts. Nonetheless, the Stain also refers to ancestry, and a convict ancestry which vacillates between remembering and forgetting. So while Hughes does not offer an actual ancestral narrative, his inhabitation of the convict past encourages reflections about the ancestral experiences of many Australians.

Hughes also presents the convicts as Other to the mainstream establishment of Australian society, and the Irish, as a significant part of this convict experience, do come to the fore. He notes that some voices, 'usually working-class, and

⁴¹ Oliver MacDonagh and W.F. Mandle (eds.), *Ireland and Irish-Australia: Studies in Cultural and Political History*, Kent: Croon Helm Ltd., 1986, p. 218.

⁴² Hughes, *Shore*, p. xiii.

commonly Irish’, spoke out against the propaganda of the Boer War and World War I; this sees links between transportation out and conscription into war.⁴³ This is a type of counter-memory in which ‘marginalised subjects recover a useable past for the purpose of constructing a counter-memory based on dignity and protest’.⁴⁴ As such, the Irish are credited with retaining what memory there is of the convict days: ‘But memories lived on as social myths, particularly among the Irish, who never forgot what treatment their convict forbears received on the Fatal Shore’.⁴⁵ In this way, Irish cultural memory in Australia served to keep memories of the System alive as a counter-tradition to its occlusion in history proper, especially in events like the Castle Hill Rebellion of 1804.⁴⁶ This strongly evokes the work of Keneally, with his concern with the subaltern Irish diaspora in Australia and his fictionalisation of Castle Hill in *Bring Larks and Heroes*.

Although Hughes does not directly deal with ancestry or family history, he is deeply concerned with the legacy of the past and how it influences the present. ‘The Stain’ is a metaphor for Australia’s convict past, which is seen as a blot on an otherwise respectable history.⁴⁷ The Stain (or the Taint) is a shameful relic of the colonial past, something to be hidden away and sublimated within the deepest recesses of the national psyche. This was a difficult process: ‘The toxins of convictry would linger in Tasmania for another generation after 1853. There was no sudden purging of the Stain’.⁴⁸ This legacy remained in various ways: through the survival of ‘old crawlers,’ or convicts in Tasmania, through the large population of Emancipists or pardoned convicts and their children all throughout Australia, and of course in the masses of official paperwork left behind by the System. It is these traces of memory that Hughes picks up and fashions into a historical narrative.

He recreates this past for the purpose of revealing the role of the convicts in Australian history. The calculated publication date of 1988 coincides with Keneally’s publication of *The Playmaker*: both texts aim to consciously reconsider Australian history. Remarking that he grew up with only the barest notion of

⁴³ Hughes, *Shore*, p. xii.

⁴⁴ Roxanne Rimstead, ‘Introduction: Double Take: The Use of Cultural Memory’, in Rimstead (ed.), *Essays on Canadian Writing*, p. 6.

⁴⁵ Hughes, *Shore*, p. 158.

⁴⁶ Hughes, *Shore*, pp 190-2.

⁴⁷ It must also be noted that this ‘respectable history’ is a myth in more ways than one, since it also glosses over the history of contact between Europeans and Indigenous Australians. See Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra, *The Dark Side of the Dream*, Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1991.

⁴⁸ Hughes, *Shore*, p. 590.

Australia's convict history, Hughes's own experience showed that until the 1960s, 'amnesia seemed to be a condition of patriotism'.⁴⁹ This left the narration of convict experience to journalists and novelists who kept its memory alive through a focus on secondary penal settlements such as Port Arthur and Norfolk Island. However, this memory-work had one major fault: 'it was one-sided and ... sometimes luridly exaggerated'.⁵⁰ An important example of this kind of popular literature is Marcus Clarke's *His Natural Life*.⁵¹ Such novels 'presented convict life as a wretched purgatory, relieved only by stretches of pure hell'.

However, the 1960s saw a shift in attitudes: Manning Clark and L.L. Robson began to 'draw the System out of folklore and into the light of enquiry' by focusing on convicts in assignment rather than those undergoing secondary punishment for crimes committed while in the colony, since the latter were actually a minority.⁵² Hughes's aim is to write a history which strikes a balance between the novelist's representation of a brutal penal system designed solely for punishment and the historian's view of assignment as a benevolent means for reforming individuals. He thus takes a stance within a very significant debate about Australian history.⁵³

A determined focus on class and the comic resolution of the narrative suggests that Hughes wants his readers to laugh at class distinctions, and so he aims to erode class divisions and soothe class conflict through an analysis of its historical foundations. *The Fatal Shore* is not merely content with revealing the Stain; it works towards transforming the negative associations attached to convict history. This is the essence of Hughes's useable past: he seeks to replace the negative, confrontational impetus of previous constructions of history with a positive, healing type of past which is oriented towards reconciliation.⁵⁴ This suggests the transformative potential of history, memory and ancestral narratives.

Hughes rediscovers the convict past by drawing on the resources of memory as well as historical inquiry. In this way *The Fatal Shore* is an ancestral narrative by

⁴⁹ Hughes, *Shore*, p. xii.

⁵⁰ Hughes, *Shore*, p. xiii.

⁵¹ Marcus Clarke, *His Natural Life* (ed. Lurline Stuart), St Lucia, Qld: Queensland University Press, 2001.

⁵² Hughes, *Shore*, p. xiv.

⁵³ See Alan Frost, *Botany Bay Mirages: Illusion of Australia's Convict Beginnings*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1994.

⁵⁴ This is an intentionally ambiguous use of 'reconciliation': on a surface level, it refers to comic reconciliation in the resolution of *The Fatal Shore*. However, it also gestures towards the idea that ancestral narratives in Australia should address (Indigenous) reconciliation as a fundamental ethical imperative for all Australians of non-Indigenous descent.

default. A more explicit focus on ancestry within historical discourse gestures more clearly towards the ancestral narratives of Keneally and Koch.

Patrick Howard: Personalised Ancestry

Although Patrick Howard's *To Hell or to Hobart*⁵⁵ is much less well-known than *The Fatal Shore*, it is an important source for Koch's *The Many Coloured Land*.⁵⁶ Significantly, Howard does narrate his personal heritage more explicitly than Hughes. The book is a subaltern history but also an ancestral narrative, and the two are crucially linked: Howard narrates his own convict ancestry. Like Hughes, Howard is not explicit about how ancestry contributes towards identity, a task which is more thoroughly undertaken by the historical fiction of Keneally and Koch.

Howard's ancestry intersects in complex ways with his presentation of social history. His book narrates the lives of his ancestors, Stephen Howard and Ellen Lydon, who were both transported to Van Diemen's Land in the 1840s. This is narrated as historical discourse, and the lives of these two minor transportees reflect larger historical events; Howard's family history is a microcosm of Irish convict history. However, his primary motivation for writing the history remains an investigation of his ancestors' lives and their transportation. The line of descent is elaborated in the final chapter, 'The Founding of a Family' which tells of how the family nest-egg was laid in the Tasmanian west-coast mining industry.⁵⁷ This chapter provides the genealogical link between the ancestors and the author-descendant, but is nonetheless a thin basis for direct identification.

Crucially, Howard combines an ancestral narrative with the aims of historical inquiry. Like Hughes, he seeks to narrate an untold story: 'Like most Australians of Irish origin ... I was blissfully unaware of Irish history'.⁵⁸ Howard had been told that his great-grandfather was sent as a free emigrant to Australia in order to send

⁵⁵ Patrick Howard, *To Hell or to Hobart: A New Insight Into Irish Convict History*, Kenthurst: Kangaroo Press, 1993.

⁵⁶ Koch cites Howard as a source in *The Many-Coloured Land A Return To Ireland*, Sydney: PanMacmillan, 2002, p. 245.

⁵⁷ Interestingly, this inheritance was used to research Howard's book; the symbolic resonance of this is highly significant and perhaps alone outweighs many of the book's faults. In any case, the personal significance of the process of researching and writing the book for Howard is evident; in many ways he is quite involved in the narrative.

back money to his family in Ireland, that he was a ‘remittance man’. The discovery that his ancestor was actually a convict prompted him to research his family history, although he encountered substantial obstacles. ‘The lack of oral family history and the almost total destruction of the Irish records left me with no choice but to reconstruct the era in which they lived’.⁵⁹ This is an important point: Howard’s book is a reconstruction, or *representation* of historical events as he sees them, not a presentation of the actual events themselves. This key point also evokes Said’s work.

Howard’s ancestry is an entry-point into a history which can be shared with others. He speculates on how Irish history may play a role in the lives of individuals – how the Irish might use their past, even unwittingly. Having reviewed Irish history from Celtic times, Howard comments, ‘the Battle of the Boyne, together with the name of Brian Boru, was to become part of the collective unconscious of those who are descended from Irish emigrant stock’.⁶⁰ This concept of history operating within the collective unconscious indicates that cultural memory is at work. It suggests historical consciousness might be indirectly passed down ancestral lines and elaborated within an historical framework.

To Hell or to Hobart gives an important insight into the experience of many Irish transported to Australia. Stephen was transported for his activities in the Whiteboy movement, which Howard calls a ‘peasant guerrilla’ organisation.⁶¹ This leads to Stephen’s trial in Limerick, with certain ‘questionable aspects’ which point towards the mockery of justice which made such convictions possible. In Australia, Stephen experienced the next stage of the System, where ‘a new form of slavery prevailed’ in the form of the assignment system.⁶² This is a dominant myth of convict history which sees the English as colonisers and villains, and the Irish as colonised victims.⁶³

The narration of Ellen Lydon’s life also tells of inequality and rural unrest. Ellen came from Galway and was transported during the Famine, which was a

⁵⁸ Howard, *To Hell or to Hobart*, p. 9.

⁵⁹ Howard, *To Hell or to Hobart*, p. 9.

⁶⁰ Howard, *To Hell or to Hobart*, p. 20.

⁶¹ Keneally deals with the question of nineteenth-century rural ‘outrages’ in Ireland much more comprehensively.

⁶² Howard, *To Hell or to Hobart*, p. 70.

⁶³ This notion of convictry as slavery is an idea which Hughes takes issue with, arguing that assignment ‘was enlaced by concepts of right and law, not of simple ownership.’ See Hughes, *Shore*, p. 283.

common shared experience of many Irish peasants. This famine was a ‘compound disaster’, as the failure of the potato crop resulted in widespread starvation and disease.⁶⁴ This was the reason for Ellen being implicated in the crime of killing a sheep with intent to steal – as an offence against property, this meant transportation. Howard invests Ellen’s trial with imagined detail as he tells how the Irish peasants would have felt in such a situation.

To the bewildered and illiterate young peasants from the wilds of north-west Connemara, Freeman must have seemed like an angry god. The unfamiliar scene of the courtroom, with the handsome and aristocratic Freeman shouting at the interpreter and roaring at the Crown Prosecutor and defence, could only have been terrifying for these powerless, lonely young peasants.⁶⁵

This is memory-work at its finest: the author’s imagination takes the reader into the lived experience of his ancestor. The extreme events of the Great Famine mean that ‘Black ‘47’ is imprinted on the cultural memory of many Irish-Australians, although Howard does not explicitly connect this with cultural amnesia on a wider scale.

After narrating his ancestors’ arrival in Australia, Howard tells of the founding of the family. This is where his lack of records lets him down, because he has no way of being sure how they met, and cannot even identify precisely who the witnesses to the marriage were.⁶⁶ The significance of his family’s social mobility seems to be lost on Howard, when he glosses over Stephen’s new status with the phrase, ‘Clearly the convict stain was fast disappearing’.⁶⁷ Howard seems to be unclear as to the value or status of his family’s recovered memory. On the one hand he notes his family’s pervasive amnesia and on the other he claims that it was overcome quite easily. There is too little attention to ‘the dialectic of remembering and forgetting’ which is crucial to ancestral narratives.

Howard’s great contribution is that he has successfully merged his ancestral narrative with a more general history of Irish convicts in Australia. He is one Irish-Australian writer who makes the crucial link between personal heritage and historical discourse, and his book is a fine attempt to trace the footsteps of his own ancestors while simultaneously placing this narrative within the context of a broader

⁶⁴ Howard, *To Hell or to Hobart*, p. 43.

⁶⁵ Howard, *To Hell or to Hobart*, p. 108.

⁶⁶ Howard, *To Hell or to Hobart*, p. 161.

history. However, his reliance on historical method prevents him from fully identifying with his ancestors.

Howard's difficulty with sources is all too apparent. Unlike Hughes, he does not refer to Cook or Jones, and although his bibliography has a reference to Harris's *Settlers and Convicts* (a first-hand account of the System), it is not discussed or referred to within the text. Unfortunately, Howard's inability to discover sufficient primary historical sources means that his book does not really work as comprehensive subaltern history. This is most apparent in Chapter Six, 'The Assignment System' which is dependent entirely upon the report of the Molesworth Committee appointed by the English parliament.⁶⁸ Not only does he ignore how assignment might have been viewed by the convicts themselves, he fails to mention that the Committee was heavily biased and comprised mainly of the strongest opponents of transportation.⁶⁹ Here Howard misses the opportunity to read the historical evidence critically.

Furthermore, Howard casts Irishness in terms of victimhood and a 'natural' desire for retaliation, invoking an outworn and conventional useable past. His account of Irish history does have the potential to explore nuances and details, such as divisions amongst the Irish themselves. Instead he ends the chapter with a negative and simplistic conclusion: 'Such was the history of suspicion and hostility towards the English that was the heritage of ... [the] Irish, both at home and in enforced exile'.⁷⁰ Here he demonstrates the propensity for resorting to the stereotype of convict identity which Hughes refuses to accept.⁷¹ His identification with both ancestors is incomplete and neglects the potential for ancestral narratives to reshape and transform identity.

Not only is there no thorough investigation of several important episodes,⁷² but Howard fails to discuss the various gradations between bond and free in Van Diemen's Land society, and what it meant for a convict to become a policeman, overseer or an informer. Here he completely misses the chance to discuss one of the

⁶⁷ Howard, *To Hell or to Hobart*, p. 164.

⁶⁸ Howard, *To Hell or to Hobart*, pp. 70-6.

⁶⁹ In contrast, Hughes offers a much more balanced analysis of assignment, especially in relation to the findings of the Molesworth Committee. See Hughes, *Shore*, p. 493

⁷⁰ Howard, *To Hell or to Hobart*, p. 23.

⁷¹ Indeed, Hughes works strongly against the stereotypes which Howard accepts uncritically. See Hughes, *Shore*, p. 159

⁷² Howard, *To Hell or to Hobart*, p. 36, pp 145-6.

central aspects of the penal system and how it may have related to Stephen Howard. Similarly, he fails to adequately narrate the lived experience of his other ancestor, Ellen Lydon, and the majority of Irish Catholics transported to Australia.⁷³ The point where Howard veers the furthest from popular memory-work is Chapter Fifteen, 'A Living Faith'.⁷⁴ Instead of telling how Australian Catholicism was actually practised by the Irish or how they felt about it, Howard tells of the development of the Church's hierarchy in Australia, the careers of its leaders, particularly the Daughters of Charity, and their conflicts with colonial authorities. This is one point where Howard shows the potential for narrating the experience of the majority of the Irish; however, his focus on the leaders rather than the led is indicative of the main problem with his subaltern history. It tends to ignore the subaltern status of his ancestors, and so no real connection with the subject is conveyed to the reader.

Before writing the book, Howard made a clear decision. 'Originally I planned to write a novel based on my research. However, I decided a factual account ... would be more exciting'.⁷⁵ Unfortunately, Howard's 'factual account' actually shapes the events to his own purposes in a more contestable manner, and proposes a reductive account of Irish-Australian heritage. While Howard's ancestral narrative acts as a site of memory due to its position between memory and history, its lack of focus on identity-formation means that it misses the target set by this thesis. The conventions of history-writing are perhaps not ideally suited to the expression of ancestral narratives, because there is not sufficient latitude for an elaboration of identity. This potential is more fulfilled by Thomas Keneally, whose work suggests that historical fiction is perhaps the best medium for expression of ancestral identification.

⁷³ Howard particularly neglects Caroline Leakey's *The Broad Arrow* (pp. 139-40), only mentioning it once and neglecting how it might reflect the lived experience of convicts.

⁷⁴ Howard, *To Hell or to Hobart*, pp. 153-9.

⁷⁵ Howard, *Hell or Hobart*, p. 9.

Keneally, *The Great Shame*: Towards Fiction

Throughout his writing career, Keneally has demonstrated a persistent interest in his own Irish heritage, whilst still strongly identifying as Australian.⁷⁶ *The Great Shame* is a fine example of how an ancestral narrative can provide an entry-point into history, and function as a site of memory which assists in the formation of individual and collective identities.⁷⁷ However, as with both Hughes and Howard, Keneally's dependence on historical method constrains his elaboration of ancestral identification. It means that the imaginative, elective ancestry which is so important to this thesis is not adequately dealt with by this text. Ultimately, Keneally is a more natural novelist than historian, which suggests the importance of ancestral narratives in historical fiction.

The Great Shame demonstrates the natural affinity between ancestry and history, because it was his own ancestry which inspired and motivated Keneally to write the book.⁷⁸ Here he relates the story of Hugh Larkin and Mary Shields, typical poor Irish transportees: Larkin 'is my wife's great-grandfather, and so I suppose I owe him a debt of conjugal gratitude'.⁷⁹ Keneally openly announces the personal connection which informs the book; he is self-consciously writing about his children's ancestors.

The tragedy and pathos in this ancestral narrative suffuses *The Great Shame* as Keneally tells a story of human loss through famine and migration. It is clear that his personal position as a descendant of these Irish migrants informs and drives the story he has to tell. This becomes more apparent when he deals with his own ancestor: 'I knew vaguely that I had some forbears who were convicts, one of them a John Kenealy who served time in Western Australia as a political prisoner'.⁸⁰ Keneally's Irish ancestry holds a secure place in his family history: unlike Howard (and Koch), there is no need to overcome familial amnesia. The Fenian Kenealy is a heroic but obscure figure, whose role serves to shape much of the latter part of the

⁷⁶ See Peter Pierce, *Australian Melodramas: Thomas Keneally's Fiction*, St Lucia, Qld.: University of Queensland Press, 1995, Chapter 6, 'Ireland and the Irish', pp. 132-157. Unfortunately Pierce's analysis predates *The Great Shame*.

⁷⁷ Thomas Keneally, *The Great Shame: A History of the Irish in the Old World and the New*, Milsons Point, NSW: Random House, 1998.

⁷⁸ Thomas Keneally, 'A Whiteboy and a "Summer Famine" Thief', in Richard Davis (ed.), *Irish Australian Studies 1995*, Sydney: Crossing Press, 1996, pp. 17-36.

⁷⁹ Keneally, *Shame*, p. 17.

book, which deals with the Fenians in Ireland and America, and the precursors to the modern Irish Republican Army. As a lieutenant in the grassroots Fenian movement, Keneally embodies the subaltern which Keneally is at pains to illustrate.

Keneally's ancestors represent the vast mass of the Irish who are not accounted for in conventional history. He effects this representation more effectively than Howard, and his subaltern history is more complete.

These obscure Australian ghosts have about them, despite everything, a whiff of democracy, vigour, endurance. It is salutary sometimes to revive their names, since their records tend to be swamped by the high colour of the careers of such transportees as Thomas Francis Meagher, John Mitchel, William Smith O'Brien and Terence Bellew McManus ... Men like Hugh Larkin and women like Mary Shields made up the masses of appalling Ireland for whose sake the Young Irelanders devised a more verbally exalted protest, and an uprising which had no better ultimate result than did the attack of Hugh Larkin on Mr Seymour's door.⁸¹

Here Keneally is depicting one aspect of Australian experience which relates to him personally. Through narrating the experience of his own ancestors, Keneally is able to give expression to the experience of the 'masses of appalling Ireland' who have been neglected in official historical accounts. This subaltern experience is juxtaposed with that of more illustrious figures of Young Ireland. This links family history to a broader national or diasporic history mediated by personal memory: Keneally's upbringing instilled in him an 'enormous inverted respect' for the power of the British Empire.⁸²

Keneally reinvigorates history with cultural memory, and so produces a type of 'countermemory'. He takes exception to prominent historians and social scientists, who together constructed a colonial discourse to justify the subjection and calamities which beset Ireland. Jeremy Bentham, the founder of utilitarianism, formulated principles which 'gave a licence for inaction ... In the name of greater possible evils, Ireland's pain was to be sanctioned'.⁸³ Although this simplifies the influence of utilitarianism as a political philosophy, it reflects Keneally's oppositional stance.

⁸⁰ Keneally, *Shame*, p. xi.

⁸¹ Keneally, *Shame*, p. 34.

⁸² Candida Baker, *Yacker 2: Australian Writers Talk About Their Work*, Sydney: Pan, 1987, p. 136.

⁸³ Keneally, *Shame*, p. 108.

This is even clearer when Keneally takes the population theorist Thomas Malthus to task. Malthus is for Keneally one of the most pernicious apologists of English colonialism in Ireland: Famine was seen as a type of population control. ‘So the Famine, whatever its other causes, would be seen as a visitation upon the Irish themselves, a corrective to their over-breeding, and their over-dependence on the potato’.⁸⁴ Although this Malthusian interpretation of the Famine no longer holds much authority, Famine history was originally narrated by the English to make it seem the fault of the Irish. Using ancestral narratives as a site of memory and a starting-point, Keneally engages with significant historical debates.

What is distinctive about *The Great Shame* is its emphasis on narrative and the use of effective literary techniques to portray the past. This suggests Keneally’s natural inclination towards imaginative or elective ancestry. Keneally illustrates the idea of diaspora with reference to a metaphor coined by Meagher, a leading member of Young Ireland. When Meagher first arrived in the United States, he offered some of his first impressions upon arrival in a lecture series entitled ‘Australia’.

In a field by the Hudson, he said, he had been struck by the bounteous harvest. ‘“That seed,” said one who stood by, “came from Egypt.” It had been buried in the tombs of kings – and lain with the dead for two thousand years. But, though wrapped in the shroud and locked within the pyramid, it died not ... And thus it is that the energies, the instincts, the faith, all the vitalities which have been crushed elsewhere, have been entombed elsewhere, in these virgin soils revive, and that which seemed mortal becomes imperishable.’⁸⁵

This image represents a redemption for the Irish diaspora as a whole; an escape from ‘the troubles’ in Ireland towards sanctuary in the New World. It is this narrative of social mobility which frames Keneally’s story of Hugh Larkin and Mary Shields.

Many of the Irish ended up in Australia because of the Great Famine. Keneally refers often to the massive depopulation of Ireland during the 1840s and 50s, which lends weight to an analogy between the Famine and the Holocaust of World War Two.⁸⁶ The experience of the Famine was imprinted on the cultural

⁸⁴ Keneally, *Shame*, p. 108.

⁸⁵ Keneally, *Shame*, pp. 256-7.

⁸⁶ This is a very loose analogy, based on the idea of intergenerational cultural memory and the explicit textual connections between *The Great Shame* and *Schindler’s Ark*.

memory of those Irish who came to Australia, although the memory of it was often wilfully suppressed. This led to the pervasive cultural amnesia which Howard contends with.

Once again, Keneally expresses the significance of the Famine through a metaphor, that of the 'Skeleton at the Feast'. During the St Patrick's Day celebrations Meagher introduces a sobering thought. ' "There is a skeleton at this feast," he declared of ravaged Ireland. Some did not perceive the corpse, he said. But he saw clearly "the shroud and the sealed lips and the cold hands".'⁸⁷ This is a disturbing image, especially since in 1855 Ireland was still recovering from the Famine, when gruesome images of death were daily realities for many. However, it also reflects the place of the Irish diaspora in the New World. The 'Feast' is a reference to the spectacular celebrations held in New York, Boston and other American cities upon the arrival of the Irish rebels. As a skeleton confined to the margins of this feast, Ireland is an absent presence, forgotten by many, unseen by others. This claim that Ireland will not be forgotten is cast in distinctly literary terms, and Keneally's use of such metaphors and images betrays his career as a novelist.

The Great Shame utilises extensive research, which was accomplished with the help of a team of research assistants in Australia, Ireland and the United States. This means that Keneally is not as dependent on primary sources as Howard, and so his social history displays more awareness of possibly contentious issues endemic to its own program. Like Hughes, Keneally extrapolates reasonably from the sources where necessary; there is a guardedly imaginative element to the depiction of subaltern characters which suggests a novelist's approach to the subject matter. He does, however, avoid the simplistic reading of evidence which Howard is prone to.

Through a reading of the histories of Hughes, Howard and Keneally, this chapter has explored history-writing as a genre for the expression of ancestral narratives. Although history might seem appropriate due to the fact that ancestors necessarily lived in the past, it has three main problems. Firstly, due to its origins as a academic discipline, history tends to aim towards objectiveness and distance, so the historian may have difficulty properly engaging with culture memory. Secondly,

⁸⁷ Keneally, *Shame*, p. 285.

history tends to require hard evidence to form interpretations and conclusions. Thirdly, history in Australia is currently a very contested field characterised by extreme polarisation. Historical fiction avoids these three problems and allows ancestral narratives to be imaginatively realised and relevant to society while presenting fresh interpretations and a balanced perspective.

The Fatal Shore is quite effective as a subaltern history due to its focus on folklore and ballads. It does aim at a wider audience than conventional history: it is highly readable and explicitly intends to give voice to the convicts themselves. However, the success of this is debatable. In the end, Hughes retains the lofty tone and distance of the professional historian: he really ends up speaking *for* the convicts rather than enabling them to speak for themselves. His subaltern history may be effective, but it lacks the elements of cultural memory which popular society can identify with. This is the value of ancestral narrative, and in his defence Hughes may not be aiming for an expression of cultural memory.

A more serious problem with history as a genre for expressing ancestral narratives is that as a discipline it tends to rely on documentary evidence. Unfortunately, this is simply not available for many ancestral narratives, as Patrick Howard's book demonstrates. Howard is unable to effectively narrate his ancestors' lives *as history* because he lacks the evidence to do so. Keneally also remains beset by the problem of how to work with absences in the record. It means that, often, the narration of Hugh Larkin and Mary Shields' lives is more imaginative than conventionally historical. So Keneally is, ultimately, still inclined to give more space and energy to the story of Young Ireland and the Fenians, leaving the mass of the Irish relegated to the footnotes, or the margins, of history. To the extent that he connects with his ancestors, he does so imaginatively. It becomes more and more clear that ancestral narratives require some imaginative elaboration.

This issue of evidence leads to the major problem of using history as a genre for expressing ancestral narratives. Over the past decade in Australia, a fierce debate has raged among historians and public intellectuals as to the validity of certain interpretations of Australia's past. Keith Windschuttle has taken issue with what he calls the 'orthodox school' of historians who propose a 'genocide thesis'. As Stuart Macintyre reports, Windschuttle refers closely to the historical evidence to argue that massacres of Indigenous Australians have been exaggerated and that

the colonisation of Australia has been overwhelmingly peaceful.⁸⁸ This complements John Howard's rejection of what he calls the 'Black Armband' view of Australian history in his 1996 Menzies lecture. On the other hand, writers such as Macintyre, Robert Manne and Bain Attwood have argued vehemently against Windschuttle.⁸⁹ This extremely conflictual and adversarial argument has been called the 'History Wars' after similar debates elsewhere.⁹⁰

This extreme polarisation of opinion creates a major problem for those interested in expressing ancestral narratives through historical discourse. It means that such narratives are likely to be drawn into a war and will need to choose sides and defend their position rather than narrate the lived experience of their ancestor. The writer must therefore choose between a black armband and a white blindfold.⁹¹ This is partly the problem with *The Great Shame*, although Keneally deals with the Irish tragedy rather than the Indigenous Australian one: he is primarily concerned with arguing for an interpretation of the past. The narration of ancestry is secondary and suffers as a result.

These three problems with history are evident in Keneally's most recent book, *The Commonwealth of Thieves*, which abandons any attempt at ancestral narrative.⁹² Keneally does have some sense of national ancestry in mind – this is evident from the opening quote: 'This thief colony might hereafter become a great empire, whose noble will probably, like the nobles of Rome, boast of their blood.' However, the rest of the book has no explicit focus on ancestry whatsoever – it departs sharply from *The Great Shame* in this regard. He does tell of the injustices of Georgian society and the lack of proportion between crimes and the punishment of transportation.⁹³ However, this book eschews the notion of nationalist ancestry which is present in his fiction. It is, after all, intervening in what is primarily an historical debate where imaginative, elective forms of identification are less viable..

⁸⁸ Stuart MacIntyre and Anna Clark, *The History Wars*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2003, pp 164-5.

⁸⁹ In addition to *The History Wars*, see Robert Manne, *In Denial: The Stolen Generations and the Right*, Australian Quarterly Essay Issue 1, 2001; Robert Manne, *Whitewash: On Keith Windschuttle's Fabrication of Aboriginal History*, Melbourne: Black Inc., 2003; Bain Attwood, *Telling the Truth About Aboriginal History*, Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2005.

⁹⁰ Macintyre and Clark, *History Wars*, pp 8-9.

⁹¹ Aileen Moreton-Robinson, 'Indigenous History Wars and the Virtue of the White Nation', in David Carter (ed), *Ideas Market: An Alternative Take on Australia's Intellectual Life*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2004, p 233.

⁹² Tom Keneally, *The Commonwealth of Thieves: The Sydney Experiment*, Milsons Pt, NSW: Random House, 2005.

In this perspective the success of the settlement at Sydney rests uneasily with the displacement of the Indigenous population. Because Keneally is treading the minefields of the History Wars, he must forego the telling of ancestral narratives.

This is not to say that the attempt is not worth making. Furthermore, the problem stems not so much from Keneally's lack of skill at writing; it is more to do with the fact that the conventions of historical discourse are too constraining for what he really wants to do. This is reinforced by Keneally's own self-assessment; he is on much more secure ground when writing fiction, which is what he excels at.⁹⁴ Despite his difficulty in the discipline of history, 'He is a highly skilled storyteller, and narration is a vital part of history-writing.'⁹⁵ For ancestral narratives to properly elaborate a communal and personal identification with ancestors, historical fiction is a more appropriate form. This way the ancestral narrative can come first, and the negotiations within the contested field of history can be dealt with in terms of ancestry conceived as personal and communal identification.

⁹³ Keneally, *Commonwealth*, pp 27-8.

⁹⁴ At Adelaide Writers' Week (2000), Keneally stated that he did not feel he was cut out to be a historian, implying that *The Great Shame* was hampered by a reliance on historical method.

⁹⁵ Oliver MacDonagh, 'Some Irish Story', *Quadrant*, Vol. 43 No. 3, March 1999, p. 83.