

Chapter 2

Documents Lost and Found: Ancestry in Historical Fiction

Keneally is clearly most successful in combining ancestral narrative and social history. However, the pseudo-fictional elements of *The Great Shame* suggest that historical fiction is more appropriate for the elaboration of ancestral narratives. Like many other examples of revelatory ancestry, *The Great Shame* utilises the ‘lost document’ as a central motif. Keneally tells of finding an 1840 petition from the ‘transportation-widowed’ Esther Larkin, pleading to be sent to New South Wales to rejoin her husband.

The document which stimulated this book [*The Great Shame*] is an 1840 plea from an Irish peasant woman, Esther Larkin, for reunion with her husband. Using the services of a scrivener who knows how to phrase petitions to Dublin Castle, Esther Larkin asks that she and her children should be sent to her husband, who is serving a life sentence in Australia. It is a plea which seemed to me to combine the required feudal subservience with an understated poignancy of loss ...

It is this Hugh Larkin from whom my wife and daughters are descended. I hope that, through exploring Larkin and his transported brethren, both the obscure and the more famous, I may show at least some of the experiences of the Irish diaspora, and some of the crucial events in the new world’s societies.¹

This is precisely the kind of discovery which inspires Keneally and Koch’s ancestral narratives. This chapter demonstrates how ancestral narratives operate as cultural memory by using the ‘lost document’ motif within historical fiction. This leads to an examination of how Keneally and Koch explore identity through ancestral narrative.

In *Bettany’s Book*² Keneally expands his dominant concern with Irish convicts to an interest in pastoral settlement, and the squattocracy. However, he simultaneously undermines the myth of peaceful settlement and retains an interest in subaltern, or neglected, historical actors. The historical narrative of the novel is

¹ Thomas Keneally, *The Great Shame: A History of the Irish in the Old World and the New*, Milsons Point, NSW: Random House, 1998, p. xii.

² Thomas Keneally, *Bettany’s Book*, Milsons Point, NSW: Random House, 2000.

based on the discovery of a lost document, an uncovered ancestral text which reveals a previously unknown ancestry to the descendent. In this way Keneally evokes a historical consciousness which links the experience of Australia to that of Africa, and the past to the present in both countries. This historical ancestry is nicely balanced with his characters' ancestral identification, which is discussed in Chapter Four.

The Bettany ancestral narrative consists of two parts, male and female, which unite to form the family history. It is an historical narrative which is a device to reflect on the past, to re-interpret history, and to evoke ancestry as cultural memory. The major device, or motif, which Keneally uses to explore historiography is that of the 'lost document', just as in *Beware of the Past*. In the case of the Bettanys, the memoirs (and Sarah's letters) were sold as part of an estate. The document containing the ancestral narrative was generously given to the last surviving Bettany, because of its sensitive nature and possible reservations about making it public. This use of the 'lost document' motif is the closest similarity between Koch and Keneally's work, and so it is worth some consideration.

What, precisely, does the use of the 'lost document' motif indicate about these novels? Firstly, it is used as a narrative technique: it allows the relationship of the ancestor to the descendant to become known (at least to the reader) and enables the intertextuality which is an essential part of ancestral narratives. The fact that the document has been 'lost' means that an historical relationship is set up, where the past can be viewed from the perspective of the present. The 'lost document' also reinforces authorial distance, and disguises the artifice of the text. Furthermore, the 'lost document' implies that the document has been discovered; this discovery means the integration of new knowledge, a new perspective on the world and our place in it. This accounts for the apparent explanatory power of ancestral narratives. The sense of discovery which surrounds an ancestral narrative may well be elevated into a full-blown revelation which overcomes a pervasive historical amnesia. Thus, the discovery and revelation aspects of 'lost-document' ancestral narratives function to engage historical consciousness, and enable a kind of awakening where the intricacies and details of the past become manifest in the present. This creates the potential for a new vision of history through discovered narratives, rather than a simple representation of the past.

Christopher Koch also uses the 'lost document' motif in his double-novel, *Beware of the Past*. This is an historicism not unlike that of his earlier novels, which point towards the ancestral narrative in *Out of Ireland*³ and *Highways to a War*⁴. The line from James McAuley's 'Warning' suggests a kind of dangerous ancestry, a festering wound under the surface: this is 'the Stain' at work in a particular family history. The origins of the novel's ancestral narrative lie in the Great Irish Famine of the nineteenth century, and the Irish anticolonial nationalism of the Young Ireland movement. This ancestry leads to the war in Indochina, through Vietnam and Cambodia in the 1960s and 1970s. The ancestral narrative creates a link by negation between nineteenth-century Ireland and twentieth-century Asia, with Australia as a vehicle, a kind of liminal space. Koch is more interested in characterisation than historiography, so his ancestral narratives are more concerned with issues of identity, with a focus on the ancestral relationships themselves rather than the strictly historical implications.

The novels here use historical fiction to reflect on a cultural memory which is less constrained by history's grand narratives. In this way ancestry implies a direct relationship with history through fiction, although this is peripheral to this thesis. For this reason, historical fiction as a form is not a focus of this discussion. What ancestral narratives really do is contribute towards a sense of identity which is conditioned by, or informed by, a relationship with the past. This leads into subsequent chapters, which explore the notion of ancestral identification in terms of nation and gender.

Keneally, *Bettany's Book*

After *The Great Shame* Keneally returned to his most natural form: a melodramatic kind of historical fiction.⁵ In many ways, *Bettany's Book* is an extension of his concerns in *The Great Shame*; in others, it represents a departure from his traditional subject. Its complex plot structure alternates between contemporary narratives set in Sydney and the Sudan, and its historical narrative is composed of a

³ Christopher Koch, *Out of Ireland*, Milsons Point, NSW: Random House, 1999.

⁴ Christopher Koch, *Highways to a War*, Milsons Point, NSW: Random House, 1995.

⁵ Peter Pierce, *Australian Melodramas: Thomas Keneally's Fiction*, St Lucia, Qld.: University of Queensland Press, 1995. Crucially, Pierce uses the term 'melodrama' in a distinctly non-pejorative sense.

confessional type of journal and a collection of letters. This multi-dimensional ancestral narrative is completely based on the 'lost document' motif: the Bettany sisters discover personal documents which produce a sense of revelation or discovery. The story of their ancestors' lives speaks to them at a particular moment of their own lives. In this respect, the novel has close similarities with Koch's *Out of Ireland*, which employs the 'lost document' motif in a similar manner. In fact, Koch originally conceived of his *Beware of the Past* diptych as an ancestral narrative within a single novel, which is precisely what Keneally has done here.

Bettany's Book develops many of the concerns of *The Great Shame*.⁶ His new novel does justice to his subject in the way he knows best, using the conventions of historical fiction. Indeed, much of *The Great Shame*'s Chapter Four ('The Limits of Location') establishes the setting for *Bettany's Book*. This explains the nature of the early colonisation of Australia, which in its official form was deliberately limited due to the continent's massive landmass.

When the line of the Nineteen Counties had been drawn ... it was considered that the five million acres contained therein contained and open for settlement were more than enough for the inhabitants of the colony ... These limits were given a name with a ring: the Limits of Location.⁷

However, by the 1830s many settled 'beyond the Limits' due to financial restrictions, and Keneally explores the role of the indigenous inhabitants who occupied this frontier landscape. In particular, he is interested in the very first contacts between the convict shepherds and the Ngarigo: '... there exists too little of a European record of them'.⁸ This focus on the historical record amplifies the significance of the lost document in the ancestral narrative. History is central in the depiction of the Female Factory, and the gross nepotism and corruption of the Pallmires reinforces the link to the historical Bells.⁹

⁶ Indeed, when I spoke to Keneally at the 2000 Adelaide Writer's Week this was how he introduced his new work, as specifically emanating from his interest in Brodribb and the his father's specific form of protest crime.

⁷ Keneally, *Bettany*, p. 45. There is an implicit connection between the Limits of Location and 'the Pale', which defined the early colonisation of Ireland. In this way the settlement of Australia drew on the precedent of that of Ireland, reinforcing the idea of palimpsest: Australia's colonisation contained traces of the occupation of Ireland.

⁸ Keneally, *Bettany*, p. 58.

⁹ Keneally, *Shame*, pp. 77-8.

Bettany's Book responds to the dominant pastoralist myth in Australian history, and the disillusion following the implosion of this myth. In this way the ancestral narrative acts as an active type of historiography, an anti-Romanticism which undermines the pastoralist myth much like *Bring Larks and Heroes*.¹⁰ In the early section of his journal Bettany's desires and hopes in settling new country are expressed as a sense of communion with the earth during his first night. 'I felt the air across my chest like the hand of a father. I was the Englishman overcome with enthusiasm for this barbarous place. I believe that people at Home would have said: this is merely the heathenism which too ripe an alien adventure will raise in the young mind'.¹¹ This is palpably romantic: the landscape is characterised as a second Eden, offering Bettany the opportunity to find material and spiritual sustenance in a place untouched by Western civilisation. Dimp mentions the darkness she discovers in the heart of the memoirs: '*I began by thinking he [Bettany] was relating an idyll, a pastorage. But then there was this extraordinary frankness about the threat from the evil at the edges, at the edges of the landscape and at the edges of his own soul*'.¹²

The potential for social reformation is also a part of the pastoralist myth, and this is characterised by the relationship between Bettany and his overseer, Long. When they first meet and choose stock, 'the pace at which two men, co-operating together, being of one mind, could put together flocks, mobs and necessaries excited me'.¹³ He nostalgically recalls 'those splendid days' of 'raw and squalid bush democracy' with relish, and a certain wistfulness: 'Charlie and I believed we were reforming the earth, and blazed with confidence that in this new and immaculate world we would be made new, immaculate men'.¹⁴ In the new world men can be friends and partners where their different status would normally preclude this.¹⁵

An important aspect of settling the new country was the expectation of material benefits: Australia offered opportunities for those who would have no chance to amass wealth in the Old World. This expectation of financial reward is

¹⁰ For a discussion of this in the earlier novel, see Laurie Hergenhan, *Unnatural Lives: Studies in Australian Convict Fiction*, St Lucia, Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 1983, p. 147.

¹¹ Keneally, *Bettany*, p. 102.

¹² Keneally, *Bettany*, p. 435; italics in original.

¹³ Keneally, *Bettany*, p. 146.

¹⁴ Keneally, *Bettany*, p. 156.

embodied in the friendship and business partnership between Bettany and Mr Barley, a wool merchant who dreams with Bettany about becoming rich old men: ‘When I bid for your wool ... I bid for a lifetime of wool, year after year until we are old men. Old men blessed by fortune.’¹⁶ The final aspect of Bettany’s pastoralist dream is having the company of the perfect helpmeet, Phoebe Finlay, the daughter of a rich Exclusive landowner. Despite the absence of the bride’s parents, who disown her, the wedding promises success and serves to ‘convince those who undergo the rite that for the moment they lie at the centre of nature and of God’s plan’.¹⁷ However, just as Keneally builds up this anticipation of a pastoralist idyll, he also foreshadows the destruction of the myth.

The expectation of a wonderful marriage is the first element of the myth to crumble. What destroys the marriage is the sudden onset of diphtheria, which kills both Phoebe and George, the Bettanys’ son.¹⁸ In addition, the expectation of material reward is undermined when the Bank of Australia collapses and creates financial ruin for Finlay senior.¹⁹ Bettany increasingly realises the dark potential for human malice. From his first social contact in the country, Bettany’s new home is a tainted Eden: he meets Goldspink (an untrustworthy convict shepherd) and two absconders.²⁰ Their presence indicates that the social rehabilitation Bettany dreams of will not be unmitigated; the *ceilidh* that celebrates the marriage of two convicts amply demonstrates this.²¹ Treated as a special guest while present, Bettany realises later through eavesdropping that his servants occupy an entirely different universe from his, that the chasm is unbridgeable. The social barriers imported from Europe are not so easily dismantled by the colonial dream.

Finally, it is the displacement and destruction of Indigenous Australian culture that delivers the most devastating blow to the pastoralist myth. Soon after his naturalist euphoria Bettany is brought jolting down to earth: ‘I tripped on a sandstone ledge, and now felt my skin broken and the great joy drain from me. “What is this?” I was forced to ask myself. I wanted to get back to Hobbes and

¹⁵ This relationship is very similar to the sharing of the pastoralist dream by Devereux and James Langford in *Out of Ireland*.

¹⁶ Keneally, *Bettany*, p. 185.

¹⁷ Keneally, *Bettany*, p. 257.

¹⁸ Keneally, *Bettany*, p. 404.

¹⁹ Keneally, *Bettany*, p. 371.

²⁰ Keneally, *Bettany*, pp. 106-7.

²¹ Keneally, *Bettany*, p. 453.

dress'.²² It is possessed with this spirit of disillusion that he meets the orphan boy he calls Felix, whose mother has been poisoned because she no longer serves the purposes of a local shepherd.²³ Felix symbolises the dispossessed Indigenous population, but he is also a hybrid figure: his father was certainly white, although this man's actual identity is unclear to start with.²⁴

The legacy of contact history is most concretely embodied in Felix. Jonathan himself gives the child this name,²⁵ which begins the process of colonial paternalism that constitutes the imperialist civilising mission. He is thus a Conrad-like character caught up in the grand narrative of colonialism but with little personal agency to effect any major change. His efforts to protect Felix are well-intentioned, and he has an early opportunity to do so when he emerges from Goldspink's hut on his first morning in the area, to find Felix nearly drowned and Goldspink apparently rescuing him.²⁶ Bettany's first instinct on finding Felix is to return him to the land and people of his birth, but Jonathan feels he is not accepted back, and returns to collect him. 'As I went I felt a strange delight that the little fellow was not lost to me. I was reclaiming him with a new seriousness of intent now'.²⁷ He intends to provide for Felix's future in the best way he can, and this is through giving him the benefit of a Western education. This 'civilising' mission is the essence of colonialism.

When Bettany takes Felix to Mr Loosely's academy, he experiences a euphoric hopefulness similar to when he first discovers his new land. Bettany and Loosely are kindred spirits – both descendants of convicts and lovers of Horace, they also share similar political ideals: they feel that colonialism is a unique kind of social experiment which can fulfil human potential in the Enlightenment tradition. This is perfectly in line with early colonial nationalism. Bettany and Loosely feel themselves to be executing a grand social experiment by giving Felix the opportunities of education, and for Jonathan it is a personal matter. 'I was delighted,

²² Keneally, *Bettany*, p. 102.

²³ Keneally, *Bettany*, p. 103.

²⁴ The general conclusion is that Goldspink fathered Felix, although there is some hint that it was Bettany himself, and the mystery is never conclusively solved. Within the narrative, there is no concrete historical evidence either way, which underscores the potential for historical fiction to inhabit history in diverse ways.

²⁵ Keneally, *Bettany*, p. 103.

²⁶ Keneally, *Bettany*, p. 111.

²⁷ Keneally, *Bettany*, p. 114.

being party now to a grand social experiment ... I felt that every shilling I handed Loosely celebrated my father, and his quiet belief in the civilised impulse'.²⁸

Initially the Bettany-Loosely experiment is a notable success; Felix shows signs of healing from his trauma, and his reading from *A Child's Life of Isaac Newton* shows his academic potential to be very high.²⁹ His second visit shows Felix's excellent progress in arithmetic³⁰, but Keneally foreshadows the impending disaster when Loosely remarks that many former convicts have complained of Felix's presence, although Loosely stood up for them against the Exclusives.³¹ On his final visit, Bettany realises that his experiment has completely failed; Loosely has succumbed to slurs on his reputation and opium addiction, and his school has fallen into utter chaos.³² Felix epitomises the inadequacy of the pastoralist myth, because Bettany's best attempts to educate him and provide for his future ultimately fail, and the best he can do for the boy is help him escape the country of his birth to start a new life in Singapore.

The image that most completely shatters the pastoralist myth is the remains of the massacre that is belatedly brought to Bettany's attention. The tragic, climactic and violent outcome of this early contact is not directly represented, but Bettany discovers it well after the event. Soon after Shegog's death Bettany reluctantly distributes carbines to his shepherds for their self-defence, but also attempts to give a pictorial treaty to the Ngarigo to help smooth relations.³³ However, he turns out to be correct in his idea that 'my convenient hesitation on this matter might return to savage us all'.³⁴ The vast distance between Bettany and his servants is starkly illustrated when he is visited by Reverend Howie, the recently-appointed Protector of Aborigines, who claims to have information that Bettany might not have had access to.³⁵ They then travel as a group to a nearby outcrop of glacial rock formations, where Bettany describes a horrible scene: the whole place is littered

²⁸ Keneally, *Bettany*, p. 122. Felix's experience of hybridity and mimicry epitomise a classic post-colonial condition closely related to that of Arabanoo, the Indigenous man taken under the wing of Governor Philip in *The Playmaker*.

²⁹ Keneally, *Bettany*, p. 187.

³⁰ Keneally, *Bettany*, p. 246.

³¹ Keneally, *Bettany*, p. 244.

³² Keneally, *Bettany*, p. 348.

³³ Keneally, *Bettany*, p. 227. This pictorial treaty has a historical precedent which attempted to regulate contact and insist on equality before the law.

³⁴ Keneally, *Bettany*, p. 229. Keneally's use of the heavily colonialist term 'savage' is notable here, especially in a space beyond civilisation.

³⁵ Keneally, *Bettany*, p. 361.

with bones that look like Sydney's fallen frangipani petals from a distance.³⁶ Their ancestral narrative forces the Bettany sisters to consider an aspect of Australian history that they may never have confronted before. This enables them to potentially reshape themselves as Australians.

Bettany's Book employs the motif of the 'lost document' to synthesise its various historical narratives, and the novel establishes an intimate historical relationship where the past and the present are brought into close dialogue with each other. The discovery of the Bettany memoirs allows the sisters to construct a personal relationship with Australian history, and thus the ancestral narrative in *Bettany's Book* operates as a site of cultural memory. Early in the novel Keneally establishes the contemporary historical context against which the Bettany ancestral narrative will be related. Thus the Bettany sisters provide the starting-point for the dialogue between the present and the past which Keneally is about to narrate.

Amplified by the use of the 'lost document' motif, the narrative elements of the Bettany documents are clear. Jonathan's journal is written quite self-consciously, and the position of speaker and audience comes to the fore. His narrative is more precisely a memoir than a journal, because it is written some time after the events have taken place, with the advantage of years of hindsight to help reflect on the incidents. The emphasis is on reflection rather than straightforward description. This enables him to build the events into a climax where his wife and son's deaths and his own attempted suicide are quickly redeemed by the saving graces of Sarah Bernard; it is partly this sense of impending cataclysm which attracts Dimp to the story. She becomes interested by the problematic truth-value of the narrative, and its intimate relation to history. '*On the one hand a modern person might suspect him of telling less than the truth about "the Moth people", to use his own term. On the other, as his tale progresses, he does not save himself from blame or self-reproach. In this he is a halfway reliable narrator, surely*'.³⁷ Dimp takes it for granted that Bettany's memoir is a biased narrative, embedded with post-Enlightenment ideas of modernity and progress, but it is precisely the dissolution of these worldviews that Keneally narrates through Bettany. Dimp and Prim's differing positions as modern readers act as counterpoints to the speaking position of Bettany's memoirs.

³⁶ Keneally, *Bettany*, pp. 363-4.

³⁷ Keneally, *Bettany*, p. 435.

Sarah Bernard's epistles contribute in a different way to this historical narrative. In these letters the reader hears a voice which is often silenced in history and literature on Australia's convict days: that of the female convict, and her history as narrative is underscored by the epistolary form in which it is presented in contrast to Jonathan's memoir. These letters chronologically tell the story of Sarah's early time as a convict, narrating in particular detail the conditions of life in the so-called Female Factory, as well as the acute grief she feels in being separated from her close friend Alice Aldread, to whom the letters are addressed. There is an element of the confessional: introducing the letters to her sister, Dimp describes them as '*of the revealing kind all of us maybe write in hours of stress but which we might hope to get rid of before we die*'.³⁸ The letters provide an intriguing counterpoint to Jonathan's memoir, telling of a life far removed from his relative security and luxury. They are evenly interspersed throughout the main narrative, and sent to the Sudan whenever Dimp can find the time to transcribe them.

Sarah's letters are an even more self-conscious narrative than Jonathan's memoirs. A sense of voice is dominant: the first letter opens plaintively, '*My God that I should find myself lacking your company and surrounded by these people here!*'³⁹ The 'your company' referred to is that of Alice Aldread, Sarah's closest friend on the convict ship, who is sent to the madhouse. The nature of their relationship is the object of speculation; Dimp's research uncovers a letter from the ship's captain complaining bitterly about the evangelical surgeon assigned to the ship. Disallowing many freedoms (including music, dance, and free relations between the sexes) made the situation of the prisoners worse. '*I don't know what he thought he was preventing, after all. For the women ... sought unnatural solace from each other.*'⁴⁰ This is one of the few veiled references to the possibility that Sarah and Alice may have been lovers, and here Keneally subtly represents the great unspoken shame of Australia's convict days. As Robert Hughes also identified, homosexuality did not dare to speak its name in historical records left

³⁸ Keneally, *Bettany*, p. 90.

³⁹ Keneally, *Bettany*, p. 131.

⁴⁰ Keneally, *Bettany*, p. 130.

by the System.⁴¹ This narrative serves to tell a side of history that has been long neglected, yet it also contains its own absences.

Sarah's epistolary narrative only deals with her time in Australia, and completely neglects how she came to be there. This is another example of the kind of amnesia suffered by Koch's Kathleen O'Rahilly, as well as some of Keneally's other characters. There is a special problem with Sarah's narrative at the other end also: when she is together with Bettany and her correspondence with Alice has ended, her narrative becomes subsumed within that of Jonathan's – her story begins to be told by him. The dominance of the male narrative underscores the silence of other voices in Australian literature and history. This is evident in the episode where Jonathan presses Sarah to tell her story, and particularly how she came to be convicted of theft. She is afraid he will not believe her, because she is actually innocent of the crime. 'The only convenient thing in New South Wales is to have committed the crime they accuse you of. Then you are fitted to the place. But the innocent are misfitted! Nothing they say is believed, and so they are reduced to silence.'⁴² Jonathan is extremely interested in hearing her story, and will not allow her to keep her silence: 'I felt I could not know enough and would never know half.'⁴³ It appears that he wants to *record* her past, and realises that (like the thousands of other convicts in her situation) her life story is not likely to be told. This is related to his ethics about contact with the Indigenous people in his area; he is shocked that contact history will never be recorded and he wants to rectify the situation to the best of his ability. A central aspect of his guilt and self-reproach is that he knows he occupies a relatively dominant position in society, and desperately wants to ameliorate the effects of social injustice.

As well as undermining pastoralism through discovered memoirs and letters, *Bettany's Book* relates Australia to Africa rather than depicting historical experience as isolated in one place. The narrative dealing with Australia's past predominantly focuses on the situation of Bettany, the convicts and the indigenous people in Bettany's area and their early contact with Europeans. The contemporary African narrative deals with the relationship between the East and the West, and the war and poverty which aid organisations seek to ease with all the best

⁴¹ Robert Hughes, *The Fatal Shore: A History of the Transportation of Convicts to Australia, 1787-1868*, London: Collins Harvill, 1987, pp. 264-72.

⁴² Keneally, *Bettany*, pp. 440-1.

intentions. This section will discuss the evocation of historical consciousness primarily in terms of past Australia versus present Africa, but the distinction is not so clearly cut. The narratives also evoke Australia in the present (with reference to the current plight of Indigenous Australians) as well as Africa's past, where many Africans were taken as slaves away from their homeland. Keneally emphasises the dialectic between past and present, linking Australia and Africa in terms of their similar post-colonial conditions, while also drawing attention to their different circumstances. This ancestry evokes a complex history and suggests deep currents and flows between otherwise distant places.

On the one hand Keneally depicts a relatively familiar contemporary Australia, foregrounding the political and social differences between the Bettany sisters and Brendan when Prim visits Sydney.⁴⁴ Sydney also provides the backdrop for Dimp's moral decisions. The same lawyer friend who gave Dimp the Bettany memoirs excites and inspires her with a brief reflection on the Mabo case (which was current affairs at the time) – this supports the Indigenous position and enrages Bren's conservative friends.⁴⁵ The historical narrative related in the Bettany memoirs is deeply concerned with the distinction between bond and free as well as issues of free will and disempowerment. Keneally also positions this narrative in a close relationship to the contemporary African narrative which revolves around Prim, and so this Australian historical experience is not isolated from the rest of the world.

The more recent history of Africa demonstrates that the experiences of slavery bear upon the present in powerful ways. The presence of servant boys at the Colonel's residence ignites in Prim an obsession that will not be allayed: she cannot get the idea of slavery out of her mind, and feels she must do something about it. Eventually she experiences exactly the same thing as her ancestor Jonathan Bettany: events spin out of her control despite her good intentions. This leads directly to the grand conclusion, which completely undermines Prim's world. Her lover Sherif is abducted and tortured by the government and Prim must leave the country to have him released. The recent history of the Sudan is put into stark relief by the Bettany ancestral narrative.

⁴³ Keneally, *Bettany*, p. 440.

⁴⁴ Keneally, *Bettany*, pp. 267-70.

⁴⁵ Keneally, *Bettany*, p. 426-9.

In *Bettany's Book* Sudanese history lives strongly in the present. All the references to slavery evoke the fact that Africa was hugely depopulated by the European slave trade. This is obliquely referred to with reference to Sherif's *fiancée* in the United States, a descendant of slaves. Within this community of 'respectable blacks', 'Memory was both muted and urgent in them ... with one side of their souls they rejoiced in their enslaved history specifically because ... "it had house-trained them"'.⁴⁶ This deflects attention away from Sherif's own memory; the memory of slavery is deep within him and surfaces in his particular and forceful sense of identity. 'I'm something of a patriot. My grandfather was a member of the White Flag League. Trans-racial, trans-sectarian. He was young, he was dashing, he believed in Woodrow Wilson's principles. Self-determination for the Sudanese. He would weep if he saw what has befallen us.'⁴⁷ Sherif's cultural memory begins with his father and stretches back to his ancestors, just as the Bettany sisters' ancestry stretches back to the days of the chain and lash.

This concern with the past and present of the Sudan underscores a similar situation in Australia. When Prim first meets Sherif, he remarks, 'The Sudan of the southern hemisphere, Australia ... Another desert country'.⁴⁸ When she meets his cousin Dr Hamadain (a government official), he points out both the similarity and the difference between the Sudan and Australia.

'It is charming to have met you ... I know you are not English but in a sense post-colonial like us. I believe your experience has been a more constructive one, and though your nation is characterised by huge tracts of desert like ours, you do not have the lines of the starving, no matter how severe the drought.'⁴⁹

The key phrase is that Australia is 'in a sense post-colonial like us'. Keneally directly compares Australia and Africa with reference to culture, society and politics, but most particularly in terms of historical experience. What this does is present Australian history not as an isolated realm but as an experience of the past which is contiguous with that of other places, such as the Sudan. Here Keneally demonstrates a different approach to national history from that of his

⁴⁶ Keneally, *Bettany*, p. 203.

⁴⁷ Keneally, *Bettany*, p. 67.

⁴⁸ Keneally, *Bettany*, p. 65.

⁴⁹ Keneally, *Bettany*, p. 72.

earlier fiction, and it foreshadows his transformation of national identity through ancestry, which Chapter Four discusses.

This chapter has begun to explore the ancestral narrative in *Bettany's Book* with specific reference to the relationship between ancestry and history. This evokes important questions about nationalism in Australia and Africa, two parts of the world which Keneally feels close to. In this way, ancestry is a type of cultural memory which offers a way 'into history'.

However, Keneally's real contribution is that he presents history as more than just a lost document which is found and allows a brief sense of revelation. For Keneally, history is not reified, abstract, or objectified. History involves everyone – it is a realm to which all people can and should have access. It is by using ancestral narrative that he offers this popular, democratised notion of history, where historical narratives have a personal element to which all people can relate. This means that the true function of ancestral narratives is to help contribute towards a definition of national identity.⁵⁰

Bettany's Book displays the importance of the ancestral 'lost document' to a construction of Dimp and Prim's personal life-stories. The Bettany ancestral narrative actually contributes to the sisters' sense of who they are, and how they fit in the world. Thus, ancestral narratives are able to contribute to the lives of descendants; through exploring their ancestry people actually explore who they are. Chapter Four will return to *Bettany's Book* to explore more precisely how Keneally's depiction of ancestry helps to both construct and transform national identity. Firstly, however, Koch has a similar notion of ancestry as a site of cultural memory which is strongly related to popular history.

Koch, *Beware of the Past*

The past is alive, and full of juices. It continues in a dimension which neither human wishes nor human indifference can affect, even if the relics it leaves behind are dead – just as our own precious objects will soon, soon, be dead. But ... I felt vaguely threatened by the past, and was affected by its melancholy.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Keneally suggested the link between history and nationalism in an interview: 'My theory of Australian history is that the reason we are such yobbos and such unbuttoned, boozing hoons is that we're Georgian.' See Candida Baker, *Yacker 2: Australian Writers Talk About Their Work*, Sydney: Pan, 1987, p. 123.

⁵¹ Koch, *Highways*, p. 42.

Like Keneally, Koch depicts ancestral narratives which operate as cultural memory.⁵² He employs the 'lost document' motif in precisely the same way as Keneally: to fill in an absence, and more precisely to reveal 'the Stain'. There are distinct historical resonances in Koch's earlier novels, although these are not directly related to ancestry. It is in his two most recent novels that Koch constructs a full-blown ancestral narrative which links them into a double-novel, or what he calls a 'diptych'.⁵³ The overall title, *Beware of the Past*, is taken from the James McAuley poem 'Warning', which foregrounds the notion of ancestry as agonisingly dangerous, a festering wound. *Out of Ireland* narrates the roots of the ancestral connection in terms of the Great Famine and the Irish nationalist response to it. The result is the descendant who ventures into Indochina during the conflict of the 1970s, so these two historical contexts are linked in a way that is clear only to the reader. Ultimately, the interest in the two novels lies not in their inhabitation of the past, but in the connection established between Devereux and Langford: in this way the chapter will gesture towards the next part of the thesis, 'Ancestral Identification'.

Koch has described himself as 'obsessed with the past'⁵⁴, and many of his novels depict a cultural memory which is based in Tasmania, his home island. In the essay 'A Tasmanian Tone', he argues for considering Tasmanian writing differently from that of the mainland: 'there's a regional tone in writing set in Tasmania: a quality that the island stamps on it'.⁵⁵ Nearly all of Koch's novels have some connection with the island, and he is particularly concerned with Tasmania's history as a penal colony. For Koch, the convict past is muted, but always present, and his early novels evoke this inheritance in poignant and powerful moments. This history lives as cultural memory for many Tasmanians: history and ancestry are inextricably intertwined.

⁵² This point is lost on commentators who simply attack Koch for having 'cannibalised' the 'historical source material'. See Cassandra Pybus, 'A Failure of Imagination', *Australian Book Review*, November 1999, p. 28. On the other hand, 'To seek to interpret his work according to whether "historical records show..." seems... both ludicrous and beside the point.' Sophie Masson, 'Letter to the Editor', *Australian Book Review*, December 1999 – January 2000, p. 4.

⁵³ Henrickson elaborates on the many crucial links between the two. Noel Henrickson, 'On the Tides of History', *Quadrant*, April 2001, p. 56.

⁵⁴ Adrian Mitchell, 'Interview With Christopher Koch', *Australian Literary Studies*, 18.1, May 1997, p. 68.

⁵⁵ Christopher Koch, *Crossing the Gap: Memories and Reflections*, Milsons Point, NSW: Random House, 1987, p 108.

Koch's debut novel, *The Boys in the Island*, does not make this explicit connection to ancestry, but its evocation of Tasmanian history and the implications for the present are worthy of note. Tasmania's isolation both from the rest of Australia as well as the world is based on a unique history: 'No wars, no disturbances have ever reached the island: no horrors at all, since the last convict transport made the long run from England, when the island's dreaded name was Van Diemen's Land, in that bad, smelly old century of rum and the lash'.⁵⁶ The convict past has serious implications for Francis Cullen, the protagonist of the novel. As he grows up, he comes to know Tasmania as a constricting place, and yearns to go to the Mainland where he feels he will be free. This is identical to Michael Langford's yearning for the outside world.

The notion of Tasmania as a prison is strongly expressed by John Mitchel, the Irish political prisoner of the mid-nineteenth century who was a major inspiration for Devereux in *Out of Ireland*. 'Mitchel's thoughts ... were bent from the first on escape; he longed to get back to Europe, out of a society he considered barbaric, and a British prison.'⁵⁷ *The Boys in the Island* adopts and develops this depiction of Tasmania as a prison as early as 1958. Cullen feels an intuitive sense of being held captive in Tasmania: he wants to forget his humiliating adolescent experience with Heather Miles, and escape to the Mainland where he feels he will be able to grow into a man. Indeed, the landscape itself is constricting, with its human settlements perched precariously between hills and sea. 'He would break free from the hillbound circle of the island: now a mocking prison, its every corner and scene stabbing him with the joke.'⁵⁸ This depiction of Tasmania as prison is only connected to ancestry in the most remote sense. Koch suggests the potential for ancestral memory in a potent image on the novel's final page: 'a wind-tormented young eucalypt in a garden tossed its thin body backwards and forwards, as though trying to break free from its roots'.⁵⁹ This metaphor for the ancestry of Tasmanians gives them a personal relationship to history. Even in this early writing Koch is really only using history as a way to foreground the importance of personal identity.

Koch's 1985 novel, *The Doubleman*, represents ancestry much more directly as well as presenting a more potent vision of the past's resonance in the present.

⁵⁶ Christopher Koch, *The Boys in the Island*, Milsons Point: Random House, 1958, p. 8.

⁵⁷ Koch, *Crossing*, p. 108.

⁵⁸ Koch, *Boys*, p. 122.

The main character and narrator of the novel, Richard Miller, observes the palpable presence of the past in Tasmania.

Sometimes it seemed to me that the fusty odour of fear, the stench of the prison ships, was still in Hobart; and a tragic, heavy air, an air of unbearable sorrow, even in sunshine, hung over the ruined, sandstone penitentiary and the dark blue bay at Port Arthur, south of Hobart, where the tourists went. Was it possible that the spirits of the convicts were silently clustered in that air, weighting it like sacking? Were the floggings and the shackles still invisibly here, hanging above the dark green bush? Still somehow repeated, for eternity?⁶⁰

This sense of haunting is powerful – the past is not buried, but lives on in the landscape and the lives of Tasmanians. This is crucial because Koch directly connects this living history to the ancestry of Miller and his cousin, Brian Brady. Miller discovers his ancestry despite his mother's attempts to obscure the truth: 'But she was lying, as so many Tasmanians lied then ... She was hiding Michael Brady, an Irish political prisoner transported in 1848; not only my ancestor, but Brian Brady's too: our hidden great-great grandfather'.⁶¹ The past is repeated in the present: it is not just their common ancestry that draws Brady and Miller together, but their experience of 'penal servitude' at a Christian Brothers school in Hobart.

The 'penal servitude' Miller and Brady experience is at the hands of Brother Kinsella, who is depicted as a sadistic bully. Kinsella inflicts upon Brady a 'strapping': corporal punishment much like the flogging of the convicts. Just like the heroic convict, the 'stone man', Brady is resilient to the abuse: 'He has been strapped by Kinsella every day for a month, without showing any sign of pain; and to extract such a sign is plainly the Navy's deepest desire'.⁶² This 'contest of wills' reflects the battle between the brutal flogger and the noble convict in novels such as *Death of a River Guide*.⁶³ The Tasmanian past lives on through institutionalised violence, in schools rather than prisons, but again it is the personal connection across generations which takes precedence over mere historical echoes.

Another evocation of the convict past has less to do with human malice and more with the sad fate of Tasmania's early European inhabitants. Miller recounts

⁵⁹ Koch, *Boys*, p. 198.

⁶⁰ Christopher Koch, *The Doubleman*, London: Chatto & Windus, 1985, p. 25.

⁶¹ Koch, *Doubleman*, p. 26. It seems that Brady was a prototype for Devereux.

⁶² Koch, *Doubleman*, p. 29.

⁶³ Richard Flanagan, *Death of a River Guide*, Ringwood, Vic.: McPhee Gribble, 1994.

the polio epidemic in terms of the horror of the convict days. ‘Poor Van Diemen’s Land! The leg-irons and the lash of a hundred years before still hung near, like bad dreams; now, suburban and respectable under your new name, you found your children in irons once more, tormented by pains more searching than the lash.’⁶⁴ Here the resonance of the past is depicted with particular pathos, a human element which makes the fate of the island and its people all the more tragic. Miller relives the experience of his ancestor in a new form, and the past is repeated in a shared experience.

In ‘A Tasmanian Tone’, Koch recounts how Tasmanians felt like ‘victims ... of a colonial habit of mind – always seeking landscapes other than our own. And Vivian said ... that a country and its landscapes perhaps don’t fully exist until they’ve been written about – until poets and novelists create them.’⁶⁵ He implies that Smith and himself are two of the writers who thus create the place and strike ‘A Tasmanian Tone’. Koch is also deeply concerned with the social and historical situation, the role of people within the place. In this way, the issue of repressed convict ancestry feeds right into Koch’s fiction in novels such as *Highways to a War*.

Himself a Tasmanian, Raymond Barton realises why John refused to admit his ancestry. ‘Robert Devereux was in the Langford blood; but he wasn’t wanted there. So he was hidden, but not destroyed. Many other Tasmanian families did the same with their convict ancestors. It was called “hiding the Stain”.’⁶⁶ Barton only allows the journal to be published after the death of the last Langford brother: ‘Out of respect for him, and knowing he would not want the family’s ancient secret displayed to the public, I have not published until now. Fellow-Tasmanians will understand’.⁶⁷ There is a clannishness about this last phrase which suggests the pervasive cultural memory of a small and tight island community. The memories of the past are only acknowledged subliminally.

Convict ancestry was considered respectable (or even heroic) much earlier in other parts of Australia than it was in Tasmania. ‘The convict past is like a wound, scarring the whole inner life of Tasmanians. It’s taken lightly nowadays; but Tasmanians of my generation remember when the suspicion of convict ancestry was

⁶⁴ Koch, *Doubleman*, p. 8.

⁶⁵ Christopher Koch, *Crossing the Gap*, Milsons Point: Random House, 1987, p. 106.

⁶⁶ Koch, *Ireland*, p ix.

a matter of real shame and anguish – even up to the 1950s. That past was hated.’⁶⁸ This trend also percolates out into the wider culture and society, and Koch recounts the drive towards collective amnesia: how Port Arthur was ransacked for building materials and almost destroyed, and how one respectable merchant tore his ancestor’s page out of the convict register in an attempt to erase the past.⁶⁹ Although Koch refers to Tasmania here, this collective amnesia also reflects upon the convict history of the whole of Australia. While the past is erased or debased, evocations of the “Stain” indicate a partial recovery at least.

These earlier works offer an important way of identifying some of Koch’s enduring concerns. He is first and foremost a Tasmanian writer, who narrates the unique historical experience of his home island. This history is characterised by the cruelty and tragedy of the convict days, and it has a palpable presence in the present. However, like much cultural memory, it is also characterised by absence, since many Tasmanians have traditionally sought to reject and sublimate negative experiences. Convictry in Tasmania is often relegated to the dark corners of historical amnesia: it is a ‘Stain’ on an otherwise respectable history. Most importantly, though, this process is endemically bound up in the personal ancestry of many Tasmanians: the rejection of family history goes hand-in-hand with a willed absence of any conception of ancestry. This significance is more personal than historical. Tasmanian ancestors are anti-heroes who are purged from memory, and this idea is further developed in Koch’s most recent novels. Bringing the “Stain” to light is thus a process of recovery and rehabilitation.

Highways to a War and *Out of Ireland* represent Koch’s more substantial use of ancestral narrative as cultural memory to link the past with the present. The two form a double-novel, a ‘diptych.’ Each novel may be read individually, since ‘both are self-sufficient narratives. However, it’s my hope that those who read both will see the larger pattern I’ve attempted to weave’.⁷⁰ Reading the novels as companion volumes foregrounds the ancestral narrative. *Highways to a War* tells of Michael Langford, a combat cameraman whose life is a series of secrets and mysteries: he is a man with cloudy motives. These secrets are revealed in *Out of Ireland*, which is the journal of Robert Devereux, Langford’s hidden ancestor. Together, the two novels

⁶⁷ Koch, *Ireland*, p. x.

⁶⁸ Koch, *Crossing*, p. 111.

⁶⁹ Koch, *Crossing*, pp. 112-3.

are called *Beware of the Past*, which reflects Koch's notion of ancestry as a traumatic and painful cultural memory. This phrase comes from James McAuley's 'Warning', a poem which is at the heart of the diptych.

Beware of the past;
 Within it lie
 Dark haunted pools
 That lure the eye
To drown in grief and madness.
 Things that are gone,
 Or never were,
 The Adversary
 Weaves to a snare,
The mystery of sadness.

 Fear to recall
 Those terrible dreams
 That sickened the heart
 Or tore with screams
The shocked affrighted air;
 Nor let your mind
 Turn back to feel
 The cold remorse
 Nothing can heal,
Whose wisdom is despair.

 Abandon the past;
 Whoever gropes
 For comfort there
 Will lose his hopes.
The cruel memories stand
 Like stone-faced gods
 Watchful and grim,
 Row upon row –
 But raise them no hymn,
No sacrificing hand.⁷¹

'Warning' expresses the notion of ancestry as a wound most poignantly. The poem is literally that – a warning to amateur historians to beware of the past: Mitchell suggests that MacAuley 'cautions against not accommodating the past'.⁷² This is a notion of history as dangerous and treacherous, composed of 'dark haunted pools',

⁷⁰ Koch, *Ireland*, author's note, p. 704.

⁷¹ James McAuley, 'Warning' in Leonie Kramer (ed.), *James McAuley: Poetry, Essays and Personal Commentary*, St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1988, p. 124.

⁷² Adrian Mitchell, '“Deep Ancestral Voices”: Inner and Outer Narratives in Christopher J. Koch's *Highways to a War*', *Australian Literary Studies*, 18.1, May 1997, p. 6.

collections of images which 'lure the eye' and confound the observer's self-control, so they 'drown in grief or madness'. The past is an illusion woven by 'the Adversary', the prince of illusion. McAuley speaks of 'terrible dreams' and 'cruel memories'; the past lives in the memory above all else. McAuley wants to 'Abandon the past', to leave it behind since it can offer no comfort or sense of hope. The past takes the form of 'stone-faced gods/ Watchful and grim': this depicts the past as an Easter-Island kind of pagan monument which should be abandoned because there is little trace of humanism in their aspect. At the same time he warns that this rejection carries its own dangers.

In this late poem McAuley represents a traditional response to the convict past: denial through repression and sublimation. He was not talking about history as an institutionalised discipline, or the history in textbooks: he was talking about history as cultural memory and ancestry as a personalised manifestation of the convict past. He might well agree with Koch that 'The past is like a trunk in the attic here, very close at hand; ancestors are not far away.'⁷³ McAuley's advice might be to leave the trunk in the attic, to consign convict ancestry to the dustbin of history despite the dangers of doing so. According to Koch himself, 'Mike's trying to get back to the past; the most pathetic of all fallacies.'⁷⁴

This idea of ancestry as a dangerous wound is what frames the central connection in *Beware of the Past*. This is precisely the motivation for the forced amnesia Koch is concerned with in almost all his writing. He writes that the situation of Australia 'produces a pathos of absence; so that the essential Australian experience emerges as one where a European consciousness, with European ancestral memories, is confronted by the mask of a strange land, and by a society still not certain of its style.'⁷⁵ McAuley epitomises the impetus towards this 'pathos of absence', a clinging to European cultural memory combined with the desire to forget or erase the past because confronting it would be too traumatic. An ancestral narrative like *Beware of the Past* serves to compensate for this absence, to fill the gaps by revitalising cultural memory through recovered ancestral narratives.

⁷³ Koch, *Crossing*, p. 87.

⁷⁴ Mitchell, 'Interview', 1997, p. 71.

⁷⁵ Koch, *Crossing*, p. 95.

Irish-Australian ancestral narratives grow out of a specific migration history, so it is useful to cast ancestry in terms of roots and fruits, or origins and results.⁷⁶ This fits well with Koch's double-novel, since 'origins' refers to *Out of Ireland*, where 'results' refers to *Highways to a War*. The former novel narrates the origins of the Langford ancestry, which stem from the experiences of the Great Famine of the mid-nineteenth century, and the Irish nationalist response to it. On the other hand, *Highways to a War* tells of Michael Langford himself, Devereux's direct descendant and the inheritor of many of his characteristics. Thus there is an historical or chronological progression between the fictional worlds of these two novels which contravenes the actual order of their publication: 1995 and 1999 respectively.

In Chapters 5 and 6 this thesis deals with these two novels in their chronological order rather than their order of publication. In the Author's note to *Out of Ireland*, Koch outlines the reasons why he chose to publish them in the order he did. 'My answer is that the enigmas of the present are often understood by descending into the past; and this is the progression which my dual narrative wishes the reader to follow.'⁷⁷ This retrospective vision is characteristic of Koch's approach to history: he identifies contemporary phenomena and searches for their origins in the past. This means that the central mysteries of Langford's life – why he abandoned his home for a career in Asia, why he was the man he was, and principally why he suicidally re-entered Cambodia – can be explained in a subsequent publication.

Intriguingly, however, Koch held a very different position in 1995: the Author's Note to *Highways to a War* says, 'Which order the books are read in isn't important. The order in which they're currently appearing places the present before the past; but ultimately their sequence can be a matter of taste – depending on whether the reader prefers to see the present carrying messages from the past, of the past delivering messages to the present.'⁷⁸ This is a notable shift from a 'matter of taste' to 'wishes the reader to follow'. Either Koch changed his mind in the intervening four years and decided to become prescriptive about the order of

⁷⁶ This structure of origins and outcomes is borrowed from David Fitzpatrick's *Oceans of Consolation: Personal Accounts of Irish Migration to Australia*, Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 1995. Fitzpatrick studies letters between Ireland and Australia, and these are divided into origins and outcomes to express the direction of letter flow.

⁷⁷ Koch, *Ireland*, Author's note p. 704.

reading, or he unwittingly reveals a deep ambivalence. However, we shall take him at his (most recent) word and assume we are reading against the grain.

Despite Koch's recent prescription, it is certainly no less logical to read the narrative in chronological order, especially if a reader is particularly interested in ancestral identification. It is much more than simply privileging the fictional chronology over the order of publication. Reading the novels in historical order allows a reader to address precisely the issues of ancestry and identity which this thesis is centrally concerned with. In particular, we can see how Devereux is a founder, a point of origin for Langford's identity. The notion of inheritance is given direct narrative form. Furthermore, reading the novels in chronological order foregrounds the potential for transforming this identity: such a reading is an intervention into the text in the interests of progression beyond static, self-destructive identities. Reading thus against the grain is the explicit intention of this thesis: if Koch doesn't outline a clear plan for change, a reader may infer one. For this reason the thesis deals with *Out of Ireland* first.

Koch's reflection on the Famine and Irish nationalism is reminiscent of Keneally's *The Great Shame*, although Koch does qualify the heroism of the Irish ancestor. *Out of Ireland* is a literary transformation of John Mitchel's memoir *Jail Journal*.⁷⁹ Mitchel is the basis for the fictional character Robert Devereux. Mitchel's formative experience before leaving Ireland was of the Famine, and its persistence in popular memory is central to Irish-Australian ancestral narratives. Within the Irish context, Koch underscores the power of the myth of nation, and is notably more critical of nationalist mythology than Keneally, being more inclined to emphasise the dangerous illusions of such mythologising.

The clearest evocation of romantic nationalism is in the novel's title, taken from one of William Butler Yeats' most polemical nationalist poems, 'Remorse for Intemperate Speech.'

Out of Ireland we have come.
Great hatred, little room,
Maimed us at the start.
I carry from my mother's womb

⁷⁸ Koch, *Highways*, Author's note p. vii.

⁷⁹ John Mitchel, *Jail Journal: With an Introductory Narrative of Transactions in Ireland*, Dublin: Gill 1960.

A fanatic heart.⁸⁰

Published in 1931, this poem is clearly a meditation on the grievances of the Irish and the transgenerational effects of trauma, as well as a reflection on the tragedy of Irish emigration which was always a dominant demographic trend until the 1980s and 90s. Koch's use of this poem immediately casts the novel as a response to nineteenth-century Irish nationalism, and its legacies in Australia. The focus on emigration is reinforced in the early part of the novel in the figure of the albatross, which also becomes a focus for themes of sin and redemption, alluding to Coleridge's 'The Ryme of The Ancient Mariner.'

Koch's textual allusions acquire a more narrow focus in the character of his protagonist, Robert Devereux, who is in many ways based upon John Mitchel. Koch has a deep admiration for Mitchel:

With Mitchel's journal, Tasmanian writing of quality begins. The vivid (though admittedly flowery) descriptions of Van Diemen's Land in his journal are rarities to be treasured, since very few intellectuals of Mitchel's type came there at the time. Most of the descriptions we have of early Tasmania are by limited or prosaic men. But with Mitchel, we are looking at the early scenes and the first settlers of the island through the filter of a genuinely poetic imagination: pictures of a society on the edge of wilderness by an impassioned activist and man of action with the sensibilities of an artist.⁸¹

For Koch, Mitchel is the first example of the 'Tasmanian tone' which he has attempted to cultivate in his own writing. However, Koch is not uncritical of Mitchel, and in the character of Devereux he underscores some of the flaws in his historical model. Koch is open about Mitchel's influence on him: he states that Devereux 'was inspired in many ways by John Mitchel, and shares a good many of Mitchel's ideas and features of character'.⁸² For Koch, Mitchel is a figure who connects Ireland to Australia, a focus for the expression of cultural memory.

Mitchel was an historical figure who a particular, patrician strain of Irish nationalism. He was Anglo-Irish and Protestant, which was not unusual since 1798, the era of the United Irishmen. However, by the 1840s the voice of opposition in

⁸⁰ William Butler Yeats, 'Remorse for Intemperate Speech', in *Poems of W.B. Yeats: A New Selection* (2nd ed.) (Selected, with an introduction and notes by A. Norman Jeffares), London: Macmillan, 1988, p. 156.

⁸¹ Koch, *Crossing*, p. 107.

⁸² Koch, *Ireland*, author's note p. 704.

Ireland was that of Daniel O’Connell and Repeal, and was implicitly associated with Catholicism. So Mitchel’s Ascendancy background made him part of a potent tradition running from Jonathan Swift through to Charles Stuart Parnell. What was distinctive about Mitchel was his strong and vocal advocacy of violent rebellion.

Mitchel responded to a crisis in Irish politics during the time of the Great Famine, because O’Connell’s Repeal League had lost credibility. Mitchel became a dominant personality in what came to be known as Young Ireland – a misnomer since this group had none of the unity or popular support which characterised similar movements in Europe. Mitchel’s militancy made him popular, but also the enemy of the British, and when he published articles recommending the tearing up of railways, he was seized and charged with new legislation designed specifically to effect his conviction. The story of Young Ireland is told by Keneally in *The Great Shame*, which offers it as an historical narrative based on documentary evidence.

However, Koch endows Mitchel’s story with a particular resonance by casting it as fiction, and mythopoetically revitalising it. Part One is entitled ‘Prometheus Bound’, with a quote from Aeschylus: ‘Here is Prometheus, the rebel:/ Nail him to the rock; secure him on this towering summit/ Fast in the unyielding grip of adamantine chains’.⁸³ Mitchel mirrors Devereux in this respect: both are punished for defying the powers that be. In the original myth, Prometheus stole the divine fire from the gods, and Zeus punished him by chaining him to a rock and torturing him with a vulture feeding on his liver every day. This pattern of defiance and punishment is the broad basis for Koch’s use of the myth.

Koch also draws upon Shelley’s version of the myth, which is more concerned with social and political institutions and the revolutions which may reform or abolish them. The Mitchel/Devereux figure is a heroic revolutionary who stands up against the might of the British Empire. The fire he stole from these secular gods was in the form of violent opposition, for this not only challenged colonial rule but appropriated the basis of political power: the legitimate use of force. This is always a crucial debate in anti-colonial movements. The punishment was transportation as a convict ‘Special’ to the hulks at Bermuda, which meant solitary confinement for a man very much used to social contact. After fourteen

⁸³ Koch, *Ireland*, p. 1.

months of this torturous isolation, both Mitchel and Devereux were sent to Van Diemen's Land, and this is where Devereux's story diverges from that of Mitchel.

This divergence is more than the fact that, as Koch puts it, 'once he reaches Van Diemen's Land, his circumstances and his fate become entirely different from Mitchel's'.⁸⁴ It is also more significant than the slight character development Devereux experiences, in contrast to the stubborn Mitchel. What Koch really does is portray Devereux in the light of Mitchel, so Devereux's flaws become a critique of Mitchel's ideas and motivations. Ultimately, Koch incorporates a critique of revolutionary nationalism in his characterisation of Devereux, and distances him from Mitchel, who showed himself to be more conservative once he arrived in the US as he opposed the abolition of slavery and defended the Confederacy by editing the *Southern Citizen*. It is notable that the faultlines in *Young Ireland* became gaping fissure during the Civil War as Mitchel and Meagher found themselves on opposing sides..

Koch's characterisation is an active transformation with a view to reflecting on and reshaping cultural memory. In a discussion of Kipling, Koch writes, '*Kim* remains a supreme work of fiction, not fact, and ... the originals for its cast were simply starting points ... They were merely the raw material – and only through the transforming imagination of a great novelist could the figures we know emerge ...'⁸⁵ The effect in terms of a nationalist personality is discussed later, in the section on identity. This transformation is relevant to the historical experience of Great Famine and its legacy within popular memory, particularly in Australia.

Out of Ireland is entirely set outside of Ireland itself, beginning with Devereux's reflections on his position on the hulk at Bermuda. However, the historical experience of Ireland feeds into the narrative and characters in many ways. Kathleen is symbolic of the Irish peasant experience, and her silence regarding the Famine contrasts sharply with Devereux's vocal denunciation of what he sees as the British cause of the great tragedy.⁸⁶ The novel reflects on his status as a heroic revolutionary, an artist-warrior who is the champion of the people. However, when the masses write and sing ballads about him and attempt to pay him tribute, he disavows this heroic status. The character of Daniel O'Donnell is a figure of

⁸⁴ Koch, *Ireland*, author's note, p. 705.

⁸⁵ Koch, *Crossing*, p. 174.

rebellious masculinity gone wrong, and his portrayal as a villain undermines the bushranger myth which is prevalent through Australian fiction. These are some central elements of Koch's depiction of cultural memory and popular history, and it is notable that he focuses on the individual's role in history.

For Australians of Irish descent, the Famine is a monumental catastrophe which is nearly impossible to face: Keneally and Patrick Howard express this. When Devereux first meets Kathleen, her expression in the Irish language instantly reminds him of home. She is from a peasant family in Limerick and, being from Clare, Devereux knows full well that the Famine ravaged the Western counties considerably. When she expresses her adoration for him as a nationalist hero, he responds in kind, seeing her as a personification of Ireland. She is a focus for the cultural memory of that traumatic period.

Kathleen never directly relates her experience of the Famine; she is trying to forget it. 'But of the Famine, and what had happened to her family, she would not speak again.'⁸⁷ Soon after this, Devereux unwittingly admonishes her for suggesting they take in nettles for boiled greens, to her dismay. 'I am not so grand that I know about these things. At home we would boil nettles to keep us alive.'⁸⁸ It is only in moments such as this that the Famine intrudes on the present. For Kathleen, as for many Irish-Australians, the Famine was repressed in memory and forgotten as a burden too painful to bear. This has a general corollary in the willed amnesia of convict ancestry: the Famine gave rise to 'hiding the Stain'.

Needless to say, Devereux's experience of the Famine was very different to Kathleen's; like John Mitchel, he helplessly watched as the Famine ravaged the countryside. This spurred his natural sense of indignation, and reinforced his revolutionary nationalism. It made him a vocal enemy of the British presence in Ireland, which endowed him with a kind of heroic status, which surprises him upon his arrival in Van Diemen's Land. When he reaches the Police Station he finds a small crowd of Irish people cheering his arrival; they sing a street ballad in his name. Devereux is deeply uneasy: believing they will be liable to arrest, his first response is to disavow this heroic status.⁸⁹ He is particularly annoyed with Liam

⁸⁶ The question of Koch's gender politics and the representation of women is thoroughly dealt with in the section on gender identity: Chapter 5.

⁸⁷ Koch, *Ireland*, p. 453.

⁸⁸ Koch, *Ireland*, p. 455.

⁸⁹ Koch, *Ireland*, p. 207.

Kinane's adulation: 'God preserve me from well-meaning fools! ... Kinane's kind of adulation makes its object into a puppet: a reflection of the worshipper's dreams. And this, far from being genuine support, amounts to a blind, paradoxical threat'.⁹⁰ In this way Devereux is an anti-hero, or at least a reluctant hero who refuses to accept the adulation of his supporters.

To help illustrate Devereux's character, Koch contrasts him with Daniel O'Donnell, who is as close to an unqualified villain as can be found in any of Koch's work. O'Donnell earlier raped and then attempted to wed Kathleen, who refused his advances and was sent to the Female Factory by her tyrannical master when she fell pregnant. Later, she is drugged and abducted by O'Donnell, although she is saved by Devereux and Langford, who venture into the worst part of Hobart, which Koch calls 'Dis' after the God of the classical underworld, to rescue her.⁹¹ An intense rivalry develops between Devereux and O'Donnell, centred around Kathleen. Since Kathleen symbolises Ireland, the two males are actually vying for the authenticity of Irishness, for the right to represent the Irish in Australia.

When O'Donnell again forcibly abducts Kathleen, this time from the farm at Clare, Devereux and Langford embark on an adventure to recapture her and defeat the bushranger O'Donnell. During their final stand-off, O'Donnell vitriolically challenges Devereux's origins and his nationalist aspirations:

– You may think that I bow before you, Devereux, as so many of our people do. I do not. I spit on you and yours, who were nothing but English robbers. And I bow to no man. I am a Ribbonman, and a descendant of kings. I am Daniel O'Donnell from Donegal, and a descendant of Red Hugh O'Donnell.

He lifted his long chin, and displayed the great red fan of his beard; head thrown back, he looked down his nose at me, with fatuous, alcoholic pride. He was not merely drunk, I saw, but mad ...⁹²

O'Donnell's claim to glorious ancient Irish ancestry contrasts sharply with Devereux's Anglo-Norman ancestry, which is earlier suggested as a source of unease. The two men represent differing approaches to history and the fight against colonialism. However, this polarised representation is also ambiguous – Kathleen makes some attempt to defend O'Donnell: 'Dan is entirely mad, that's the truth of it.

⁹⁰ Koch, *Ireland*, p. 211.

⁹¹ Koch, *Ireland*, p. 384.

But supposing he had not been put in gaol and flogged, he might have been a better man – and one who might have fought for you, since he fears nothing. Being flogged by the English made him mad. It also put an anger in him that cannot be cured. Now, his soul may be lost'.⁹³ This qualifies, but does not justify, O'Donnell's villainy. This rivalry raises important issues about history and the nature of anticolonial activism. However, as the novel progresses the manifestations of cultural memory are more personal than social as the narrative gestures towards the life of the descendant.

While *Out of Ireland* narrates the roots of the Langford ancestry in nineteenth-century Ireland and Van Diemen's Land, *Highways to a War* tells of the fruits of this ancestral precedent, in the figure of Michael Langford and his experiences during the conflict in Indochina. Instead of the first-person journal account Koch uses in *Out of Ireland*, this novel uses a documentary style, a collection of many different speakers and voices. The main narrator is Raymond Barton, a lawyer and amateur historian who was a childhood friend of Langford's. Barton embarks on a search for Langford, a final, near-hopeless search to find him dead or alive. In so doing, Barton interviews many of Langford's wartime friends, and intersperses these narratives with Langford's own audio diaries. However, the hope of actually finding him fades as the narrative progresses, and Barton eventually has to settle for discovering Langford's motivations, his reasons for living as he did. These reasons are to be found in the past and the personal narrative of Langford's ancestor, not merely his role in history.

Highways to a War has multiple historical resonances, since the entire narrative gestures back towards the nineteenth century and Devereux's time in Van Diemen's Land.⁹⁴ However, it also refers to the more recent past, since Langford disappeared many years before Barton's investigation. Through Barton, Koch looks back at the Vietnam War and the conflict in Cambodia with a nostalgic wistfulness, and certainly with the recognition that these events have drifted into the past just enough to qualify as history. Like Keneally's setting of *Bettany's Book*, Koch fuses ancestral narrative and historical fiction to allow a multilayered reflection on history.

⁹² Koch, *Ireland*, p. 569.

⁹³ Koch, *Ireland*, p. 547.

⁹⁴ In an interview Koch stated, 'This is not a matter of linkage: it's a matter of echoes. I believe that the past and the present echo off each other.' Helen Daniel, 'Interview with Christopher Koch', *Australian Book Review*, No. 173, August 1995 p. 9.

‘So far off now, 1965! It begins to seem almost as far as 1848. Yet neither of these years is as distant as we think: unfinished roads stretch from them both, and run to where we stand.’⁹⁵ It is this close interaction between historical periods that the novels are based on. However, the important point is that the entire Devereux background is unknown to Mike; his is the story of a man journeying away from a past he is ignorant of. Indeed, this creates a slight paradox for a reader who is interested in ancestral identification. On the one hand Langford’s ancestry is crucial: it is the basis for the entire dual narrative. However, Langford doesn’t know about Devereux. How, then, can his life be affected by that of an unknown ancestor?

To insist that Langford’s lack of knowledge of his ancestry means that Devereux can have no influence on him is stubbornly literal-minded. True, it is not possible for him to consciously base his actions on ancestral identification. However, Devereux exists as an unseen ghost for Langford, prompting him to act in certain ways. On one level, Langford just repeats the mistakes of his ancestor due to ignorance. But in the world of the narrative itself, the ancestral identification operates paradoxically by negation: it is the *lack* of Devereux in Langford’s conscious mind which drives the narrative. This ancestry operates on an imaginative level, as outlined at the beginning of this thesis. Koch displays the ancestry for the benefit of his readers, not Langford. For this reason he plants significant clues at the beginning of *Highways to a War*.

Early in the novel Barton tells how as children he and Mike once entered the forbidden zone of the locked storeroom. Here they find Devereux’s writing-slope and portrait, and they smell the palpable odour of the past before being caught, and summarily punished, by Mike’s father. It is here the young Barton begins to taste the bitter past, and its presence in the present. ‘The past, I see now, waits always for us to open its doors; and once having done so, we can choose to open our spirits to its thin, helpless voices, or else turn away. Both choices have their consequences.’⁹⁶ This suggests the idea of the past as dangerous – the ominous suggestion of ‘consequences’ gestures towards the repression of the past in the Langford family. In escaping Tasmania for a short career as a war-correspondent in Asia, Langford lives out the notion of ancestry

⁹⁵ Koch, *Highways*, p. 146.

⁹⁶ Koch, *Highways*, p. 40.

as a wound which is unacknowledged and covered up, and which can only be healed by the open acknowledgement of the past. It is through making the connections between Michael and Devereux that the reader comes to understand Michael's secret personality, and so history is merely a vantage point from which to understand the permutations of personal identity.

Undoubtedly, much of the interest of *Beware of the Past* lies in its telling of parallel historical narratives. Here, the story of Ireland's sad history and failed revolution feeds into Australian convict history and becomes translated into the story of twentieth-century conflict in Asia. As well as a deep interest in history, all these novels by both Keneally and Koch display complex and multifaceted characterisation, and this emphasises the personal aspect of ancestry. However, the main focus of this reading of Koch is on how his construction of an absent ancestral narrative impinges on the descendant's own male gender identity. For this we must turn to the ancestor, Devereux. It is this man's complete contempt for Hobart and Tasmania which lays the basis for the repression of memory. Devereux (and his model Mitchel) utterly despised the place as a British outpost, a small cog in the great, evil Empire. However, he also had considerable contempt for the convicts themselves; this is just one indication of his dual nature. It is in the name of social propriety and respectability that the convicts are shunned, and outcast from Tasmanian cultural memory. This creates real problems for Langford's self-identity as the link is based on absence, amnesia or negation. For Mitchell, in Koch's novels 'independent moral agency will be ... a contested site ... character is ... determined, so that characters are rarely just themselves. They speak or act for something other, something more'.⁹⁷

Ultimately, it is these links, or gaps, between ancestors and their descendants which is the subject of this thesis. This is ancestral identification: it is through identifying with their ancestors through narrative that people construct their own life-stories, and come to know who they are. Similarly, the lack of any such identification can be harmful; the absence of such a feeling of connection can act as a wound which cannot heal. It is this construction of identity which is the central focus of this reading.

⁹⁷ Mitchell, 'Inner and Outer Narratives', p. 4.