

### Chapter 3

## Keneally: Nationalists as ‘Tomorrow’s Ancestors’

Thomas Keneally has long been a writer who gives expression to nationalist sentiment. In 1978 J.J. Healy commented that writers such as Keneally represented ‘a collective, many-motived consciousness’ whose impulse was ‘political, public’.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, many of Keneally’s earlier novels illustrate what we might call ‘national progenitors’.

In *From The Ruins of Colonialism* Chris Healy describes a unique historiographical practice of retrospective genealogy, where James Cook was constructed within a nationalist vision which saw him as the founding ancestor of Australia.<sup>2</sup> The ancestral narratives within Keneally’s historical fictions do the same thing, by constructing characters who function as ‘tomorrow’s ancestors’. In his pre-1995 novels, Keneally depicts historical figures as ancestors of the modern nation. He uses the resources of mythic narrative to create a distinctive national identity which is broadly ethnic in nature, and which is implicitly defined against ‘other’ nationalisms. This is a fairly straightforward example of how groups ‘mobilise collective memories to sustain enduring corporate identities’.<sup>3</sup> However, his more recent fiction includes an element of flexibility in this portrayal of nationalist ancestors, as he begins to move towards a post-humanist conception of national identity through ancestry. It is in his most recent novels that this post-humanist vision is most clear; this is the subject of Chapter Four.

This chapter begins with a brief overview of theories of nationalism which have a specific bearing on Keneally’s ancestral narratives. Bhabha’s notion of ‘national narrations’ is central here, as it outlines how narratives articulate differing conceptions of the nation. Anthony D. Smith’s ethno-symbolist approach is also relevant, because it suggests how myth and narrative are essential in the transition from ethnic to modern national identity. Smith’s analysis of ethnic myths of descent is especially useful, as it highlights the role of ancestral narratives in the

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<sup>1</sup> J.J. Healy, *Literature and the Aborigine in Australia: 1970-1975*, St Lucia, Qld: University of Queensland Press, 1978, p. 291.

<sup>2</sup> Chris Healy, *From the Ruins of Colonialism: History as Social Memory*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 29.

<sup>3</sup> David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985, p. 198.

construction of nationhood. These theories will be deployed in a reading of several of Keneally's earlier novels which depict national identity through constructions of ancestry.

The discussion of Keneally's novels is roughly chronological, because the argument pursues his ancestral narratives throughout his career. *Bring Larks and Heroes* is a foundational text in this regard, because it depicts the Australian nation as a predominantly ethnic entity through potential ancestors who come to a tragic end.<sup>4</sup> *Schindler's Ark* is similarly concerned with tragic ancestry, although there is an element of redemption in the form of survival for many of its characters.<sup>5</sup> It is in *The Playmaker* that Keneally's reshaping of nationalist ancestral narratives is clearer; this novel depicts the convict past as a thorough comedy with many elements of redemption and even reconciliation.<sup>6</sup> The more recent novels depict variations or extensions of nationalist ancestry; as they progress, these novels portray a fundamentally revised conception of national history, using ancestry as an essential resource.

## Nationalism and Ancestral Narratives

Keneally's novels establish a clear connection between nationalism and his ancestral narratives in historical fiction. It is through ancestry that nations are represented and constructed, creating a type of 'useable past' which serves the aims of nationalist discourse. Hobsbawm's *The Invention of Tradition* challenges the assumption that tradition (particularly with regard to communal affiliation) represents continuity with the past in a fixed, unchanging relationship.

'Invented tradition' is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact, where possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Thomas Keneally, *Bring Larks and Heroes*, Melbourne: Cassell, 1967.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Keneally, *Schindler's Ark*, London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1982.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Keneally, *The Playmaker*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1987.

<sup>7</sup> Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds), *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.

This encapsulates Hobsbawm's classical modernist thesis, which implies that ancestral narratives are largely artificial constructions which retrospectively create a nation's past. This stands in stark contrast to the primordialist view, that nations are natural, essentially unchanging entities which loom out of an immemorial past and whose reality is simply reflected or expressed by narrative. It is important to note here that the 'invention' or 'construction' (or Anderson's 'imagining'<sup>8</sup>) of tradition or nation does not necessarily imply falsity, or inauthenticity. It simply means that nations acquire their authenticity and command loyalty by using popular constructions of history, and with the view to establishing (or maintaining) a sovereign nation-state through shared narratives of origin. In this view nationalism is a function of modernism, although ancestral narratives are rarely directed towards the purely political aims that the modernists imply. Keneally engages wholeheartedly in this imagining of his national community.

However, there are also critiques of this position: such modernism tends to betray an elitist bias, and sees nationalism from the 'top down'. Hobsbawm tends to judge nationalism from the outside, without acknowledging either its subjective reality or persuasive power. Ancestral narratives must be understood as national narrations on their own terms, by giving space to the perspective of the subaltern.

When forming the Subaltern Studies group in 1982, Ranajit Guha argued that not only was nationalist discourse dominated by the elite, but that Indian historiography itself has also been overshadowed by an elite bias.

What clearly is left out of this un-historical historiography is the *politics of the people*. For parallel to the domain of elite politics there existed throughout the colonial period another domain of Indian politics in which the principal actors were not the dominant groups of the indigenous society or the colonial authorities but the subaltern classes and groups constituting the mass of the labouring population and the intermediate strata in town and country – that is, the people.<sup>9</sup>

*Subaltern Studies* was founded as a forum for discussing these issues and presenting such research, with the firm conviction that it was possible and necessary to oppose elitist historiography. The same goes for ancestral narratives: they are not only

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<sup>8</sup> See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London: Verso, 1983.

<sup>9</sup> Ranajit Guha, 'On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India', in *Subaltern Studies I* (1982), p 4.

restricted to royal or aristocratic pedigrees. Despite the debate surrounding Subaltern Studies, it is still a viable project, exemplified by the recent contribution of David Lloyd in the case of Irish new histories. For Lloyd, 'Both the terms "post-colonial" and "subaltern" designate in different but related ways the desire to elaborate social spaces that are recalcitrant to any straightforward absorption ... of Ireland into European modernity'.<sup>10</sup> This is also true of Irish-Australian ancestral narratives: their expression of nationalism must be understood on their own terms rather than being appropriated by a metropolitan culture.

There are several individual approaches to nationalism which are also relevant to ancestry: those of Hastings, Brown and McCrone. Adrian Hastings announces his self-consciousness of himself as analyst, or researcher. He derides Hobsbawm's attempts to attain critical distance: 'Hobsbawm can no more leave his "non-historical" Marxist convictions behind than I my Christian and Liberal ones ... It is surely better to be aware of them and historicise with them, recognising that they affect our value judgments and that there is no value-free, purely objective, history'.<sup>11</sup> Hastings brings to his work a strong ethical sense that the theorist and researcher has the responsibility to ameliorate the destructiveness of nationalism in some forms. He thus challenges the myth of critical distance, which many modernists succumb to. This self-consciousness also applies to the study of ancestral narratives: we cannot escape our origins and their influence on the shape of our thoughts.

David Brown emphasises that there are several types of nationalism, which is essential to an understanding of Keneally's ancestral narratives. According to Brown, differing conceptual languages produce differing, and indeed contending, visions of the nation. Cast into ideal-type categories, they are: civic nationalism, which is voluntaristic and political; ethno-cultural nationalism, which rests on emotive attachments and myths of common ancestry; and multi-cultural nationalism, which seeks to encourage a more open, pluralist society, encompassing many cultures under the one political system. The first two ideal-types are often cast as 'good' and 'bad' nationalism; civic nationalism is seen as conducive to social stability, whereas ethno-cultural nationalism is violently divisive. Brown argues

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<sup>10</sup> David Lloyd, 'Outside History: Irish New Histories and the "Subalternity Effect"', *Subaltern Studies IX* (1996), p. 263.

against this assumption, showing how both nationalisms could take liberal or illiberal forms depending on the circumstances in which they develop.<sup>12</sup>

‘Nationalism does have two ideological faces, civic and ethnocultural, but the political character of both is surely protean rather than Janus-faced.’<sup>13</sup> This ‘protean’ nature of nationalism is highly relevant to Keneally’s fiction, because his nationalistic ancestral narratives do develop from an ethnic to a civic vision, without the totalitarian aspects usually associated with the former. Brown accounts for the differing visions of the nation, which helps to explain Keneally’s transformation of national identity through ancestry.

David McCrone emphasises the role of identity in nationalism, and also provides this chapter with its title. He adopts a broad ethno-symbolist approach, arguing that nationalism is a form of identity constructed through cultural productions of tribe and place. This emphasis on identity allows McCrone to utilise recent sociology, especially the work of Stuart Hall, to challenge simplistic, essentialist views of identity, enabling ‘cultures of translation’ which are not overarching or totalised. ‘Identities should be seen as a concern with “routes” rather than “roots”, as maps for the future rather than trails from the past.’<sup>14</sup> This reconceptualisation of identity via metaphor is exactly the type of shift made possible through ancestry, and flexible forms of ancestral identification. In a similar way, McKenzie Wark juxtaposes ‘roots’ with his postmodernist notion of ‘aerials’.<sup>15</sup>

McCrone offers a fascinating example of invented tradition and useable past in the claims of Quebecois nationalists: ‘The time has come for us, tomorrow’s ancestors, to make ready for our descendants harvests that are worthy of the labours of the past’.<sup>16</sup> The notion of nationalist figures as ‘tomorrow’s ancestors’ embodies the central process of ancestral identification: we identify with our ancestors both individually and in terms of national identity. It captures both the totalised sense of

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<sup>11</sup> Adrian Hastings, *The Construction of Nationhood: Ethnicity, Nationalism and Religion*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 33.

<sup>12</sup> David Brown, *Contemporary Nationalism: Civic, ethnocultural and multicultural politics*, London: Routledge, 2000, p. 66.

<sup>13</sup> Brown, p. 69.

<sup>14</sup> David McCrone, *The Sociology of Nationalism: Tomorrow’s Ancestors*, London: Routledge, 1998, p. 35.

<sup>15</sup> McKenzie Wark, *The Virtual Republic: Australia’s Culture Wars of the 1990s*, St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1997.

<sup>16</sup> McCrone, *Sociology of Nationalism*, p. 49.

destiny in ancestral narratives as well as the appeal to the past which nationalism makes. In his national narrations Keneally retrospectively constructs ‘tomorrow’s ancestors’, deploying historical fiction to use the past within constructions of national identity. McCrone’s approach gestures towards that of Anthony D. Smith, who argues that myths are essential in the construction of the modern nation.

From the Alcmaeonids to Alex Haley, families and individuals have traced and publicised their ancestry ... It is the question of individual identity, which is always a matter of social and spiritual location. For in that location lies a sense of security, so indispensable to the much-desired individuality and uniqueness of persons and families alike.<sup>17</sup>

Anthony D. Smith is most immediately relevant to Keneally’s nationalist ancestral narratives because he is the only theorist of nationalism who gives credence to the role of ancestry. Smith’s main project is to describe how nationalism functions as a form of collective identification, and how it promotes collective action. This socio-cultural approach distinguishes Smith from a modernist like Hobsbawm, who focuses on the development of political institutions such as the nation-state.<sup>18</sup> In this way Smith seeks to find a way to ‘make a modest contribution to a saner and more tolerant approach to human diversity’.<sup>19</sup> This is also the task of Keneally’s ancestral narratives: there is an ethical prerogative in all such intellectual work.

Smith walks a middle path between primordialist and modernist approaches to nationalism. Thus he is able to see nations from both an external and an internal perspective, and gives due weight to the affective and non-rational aspects of nationalism. ‘What is important in the study of nationalism is not what is, but what is *felt* to be, the case.’<sup>20</sup> He is the originator of the ethno-symbolist perspective, which argues that modern nations are natural extensions of ancient ethnic groups. For Smith, the transition from *ethnie* to nation occurs with the appearance of genealogies and kinship myths, which develop networks that gradually develop into distinct national entities. This echoes John Armstrong’s focus on ‘myth-symbol

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<sup>17</sup> Anthony D. Smith, *Myths and Memories of the Nation*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 59.

<sup>18</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.

<sup>19</sup> Smith, *Myths*, p. 118.

<sup>20</sup> Anthony D. Smith, *Nationalism: Theory, Ideology, History*, Cambridge: Polity, 2001, p. 71.

complexes' which divide ethnic groups from one another.<sup>21</sup> This focus on myth is directly relevant to Keneally, who is a self-conscious mythmaker who narrates national formation and ancestry within a mythopoetic framework.

Smith makes a broad distinction between genealogical and ideological myths of descent.<sup>22</sup> The former is a biological myth of descent, where filiation forms the basic principle of myth-construction; this is a literal ancestral relationship. On the other hand, cultural-ideological myths are based on ideas and values that are inherited from heroic ancestors, which is closer to the secular notion of ancestry that this thesis is concerned with. Smith argues that within particular case studies, these modes of myth-making are both divided and united: they exist in a 'contrapuntal' relationship which gives dynamism and vitality to the myths.<sup>23</sup> This is certainly the case with Keneally: his ancestral narratives produce historical fiction which is simultaneously concerned with biological and ideological inheritance, and the tensions between them.

Smith's taxonomy can also help us identify the different myths of ethnic descent which are prevalent in Keneally's work.<sup>24</sup> The myth of ancestry is essential in establishing a communal sense of identity: it produces a symbolic kinship link which unites a group of people under a shared ancestry. This myth of common ancestry is played out on the wide stage of the nation, quite literally in the case of *The Playmaker*. Another myth of ethnic descent is the myth of the heroic age, which is concerned with narrating a golden age when the people were liberated from subservience to a tyrannical despot. This ties in closely with Australian nationalist history, especially in its concern with the convict era, because the formation of Australia is often cast as liberation from the yoke of the Old World. Keneally himself is particularly concerned with heroic ancestors, especially Irish ones. Finally, of the utmost relevance is the myth of location and migration, which tells how a people came to be where they are, and by so doing construct a sense of home. These myths of migration are particularly applicable to the Irish experience in Australia, because they articulate the historical process of arrival, and construct an ancestral

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<sup>21</sup> Armstrong was an early proponent of the idea that nations emerge from ethnicities. See John Armstrong, *Nations Before Nationalism*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1982.

<sup>22</sup> Smith, *Myths*, pp. 57-8

<sup>23</sup> In this context, Breuilly's critique that Smith fails to account for the problematic status of past cultural material is unfounded. John Breuilly, 'Approaches to Nationalism', in G. Balakrishnan (ed). *Mapping the Nation*, London: Verso, 1996 [1994], pp. 146-74.

<sup>24</sup> This taxonomy is elaborated in Smith, *Myths*, pp. 63-5.

homeland out of what was previously an alien landscape. Smith enables an identification of the various mythical elements present in Keneally's work, and an elaboration of how these myths of descent connect ancestry to the nation.

Another positive benefit of Smith's theory is that it focuses on national identity as an important component of nationalism. This helps to explain how ancestry contributes to both personal and group identities. Smith offers a viable working definition of national identity:

the continuous reproduction and reinterpretation of the pattern of values, symbols, memories, myths and traditions that compose the distinctive heritage of nations, and the identifications of individuals with that pattern and heritage and with its cultural elements.<sup>25</sup>

Smith's notion of national identity balances important aspects which are highly relevant to the reading of ancestral narratives. Firstly, he outlines the importance of national identity for both the collective and the individual; to neglect one is to omit half of the relationship. Ancestry also performs the function of linking the individual to the collective; ancestral identification is of immediate importance to the individual, but also serves to weave the individual into the social fabric of the group. In this way, Keneally expresses ideas about his own ancestral origins and those of his characters, but these can be extended to Australians generally and Irish-Australians in particular.

Secondly, Smith also accounts for both continuity and change within national identity. On the one hand, nations are long-term constructs, and so continuity is essential to the viability of this collective identity over the long term. However, an important aspect is also change and the reinterpretation of nationalist symbols and myths. This idea of adaptation is central to this thesis, because Keneally and Koch both adapt their ancestral narratives to express changing ideas of the human within the social world. This challenges Stuart Hall's early idea that shared history and ancestry 'provide us, as "one people", with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning', that ancestral identification inevitably leads to essentialised and totalised conceptions of identity.<sup>26</sup> All too often, ancestry is assumed to simply support a static and unchanging notion of cultural and national

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<sup>25</sup> Smith, *Nationalism*, p. 18.

identity. Keneally, in particular, develops his idea of nationalism beyond a traditional ethno-symbolist model into a pluralist, diasporic and transnational vision that underscores the adaptability of national identity.

Linked to migration myths is the central idea of the territoriality of nationalism. For Smith, nationalist myths and memories construct an 'ethnoscape' where land provides a sacred link to ancestral origins, and which binds 'descendants to a distinct landscape endowed with ethno-historical significance'.<sup>27</sup> This relates to the notion of an ancestral homeland, where individuals and collectives weave a part of the natural landscape into their self-identity. This aspect is particularly potent in cases of irredentism, where two or more populations vie for control of the same territory, and both claim it as their own sacred land. There are many examples, but Smith notes the situation of Ulster as an important one, where both Protestant and Catholic populations claim the land as theirs through ancestral affiliation.<sup>28</sup> The situation becomes distinctly more complex in the case of Australia, where migration history is also involved. Here the landscape must be imaginatively reconstructed to suit the new social situation, and a diaspora such as the Irish must sacralise the territory for it to become the basis for a type of national identification. In this case, the influence of migration may serve to enable a new conception of identity in a national sense, and may contribute towards the reconciliation which becomes a prevalent aspect of Keneally's later ancestral narratives. Thus, migration may serve as an example of Lloyd's idea of the 'subalternity effect ... emerging in and between historiographical discourses'.<sup>29</sup> Migration myths function as one of the discontinuities Lloyd draws attention to.

As well as myth, another resource which is widely, and potently, used in the construction of nationhood is collective memory. This interaction between history and social memory is precisely the focus of Chris Healy, who discussed the treatment of Cook as a nationalist progenitor. Smith analyses this in the specific case of the Jews as a diasporic community, where he also demonstrates the benefits of understanding a particular nationalism from both an internal and an external perspective. 'In the case of collective cultural identities, such as *ethnies* and nations,

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<sup>26</sup> Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora', in Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (eds), *Colonial Discourse and Post-colonial Theory: A Reader*, Hertfordshire: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993 p. 393.

<sup>27</sup> Smith, *Myths*, p. 151.

<sup>28</sup> Smith, *Myths*, p. 155.

later generations carry shared memories of what they consider to be ‘their’ past, of the experiences of earlier generations of the same collectivity, and so of a distinctive ethno-history.’<sup>30</sup> What is notable here is that Smith’s discussion of collective memory casts it as an intergenerational phenomenon, and so ancestry is essential to the group’s ongoing memory. In the case of the Jews, this memory is strongly associated with exclusion, persecution and trauma, and this is precisely the kind of identification expressed in Keneally’s *Schindler’s Ark*. Notably, however, this kind of memory is adaptable to different circumstances, so Smith’s treatment of Jewish ethnicity and nationalism demonstrates the fluidity and malleability of ethno-symbolic nationalism.<sup>31</sup>

The centrality of memory and the diaspora experience are two important links between the Irish and the Jews. Another is what Smith calls the circumstances or fertilising conditions for the working out of myth and memory. The first is negative: the experience of catastrophe or trauma; the second is positive: the enabling of collective action.<sup>32</sup> These two conditions explain how a collective identity coalesces under differing circumstances, and with different outcomes, although they also highlight a major difference between the Jewish experience and that of the Irish in Australia. While both have suffered historical trauma, the Jewish experience became formulated through the Zionist movement into territorial claims for a homeland and nation-state with autonomy and independence. This is a fairly traditional type of nationalism. On the other hand, Keneally shows how a diasporic nationalism can emerge from painful history with much more innovative forms of collective action, which defy and extend traditional ethno-nationalism.

Smith’s ethno-symbolist approach allows a significant role for ancestral narrative in the construction of nationhood. Such narratives are the form, or basic structural principle which pulls together the various myths and memories of a group into a coherent ethno-nationalist vision. In particular, historical fiction allows a legitimate blending of empirical history with the more imaginative and mythical elements of collective identity. Narrative is the platform for a construction of ancestral identification which links the individual to the collective, the continuous

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<sup>29</sup> Lloyd, ‘Outside History’, p. 263.

<sup>30</sup> Smith, *Myths*, p. 208.

<sup>31</sup> For an example of such an argument, see Umut Ozkirimli, *Theories of Nationalism: A Critical Introduction*, New York: St Martin’s press, 2000, p. 187.

<sup>32</sup> Smith, *Myths*, p. 217.

to the transitory, the past to the future. This potential for radical change within national narrations is also clearly evident in the work of Homi Bhabha.

Bhabha allows a progression from Smith's analysis of the raw material of nationalism to the idea that myth and memory offer the potential for a substantial challenge to normative Western concepts. On a general level he articulates a more refined version of memory within a reflection upon the contribution of Franz Fanon to post-colonial thought:

Remembering Fanon is a process of intense discovery and disorientation. Remembering is never a quiet act of introspection or retrospection. It is a painful re-membering, a putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present.<sup>33</sup>

Similarly, remembering one's ancestors is never quiet or simple. Bhabha's notion underscores the reconstruction involved in memory, especially in the context of Algeria's traumatic colonial history. Through memory the past is made useable, and ancestors are reconstructed by a writer like Keneally to represent the nation's history, or point of origin. Australian settler culture needs to reconstruct a past which takes account of the 'Stain' of its convict origins. However, Keneally also seeks to make sense of the present in Australia, which is admittedly less traumatic (at least for white settlers) than that of Fanon's Algeria.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, Keneally's more recent ancestral narratives re-member the past in order to point a way to a better future, and to challenge the static traditionalism of Western nationalism.

For Bhabha, it is this challenge to Western concepts that is enabled by national narratives. Bhabha starts by postulating the nation as an inherently ambivalent entity; its 'cultural temporality' inscribes a 'transitional social reality'; it is characterised by an inherent 'instability of knowledge'. It is this ambivalence in the process of narration and textual production which he draws attention to.

To encounter the nation *as it is written* displays a temporality of culture and social consciousness more in tune with the partial, overdetermined process by which textual meaning is produced through the articulation

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<sup>33</sup> Homi Bhabha, 'Remembering Fanon', in P. Williams and L. Chrisman (eds), *Colonial Discourse*, Hemel Hempstead, England: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993, p. 121.

<sup>34</sup> The problems of a settler culture with an Indigenous (or Other) presence is also dealt with by Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra, *Dark Side of The Dream: Australian Literature and the Post-Colonial Mind*, Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1991.

of difference in language; more in keeping with the problem of closure which plays enigmatically in the discourse of the sign.<sup>35</sup>

Bhabha thus draws upon the resources of post-structuralist theory to challenge the normalisation and totalisation of the nation in the discourse of modernity. *Nation and Narration* seeks to investigate such processes of ‘incomplete signification’ which turn borders into in-between spaces; it is from this interstitial perspective that Bhabha emphasises the importance of Fanon’s internationalism. This type of international and transnational perspective is what gives Keneally’s more recent ancestral narratives their post-humanist edge; they are not merely narrating the nation as an unproblematic entity, they are transgressing and questioning its very borders using the resources of myth and memory.

Sneja Gunew’s contribution to *Nation and Narration* suggests that the introduction of the term ‘multiculturalism’ has the potential to denaturalise Australian cultural nationalism, as long as it is not recuperated and used as a thin veil for continued assimilation.

Multiculturalism will only function as a useful expression of difference when it is seen as including Anglo-Celts ... The discontinuities and radicalism within Irish writing *vis-à-vis* England were linked with Australian dissidents who fed into the republican movement and who were seen as favouring a generalised anti-authoritarianism.<sup>36</sup>

However, Gunew was writing out of the immediately post-Bicentennial era, and from this perspective it is possible to see how a writer like Keneally occupied such an oppositionalist counter-public sphere. The important point is that as his writing developed through the 1990s, he began using ancestral narratives in an entirely different fashion. Keneally’s ancestral narratives came to question the simplistic binaries and boundaries which constituted the nation. Keneally’s earlier works tended to use ancestry to represent the nation as an ethnic entity in a rather traditional sense.

The nation, like the individual, is the culmination of a long past of endeavours, sacrifice and devotion. Of all cults, that of the ancestors is most legitimate, for the ancestors have made us what we are. A heroic

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<sup>35</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *Nation and Narration*, London: Routledge, 1990, p. 2.

<sup>36</sup> Sneja Gunew, ‘Denaturalising Cultural Nationalisms: Multicultural Readings of “Australia”’, in Bhabha, *Nation*, p. 115.

past, great men, glory ... this is the social capital upon which one bases a national idea.<sup>37</sup>

Keneally's earlier historical fiction comes close to what Renan calls the cult of the ancestors; these novels produce a type of ancestor worship which embodies a traditional, ethno-nationalist sentiment. These novels juxtapose national history with ancestral narratives to tell the story of 'anonymous ancestors called convicts'.<sup>38</sup> The implication is that narrating the national past is important not only for those who are descended from convicts, but also all Australians who need to understand this crucial formative stage of Australia's history. 'It seems that every Australian does understand, with either fear or fascination, that part of what he is, part of his vision of the world is based on who these people [the convicts] were, and what their government thought of them, and why they were sent so far'.<sup>39</sup> Usually these novels cast a group of characters who represent a prototypical Australian nation, using the resources of myth and memory to sketch out a potential Australian national identity. Although this is a reasonably normative nationalist project, this fiction also sows the seeds for Keneally's revision of this ancestral nationalism which is more apparent in his later work.

*Bring Larks and Heroes* narrates a particularly tragic, pessimistic version of the national past.<sup>40</sup> It casts early Australian society as being irredeemably sundered by various social divisions: between the convicts and their jailers, between the Irish and the English, and between the powerful and the powerless. The novel's major characters are cast as potential ancestors for the Australian nation, but this is a tragic identification because the two major characters who could found such a proto-nationalist family have their lives cut short. Thus, the potential inherent in Halloran's romantic-nationalist vision is not fulfilled, and this novel presents alienation as triumphant over any potential for human agency within the nation's history.

Perhaps not surprisingly, *Schindler's Ark* also presents a very tragic conception of history, saved only by the grace of an intergenerational cultural memory which is able to reconstruct the traumatic experience of the Holocaust.<sup>41</sup> In

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<sup>37</sup> Renan, 1882, cited in Smith, *Nationalism*, p. 37.

<sup>38</sup> Thomas Keneally *et al.*, *Australia: Beyond the Dreamtime*, Richmond: Heinemann, 1987, p. 11.

<sup>39</sup> Keneally, *Australia*, p. 18.

<sup>40</sup> Keneally, *Larks*.

<sup>41</sup> Keneally, *Schindler*.

this novel, children are particularly important; they represent the potential for the nation's survival which relates the Jewish experience to the particular circumstances of Australian settlement. Oral history and popular memory are essential in this novel, as they provide an important link between the communal experience and a sense of a nation informed by a type of ancestral narrative. However, *Schindler's Ark* presents a much more redemptive potential inherent in national tragedy, and the magic and myth of the tribe's survival is a saving grace which points towards some of the more positive, innovative aspects of Keneally's later novels.

*The Playmaker* offers a complete revision of the convict past compared to *Bring Larks and Heroes*.<sup>42</sup> Here the cast of the novel (most of whom are the cast in the production of Australia's first theatrical performance) are also nationalist prototypes, potential ancestors for all Australians in the modern age. However, this novel presents the convict past as a comedy, which expresses the potential for a positive unification of the characters into an ethno-nation. At the same time, the novel underscores the marginalisation of Indigenous Australians from this nationalist construct, and suggests that there is a need to move towards a more comprehensive program of reconciliation before the nation can be settled on its own terms. Keneally's later novels present extensions and variations of nationalist ancestry which clearly prefigure the more fundamental revision of his later work.

Ultimately, all of these novels use myth and memory to construct an ethno-nationalist identity which is founded on ancestral narratives. This is precisely the process Smith and Bhabha are at pains to describe and interrogate. At the same time, Keneally also presents contending visions of the national past which suggest the potential for conceiving of the nation in new ways. Chapter Four investigates how this transformation operates more fully in Keneally's recent work.

### ***Bring Larks and Heroes: The tragic portrayal of ethnic nationalism***

Keneally's subaltern, or 'ordinary', characters proliferate through his novels and function as figures of potential nationalist ancestry. These depictions highlight Keneally's preoccupation with a popular conception of society and culture; for Keneally it is the convicts and poorer emigrants who embody the national past,

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<sup>42</sup> Keneally, *Playmaker*.

rather than Governors, military officers, explorers or wealthy settlers. It is the nation's popular memory that Keneally is both drawing on and contributing to: he narrates the nation by casting his subaltern characters as potential ancestors for modern Australians. In this way he does outline the foundation of an oppositional culture, but this is not done via ancestry. These characters are the literary inheritors of the 'national type' that Vance Palmer outlined in 1954, the inventions of Furphy and Lawson.<sup>43</sup> In *Bring Larks and Heroes* this literary nation-building through leaving a line of descendants is a failed project, an abject tragedy.

In this novel, Keneally's underclass consists mainly of convicts and emigrants, usually with Irish backgrounds. They are rendered sympathetically, and Keneally depicts the psychology of the oppressed with well-crafted pathos. For instance, the Irish prisoner Quinn in *Bring Larks and Heroes* is terrified and daunted by the opulence of the Governor's residence and the authority he faces, although his petition is just.

Instantly, he wanted above all to escape from the house. The terror of officials lies in that they can be translucent beings, inhuman windows. With a little wisdom, they can so place themselves that centuries of kingships and Parliaments shine straight through them, flush onto poor creatures such as Quinn. To hell with the friendly cheeks! His Excellency was an official, and officials suffocated anyone they managed to trap down on paper.<sup>44</sup>

The mention of 'centuries of kingships and Parliaments' is an oblique reference to ancestry, and marks social division as a part of Australia's European inheritance. Quinn's deeply internalised sense of inferiority is the dominant marker of his 'ordinariness'. His sentence having expired, he asks only for his due release, but bureaucratic incompetence means that his records cannot be found and he must wait. Furthermore, in his naïveté he speaks of a corrupt scheme whereby the Provost-Marshal sells tickets for passage home; for unwittingly revealing this he is flogged. His brush with authority actually leaves him far worse off than he would have been if he had just kept silent. He is a forefather of subaltern status, and a nationalist ancestor who is tragically brutalised through the novel.

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<sup>43</sup> Vance Palmer, 'A Lost Tradition?' in *The Legend of the Nineties*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1954.

<sup>44</sup> Keneally, *Larks*, pp. 107-9.

Terry Byrne is an Irish character who is quite similar to Quinn, although as a Private in the Marines he enjoys some nominal authority. He experiences a recurring dream of being trapped in a pit of Irish black soil, having clods of earth hurled at him by a man who was God but wore ox-blood gaiters like a wealthy farmer.<sup>45</sup> This dream is a symbol of Byrne's acute persecution complex; he is a popular figure who is terrified of authority. The link between God and the landowner indicates an innate fear of all authority figures, and the setting of the dream in Ireland implies Byrne's fear that strict and brutal authority structures have been transplanted ready-made from Europe. Byrne is clearly a figure of the underclass, but his role is more complex than that of the passive Quinn; the nation to come is quite diverse. In contrast to Quinn, Byrne actually has more success engaging with authority figures and seeks to derive some personal benefit from this relationship.

To do this Byrne comes to know the respectable and powerful Blythes. His value to her is considerable: for Mrs Blythe, Byrne is a window into the underclass of the colony, and informer: he gives her a kind of access to the goings-on of the lower classes which is otherwise impossible due to her position of power. Between them they reflect the complete alienation and strict class structure in this national narration. Byrne becomes especially useful when he hears of the constant pain caused by Mrs Blythe's ulcers. He suggests an Irish folk-remedy:

I had an aunt whose leg was one dripping sore, Mrs Blythe. She used every cure she could think of, even faith and relics. But it wasn't God's will. Then a land-agent from Waterford was passing, and told her to take the giblets from one of the slightly bigger birds, a shrike or a kestrel say. You stew the giblets for a while, not very long, and then you cake them in soft soap to stop them sticking or going bad, and you wrap them up in a hot cloth. She put this poultice on, my aunt did, and praised the God of heaven, because she could feel it working on her trouble. Today she walks this earth as straight as any soldier.<sup>46</sup>

This speech is a folk-remedy based in cultural memory offered to a person of power, and the folk-medicine is effectively appropriated by a figure of authority. In addition, it actually works and earns credit for Byrne, who became 'delighted to

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<sup>45</sup> Keneally, *Larks*, p. 129.

<sup>46</sup> Keneally, *Larks*, p. 101.

have such a powerful invalid for a friend'.<sup>47</sup> However, the pittance of respect and praise which Byrne earns here does not translate into social mobility by the tragic conclusion of the novel. For conspiring to steal stores he is tortured with a particularly painful form of flogging, and after naming his accomplices is completely rejected from the Blythes' front parlour, sent outside to where the Marines would be sure to make him bury the bodies of Ann and Halloran.<sup>48</sup> Byrne's fate is truly pitiable: he is not given the martyrdom for which he longs, but is subjected to the ultimate punishment of continued life. His role as symbol of the underclass in *Bring Larks and Heroes* highlights the tragic resolution of the novel, and as a potential ancestor his position is lamentable.

Terry's gibletpoultice remedy is mirrored by another rural Irish custom. Ann wears a red cord around her waist to prevent her becoming pregnant. 'It was called a St Megan's cord. You got an indulgence of four hundred days for wearing it, and all the women of her family had always put their trust in it in matters of female chemistry.'<sup>49</sup> Although at one point Ann and Halloran think it might have failed them, it does work (like Terry's poultice) and Ann does not conceive. While the folk-remedy does eventually fulfil its task even after Byrne's betrayal, it functions more effectively as a symbol of Ann and Phelim's 'secret marriage'.

Quinn and Byrne are just minor examples of characters that embody 'the estrangement of the individual from society'.<sup>50</sup> In this way *Bring Larks and Heroes* portrays a failed national project and outlines the impossibility of a collective identity. Ann and Halloran's relationship is loving and has the potential to conceive and give birth to the nation, but fails to do so. These characters become ancestors to no-one.

Ancestral themes often relate to the prevalence of children, whose death or survival gives clues to the shape of the nation to come. In *Bring Larks and Heroes* children are not present at all; they are only mentioned or hinted at, and their significance lies in their absence. This novel's bleak, negative picture deploys the

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<sup>47</sup> Keneally, *Larks*, p. 102.

<sup>48</sup> Keneally, *Larks*, p. 240.

<sup>49</sup> Keneally, *Larks*, pp. 28-9. Incidentally, the red cord (like Byrne's poultice) evokes the cultural memory of the Irish in Australia and so magnifies the significance of Irish ancestry. See J.S. Ryan, 'Furphy 1: The Red Cord: A Neglected Folk Motif in the Early Fiction of Thomas Keneally', *Notes and Furphies*, 26, 1991, pp. 2-3.

<sup>50</sup> Brian Kiernan, 'Thomas Keneally and the Australian Novel: A Study of *Bring Larks and Heroes*', *Southerly*, Vol. 28 No. 3, 1968, p. 189.

absence of children to further alienate the characters from each other, and the infant society at large.

The Blythes are trapped in a loveless, adversarial marriage which has borne no children; they give the nation no future. This is a post-colonial theme: in the new world, full of dangers and deprivations, people were reduced to the basic necessities of life, and so the need to unite with a mate and produce offspring may have been felt as a higher priority than in the relatively settled and safe Europe. The significance of children in Australian literature is explained in Peter Pierce's *The Country of Lost Children*, although this idea pertains more directly to *Schindler's Ark*.<sup>51</sup> The production of children enables characters to become 'tomorrow's ancestors', and the absence of children indicates the unredeemed pessimism and tragedy of *Bring Larks and Heroes*.

The potential for characters to bear offspring and become prototypical nationalists is always cut short. Near the beginning we are told of the death of Reverend Calverly's son, who contracted smallpox and died.<sup>52</sup> This is highlighted when Calverly, on a hunting expedition, thinks he has found the body of his son and cradles its head close to him, before realising it is actually a black boy he has found which bears a resemblance due to its affliction with smallpox.<sup>53</sup> In essence, the genealogical line of the colonising mission has been severed in the new land; Calverly 'remembered the heartless way long rain dealt with churchyards and went out with a lantern to see if his son's grave had sunk in the outline of a coffin, threatening the resurrection'.<sup>54</sup> This episode regarding Calverly's lost son not only plants ambivalence at the very heart of the colonising mission, it encapsulates the tragic ancestry which depicts the failure of the nationalist dream in Australia.

Tragic ancestral nationalism is even more directly represented in the relationship between Ann and Halloran. This relationship produces an intricate moral dilemma: although they are in love, there are as yet no Catholic priests in the colony to marry them in the proper way. The 'secret marriage' operates beneath and apart from the established structures of civil society and so provides an illustration of the social underclass and its oppositional relationship to authority. Potentially,

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<sup>51</sup> Peter Pierce, *The Country of Lost Children: An Australian Anxiety*, Melbourne, Cambridge University Press, 1999.

<sup>52</sup> Keneally, *Larks*, p. 20.

<sup>53</sup> Keneally, *Larks*, p. 22.

<sup>54</sup> Keneally, *Larks*, p. 92.

Ann and Phelim are ‘tomorrow’s ancestors’, and their relationship needs no higher authority to confirm this fact; their lives are a potential myth of origin for the Australian nation.

In civilised parts, people formed unions for subtle reasons; but in a desert, they united to ward off oblivion. The secret marriage of Ann Rush and Halloran was an attempt at warding off oblivion. It was a pledge by each to each other’s survival. It was an attempt to earn pity or leniency from the providence, sultan-wise, sultan-cool, who watched them from the far side of the nightly lattice of stars.<sup>55</sup>

This unity, sense of common purpose and survival instinct is characteristic of nationalist sentiment; at this point it is possible for Ann and Phelim to become national forbears. They are attempting to found a nation against the odds, since neither of them occupies a position of real power or authority. The difficulties are many: in particular, with no social sanction on their marriage, it becomes unstable and they are unsure of where they stand. ‘It is not possible, except on the most sanguine days, for Halloran to believe beyond doubt that he is a husband and has a bride.’<sup>56</sup> Later Ann expresses her doubt and her sense of shame: ‘Remember how brides used to be at home, Phelim? Blue coats and long mantles and just a bit of worsted stocking showing. None of them ever looked to me as if they were raging under their decent clothes. Is there something wrong with me?’<sup>57</sup> Their marriage is never properly consummated and the novel ends with an overarching sense of alienation and futility, partly because the nation-to-be is not authorised in the proper way. ‘The very fact that we feel their defeat as something terrible is itself an assertion that they have achieved something of substance in the fleeting victories of their doomed lives’.<sup>58</sup> While they do succeed in helping to construct an oppositional culture within the novel, they do not contribute directly to the foundation of the nation because they leave no heirs.

The predominant factor in the conclusion of *Bring Larks and Heroes* is that Ann and Phelim are both hanged for their crime, leaving no offspring. This is the great tragedy of their deaths: they leave no-one behind to remember them or speak for them after they have gone. Right at the climax of the novel, when Halloran is

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<sup>55</sup> Keneally, *Larks*, p. 11.

<sup>56</sup> Keneally, *Larks*, p. 11.

<sup>57</sup> Keneally, *Larks*, p. 26.

<sup>58</sup> John McLaren, ‘New Novels’, *Overland*, No. 38, Summer 1968, p. 42.

being taken in a daze to the gallows, we hear an expression of the utmost grief which evokes particular memories.

There was a woman's voice wailing a sound that had pontifical authority for Halloran. He could not avoid it washing through him. It brought with it even its own sensations, coming to him with the smell of dry pinewood coffins, tallow candles, the sad hearths of bereaved families. It was the *Trougha* wail, an old friend and demon from the awe-struck twilights of his childhood, when from kitchen corners, he eyed the willowy cleanliness of dead neighbours. He lifted his ear up to the old sound come all those miles to see him to his grave.

*This is how to mourn the dead*, he thought, proud of the wail, forgetting the dead was Ann.<sup>59</sup>

This evocation of the Irish wake underscores the tragedy of Ann and Halloran's death and again emphasises the persistence of Irish cultural memory. With them perish future unborn children and the Irish diaspora finds no secure foothold in the new continent, despite its tenacious grip on memory. Thus, their personal tragedy is related to the Irish national tragedy, and these fears of genocide are certainly paralleled in *Schindler's Ark*.<sup>60</sup> The absence of a child for Ann and Phelim is highlighted by her use of the St Megan's cord, as well as their (ultimately unfounded) belief earlier on that she may have been with child.<sup>61</sup> Although having a child would have been very difficult for them, Halloran is still disappointed: 'though he had become drunk with release, he felt deprived of the child for whom, all the week, he had been practising his valour'.<sup>62</sup> This lost potential is acutely portrayed: although Kiernan argues that the novel is predominantly comic, he concedes that 'fundamental to its form is that Halloran and Ann represent the possibilities of life, and social life, unattainable in such a denatured society'.<sup>63</sup> This impossibility means that Ann and Halloran are unable to become national progenitors, or 'tomorrow's ancestors'.

Aside from his role as potential father, Halloran is the novel's protagonist: he is a romantic tragic hero caught between his dream of a secure family life and his outrage at the obvious injustices around him. The potential for bearing offspring is

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<sup>59</sup> Keneally, *Larks*, p. 244.

<sup>60</sup> Although the initial reception of *Bring Larks and Heroes* focused on the rather obvious themes of alienation and moral responsibility, it took some nine years for Molloy to explore Keneally's portrayal of the complexities of Irishness in this novel. F.C. Molloy, 'An Irish Conflict in *Bring Larks and Heroes*', *Australian Literary Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 4, October 1976, pp. 389-98.

<sup>61</sup> Keneally, *Larks*, pp. 88-91.

<sup>62</sup> Keneally, *Larks*, p. 91.

very close to Halloran's heart; his disappointment is unexpectedly acute when he realises he is not to be a father. It is as if Halloran feels that his life in the colony will be worthwhile if he leaves behind a child to carry on his legacy, to remember him to succeeding generations. This is romantic nationalism at its most powerful: Halloran wishes to transcend the banal realities of his life by founding a family line which will remember him as its ancestor.

Halloran's romantic sensibility is illustrated by the dream where the artist Ewers, here symbolising an artistic creativity which mirrors Halloran's, gives him a seed to plant; he hesitates but eventually plants the seed before it is too late.<sup>64</sup> Clearly, Halloran is deeply concerned with new beginnings, with taking action and allowing the consequences of his actions to grow. Because he feels so constrained about his life choices and feels he has little free will, he wishes to have a child in order to secure his identity and place in the world, to create something which will live on after him. He is a fine example of a character wishing to become an ancestor to secure a sense of self-identity.<sup>65</sup> Halloran's desperate yearning for a bloodline is most evident in one of his poems, the one shown to the Governor:

And when Beauty nods silver -  
Kine cropping the lushness of my edge -  
May the smiles of our shy grand-daughters  
Bring larks and heroes to our hedge.<sup>66</sup>

Halloran's poem is a vision for the future, a future he would obviously like to create for himself. The central aspect of his vision is the 'smiles of our shy grand-daughters'; here he envisages his children's children far in the future, and he even goes so far as to imagine their smiles to 'bring larks and heroes,' the young men of the future who will also continue his line. In seeking to narrate the as-yet unborn nation, Halloran imaginatively casts himself as one of 'tomorrow's ancestors'. Notably, the poem also reflects a pastoralist ideal in its vision of the unborn nation. This dream is what gives Halloran hope, and reconciles him to his situation in the colony. The great tragedy of the novel is that his dream is never realised; moreover, his poem is never appreciated, merely thrown onto the fire by the Governor without

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<sup>63</sup> Kiernan, 'A Study of *Bring Larks and Heroes*', p. 199.

<sup>64</sup> Keneally, *Larks*, p. 195.

<sup>65</sup> This aspect of the novel reflects one of the deep connections between Halloran and national development which Hergenhan identifies. See Hergenhan, *Unnatural Lives*, p. 139.

a second glance, and is thus relegated to the ash heap of amnesia. The failure of Halloran to establish an ancestral line is the crucial factor in the tragic resolution of *Bring Larks and Heroes*.

Ultimately, *Bring Larks and Heroes* presents a tragic, pessimistic vision of the nation's potential through the establishment of ancestral origins; its major characters are unable to become 'tomorrow's ancestors' and take part in the foundation of a viable nation. The stark disparities between the positions of the characters are never resolved, and there is no suggestion of any reconciliation. This novel presents a view of nationalist ancestry which is never completely fulfilled; a nation thus conceived can only be stillborn. The problem is that Halloran's romantic idea of becoming a nationalist founder is inconsistent with the novel's reality; this is a seed of Smith's ethno-symbolic nationalism, but one which contains no fulfilment. The novel itself does, indirectly, suggest the nation's future, but the potential for this to occur through ancestry is foreclosed. Here the mythicised lines of descent are prematurely cut short, although this irredeemably tragic portrayal of nationalist ancestry is the starting-point for ancestral narratives which take the idea much further.

### ***Schindler's Ark: Intergenerational cultural memory***

As in *Bring Larks and Heroes*, ancestry is significant in *Schindler's Ark* but primarily in a negative sense. While there are no direct ancestral relationships outlined, the significance of communal heritage is evident in Holocaust survivors, particularly the children who embody the hopes and aspirations of the Jewish people, standing for the potential of the Jewish nation. This idea is elaborated by Peter Pierce, in *The Country of Lost Children: an Australian Anxiety*, which argues that the motif of children lost in the Australian bush reveals deeply-hidden anxieties about European belonging in Australia. Because *Schindler's Ark* is less about landscape than about the Holocaust, the innocence and powerlessness of children underscores the brutality of mass genocide.

This is Keneally's specifically Australian contribution to Holocaust narratives. Although he is an 'outsider', he can relate to the themes of tribal survival through

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<sup>66</sup> Keneally, *Larks*, p. 225.

the figures of children because his own country has a cultural history of having lost children. It is one thing to have children lost in an indifferent landscape, but Pierce argues that more recent child-loss narratives implicate adults in acts of kidnapping and molestation, and introduce the question of human agency. This certainly applies to the Holocaust context: children are targeted and victimised because they represent the nation's future potential. So when he tells of Jewish children narrowly escaping a horrible fate, Keneally may well have in mind Rory's Irish-Australian daughter in *Such Is Life*, who tragically dies whilst lost in the bush.<sup>67</sup> Notably, *Schindler's Ark* relates the survival of such figures.

Children are highlighted throughout the narrative because they are potential ancestors of the future nation. This is embodied in the little girl who is known as 'red Genia', because of her love for the colour red. When approached and recognised by a family friend, Genia is guardedly unresponsive:

'Madam, you're mistaken. My mother's name is not Eva. It's Jasha.' She went on naming the names in the fictional Polish genealogy in which her parents and the peasants had schooled her in case the Blue Police or the SS ever questioned her. The family frowned at each other, brought to a standstill by the untoward cunning of the child, finding it obscene but not wanting to undermine it, since it might, before the week was out, be essential survival equipment.<sup>68</sup>

The 'obscene' nature of the little girl's rehearsed genealogy means she cannot even own up to her true family for fear of reprisal against her Jewish origin. Here, Jewish ancestry is significant in an inverted kind of way – it is something to be disowned and distanced from in order to survive. Genia is an important symbol in the novel; she represents childhood innocence but also a kind of perverse adult cunning – she has the 'essential survival equipment'.

Keneally's narrative voice becomes heightened when Genia is involved. This is most apparent during the liquidation of the ghetto, which Oskar views from the vantage-point of a nearby hill; the narrative voice expresses the horror and outrage Oskar feels. Genia is being led away at the end of a column of children, and Oskar is horrified to see her turn around to witness a brutal murder on the pavement. 'They were doing it in front of *her* ... it proved, in a way no-one could

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<sup>67</sup> Joseph Furphy, *Such is Life, being certain extracts from the diary of Tom Collins*, (ed. with intro. by Francis Devlin-Glass), Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1991 [1903].

ignore, their serious intent ... they believed all the witnesses would perish too.’<sup>69</sup> This is where Oskar decides to wage his private war against the Nazis, and the reader shares his outraged moral response to the pogrom.

The figure of the child as a symbol for the Jews’ hopes for survival is vividly illustrated when one anonymous adolescent seeks to evade an *Aktion* and hides in the filthy latrine, only to find ten other children already in there.<sup>70</sup> These scenes narrating the efforts children make to survive are vividly and poignantly illustrated, and actually engage the reader such that one feels personally for the Jewish people, and shares their minor triumphs. One such case is where two families experience a bizarre kind of reunion through the barbed wire; the women and the men connect with each other and establish that the family is relatively safe, protected by their status as Schindler’s employees.<sup>71</sup> In such scenes, children symbolise the Jewish nation; within the narrative they are ‘tomorrow’s ancestors’ because they personify survival amidst such brutal genocide.

Keneally’s concern with the Jews is similar to his treatment of the convicts; he gives expression to popular memory which is originally recorded within oral history.<sup>72</sup> He notes that the novel is based closely on fifty interviews conducted with Schindler survivors, and extended time spent with Leopold Pfefferberg, who introduced Keneally to the story of Schindler. It is thus the first-hand accounts of survivors on which the myth of the tribe is based. Keneally dedicates the novel partly to Pfefferberg, ‘who by zeal and persistence caused this book to be written’.

Memory is not infallible: it often contains absences or amnesia, especially in cases of traumatic hardship. The first Jew we meet is Helen Hirsch, a servant of Goeth who endures his beatings and abuse for the sake of her sister. When Oskar meets her she mentions but cannot fully express the trauma she has experienced: ‘She shook her head and shrugged, as if reproving herself for talking so much. She didn’t want to say any more, she couldn’t convey the history of her punishments, her repeated experience of the Hauptsturmfuhrer’s knuckles’.<sup>73</sup> Helen is repressing

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<sup>68</sup> Keneally, *Schindler*, p. 120.

<sup>69</sup> Keneally, *Schindler*, pp. 142-3

<sup>70</sup> Keneally, *Schindler*, pp. 284-5.

<sup>71</sup> Keneally, *Schindler*, pp. 354-6

<sup>72</sup> Strong Australian undercurrents suggest that as a folk-hero Schindler could well be consider ‘the Ned Kelly of Cracow.’ See Michael Hollington, ‘The Ned Kelly of Cracow: Keneally’s *Schindler’s Ark*’, *Meanjin*, Vol. 42 No. 1, Autumn 1983, pp. 42-6.

<sup>73</sup> Keneally, *Schindler*, pp. 30-1.

her memory, or at least forcefully repressing any expression of these experiences. This is, in part, the effect of a particular kind of shame: the shame of the victim who at once blames herself for her beatings and cannot justify her continued survival in the Goeth household, given the deaths of so many of her family and friends. The result is a kind of willed amnesia, a conscious forgetting of traumatic experiences because they are simply too painful to deal with, or even remember. This is the kind of ‘survivor shame’ around which *The Great Shame* is constructed.

In some ways, the historical trauma experienced by the Jewish people is analogous to that of the Irish. This analogy can be followed in relation to the experience of the people, folk-memory and its repression – here lies the personal significance of the novel for Keneally.<sup>74</sup> It narrates a type of survival of which Keneally himself is barely aware of being a part.

Keneally obviously intended a connection between the two. Both the Irish and the Jews are peoples who have historically been underdogs, oppressed in a variety of ways, under different regimes, and at different periods. Although these actual experiences differ, they suffered a similar kind of oppression and so responded similarly, as groups and as individuals. This response is often characterised by a personal sense of difference and inferiority, an ingrained subservience to those in power. Also, group divisions are highlighted, principally divisions between those who respond with moderate, co-operative methods and those who support unequivocal militant resistance. These are the issues which vex the popular memory, the issues which are supposedly resolved through creation of a nation-state. In terms of the teleology of political nationalism, Jewish ancestral narratives can be linked to those of the Irish.

Many of Keneally’s ‘ordinary’ characters have internalised their loyalties, but suffer internally when oppressed within certain power relations. Izhak Stern is this type of character; obedient to the edict, he tells Schindler he is a Jew when he first meets him.<sup>75</sup> He is instantly wary of Schindler because he is German and wears the badge of the Nazis. However, Stern is a far more complex and highly-wrought character than Keneally’s convict subalterns Quinn and Byrne. Stern was not among the ‘sanguine ones’ who believed that ‘the situations would settle, the race would

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<sup>74</sup> Keneally himself emphasised the importance of remembering the past. See Thomas Keneally, ‘Lest Gentiles Forget’, *The Age*, 4 February 1994, p. 11.

<sup>75</sup> Keneally, *Schindler*, p. 48.

survive by petitioning, by buying off the authorities – it was the old method ... In the end the civil authorities needed Jews, especially in a nation where they were one in every eleven'.<sup>76</sup> Stern and his people are in significant danger, and his response is appropriately complex. Although he is at first wary of Schindler, he warms to him quickly and realises that he is a good man.

There was, of course, in men like Stern an ancestral gift for sniffing out the just Goy, who could be used as a buffer or partial refuge against the savageries of the others. It was a sense for where a safe house might be, a zone of potential shelter.<sup>77</sup>

Notably, it is Stern's *ancestral* gift that he calls upon, based on his membership of a people with a particular experience. The Jewish popular memory is suffused with oppressive episodes, and Stern expresses his membership of the tribe through securing personal protection from Oskar. Between them, a relationship develops which acquires the characteristics of myth.

Oskar's treatment of the Jews contrasts sharply with that of other Germans, and he becomes enshrined in the popular memory as a saviour. Primarily, he saves them from the Holocaust, gives them shelter and food in his industrial plant, and even moves his factory to Czechoslovakia to protect them from the death throes of the Third Reich. He uses the cover of his factory as a munitions plant fulfilling important military contracts in order to avoid the attention of local SS authorities, and bribes them heavily to keep them on his side. Moreover, he facilitates the practice of Jewish culture and religion; Chapter Twenty-six tells how only in the freedom of Oskar's camp could Josef and Rebecca form a relationship and conduct their wedding in something resembling a traditional Jewish manner.<sup>78</sup> Schindler even encourages Rabbi Levartov to conduct the Shabbat ceremonies, and slips him a bottle of wine for this purpose.<sup>79</sup> Later, in Czechoslovakia, Oskar buys a cemetery plot to be used by his Jewish employees with full ceremony, principally for the numerous dead just arrived from Goleszow.

It is clear from the recollections of all Brinnlitz prisoners that this internment had enormous moral force within the camp. The distorted corpses unloaded from the freight cars had seemed less than human.

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<sup>76</sup> Keneally, *Schindler*, p. 49.

<sup>77</sup> Keneally, *Schindler*, p. 50.

<sup>78</sup> Keneally, *Schindler*, pp. 264-60.

<sup>79</sup> Keneally, *Schindler*, p. 231.

Looking at them, you became frightened for your own precarious humanity. The inhuman thing was beyond feeding, washing, warming. The only way left to restore it – as well as yourself – to humanity was through ritual. Levartov's rites therefore, the exalted plain-chant of Kaddish, had a far larger gravity for the Brinnlitz prisoners than such ceremonies could ever have had in the relative tranquillity of pre-war Cracow.<sup>80</sup>

These central episodes relating the salvation of the tribe have a mythic resonance, and are obviously part of the myths of descent for Holocaust survivors and their children. Keneally surrounds Oskar with myth; indeed, the whole novel can be considered a myth in itself. He often refers to 'the Schindler mythology, the almost religious supposition among many prisoners ... that Oskar was a provider of outrageous salvation'.<sup>81</sup> The myth built up throughout the novel is constantly augmented by anecdotes and little stories which exemplify Oskar's diplomacy, his shrewdness, and his endless capacity for circumventing the hateful policies of the Nazis. In this way Keneally enables the reader to see through the eyes of the Jewish people Oskar saves, and to understand why they idolise him. It is firmly based on the actual testimonies of Schindler survivors, and so we understand the myth more in terms of how the people hold it.<sup>82</sup> The most remarkable effect of this is that readers are encouraged to engage with the myth, to suspend their natural disbelief, and to feel the resonance of the popular myth. The myth transcends truth and falsity.

From late 1943, there is a story about Schindler which runs among the Plaszow survivors with the electric excitement of a myth. For the thing about a myth is not whether it is true or not, nor whether it *should* be true, but that it is somehow truer than truth itself ... Oskar had become a minor god of deliverance, double-faced – in the Greek manner – as any small god, endowed with all the human vices, many-handed, subtly powerful, capable of bringing gratuitous but secure salvation.<sup>83</sup>

Myth has a universal relevance which transcends the simplistic binary of fact versus fiction. Ultimately the stories about Schindler, whether actually true in the realm of objective fact or not, are so representative of his character that those who knew him best are prepared to acquiesce to any bending of the truth. It is almost a consensus among the survivors that Oskar is, and should be, regarded as a minor god. The

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<sup>80</sup> Keneally, *Schindler*, p. 388.

<sup>81</sup> Keneally, *Schindler*, p. 234.

<sup>82</sup> Keneally, *Schindler*, p. 13.

many anecdotes about him highlight this opinion, and together they form a myth of descent in a proto-nationalist form.

In this myth-making enterprise Keneally utilises contrasts between major characters who act as foils to each other, and has recourse to diametric opposites such as good and evil to give his narrative an epic, or even melodramatic quality.<sup>84</sup> From the outset Keneally establishes the contrast between the characters of Oskar and Amon; in some ways they are quite similar: 'Goeth ... shared with Oskar not only his year of birth, his religion, his weakness for drink, but a massive physique as well.'<sup>85</sup> However, while Oskar is gentle and benevolent, Amon is cruel and despotic; he is introduced just as he is about to carry out orders to liquidate the ghetto. This is where Oskar had the final irrefutable proof of the brutality of the Nazi regime: 'No-one could find refuge any more behind the idea of German culture.'<sup>86</sup>

In the mythopoetic world of the novel Oskar represents good and Amon represents evil. The novel is constructed so that these two characters are diametrically opposed, set up as a hero and a villain engaged in conflict over the lives (and souls) of the Jews of Europe. Keneally conceived the narrative to operate in this way: 'This is the story of the pragmatic triumph of good over evil ... Fatal human malice is the staple of narrators, original sin the mother-fluid of historians. But it is a risky enterprise to have to write of virtue'.<sup>87</sup> This foreshadows the revision of history between *Bring Larks and Heroes* and *The Playmaker*, and in this way *Schindler's Ark* is suitably positioned between the two. Through opposition the novel acquires a stronger mythic resonance. The idea of Oskar and Amon engaged in battle receives its quintessential expression in the scene where they are playing cards and Oskar wins Amon's maid, Helen, whom he promised to save very early in the novel. Oskar 'did not seem to see ... any parallel between God and Satan playing cards for human souls'.<sup>88</sup> The irony of the situation is that Amon does not understand the nature of the battle; he never stops believing that Oskar is his friend

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<sup>83</sup> Keneally, *Schindler*, pp. 251-2.

<sup>84</sup> I use the term 'melodrama' in the sense referred to by Peter Pierce, *Australian Melodramas: Thomas Keneally's Fiction* (UQP Studies In Australian Literature), St Lucia, QLD: University of Queensland Press, 1995. Pierce uses the term 'melodrama' to refer to a narrative technique which is particularly suitable for representing times of danger or distress.

<sup>85</sup> Keneally, *Schindler*, p. 175.

<sup>86</sup> Keneally, *Schindler*, p. 143.

<sup>87</sup> Keneally, *Schindler*, p. 14.

and has no idea that he is actually saving the Jews. Nonetheless, the narrative represents these two characters as the personifications of good and evil, engaged in an epic battle of cosmic proportions which intensifies the Jewish myth of survival in a proto-ancestral narrative.

Ancestry is central to this novel because Schindler saves over a thousand Jews who otherwise would succumb to the Holocaust. All these *Schindlerjuden* are potential progenitors of the tribe, especially the children who figure so prominently in the text. This embodies the future's potential, in contrast to the abject hopelessness of *Bring Larks and Heroes*. This element of survival is particularly highlighted in Stephen Spielberg's film, *Schindler's List*.<sup>89</sup> The final scene depicts each descendant of the *Schindlerjuden* placing a pebble on Schindler's grave; by the end it is covered by thousands of pebbles. The survival of ancestors means the survival of the tribe; this is a collective goal rather than an individual one.

The 'Schindler myth' is a myth of Holocaust survival, and thus a myth of origin in a concrete sense. The descendants of survivors have a personal investment in this story, and for them it is a powerful ancestral narrative. When the Final Solution is gearing up, Oskar visits Amon to give him a 'present'. The transportation of Jews in cattle-wagons is a horrifying metaphor for their dehumanisation, and when Oskar sees many wagons lined up in the blistering heat, headed for Mauthausen, the evil Amon states, 'They don't know what complaint is yet'.<sup>90</sup> Viewing this spectacle, Oskar cannot help but to lend some humanity to the poor wretches inside the carriages, and he organises to have the fire hoses spray water over and through the wagons, to relieve those suffering inside. While Oskar attempts to ameliorate the horror of the brutal transports, Amon sees it as a kind of joke, a final cruelty to the Jews. 'Amon was so willing to enter into the spirit of the event that he permitted the doors of the wagons to be opened and buckets of water to be passed in and the dead, with their pink, swollen faces, to be lifted out ... [he] was willing to do anything for the sake of the comedy of life.'<sup>91</sup> Oskar even goes to the length of bribing a soldier at the rear of the train to open the doors at each station and allow water to be given. The strength of the myth is clear when two survivors later recall that the prisoners of that transport were treated with some

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<sup>88</sup> Keneally, *Schindler*, p. 303.

<sup>89</sup> *Schindler's List*. Dir. Stephen Spielberg. MCA, 1993.

<sup>90</sup> Keneally, *Schindler*, p. 288.

humanity. This memorable scene is an important element of the Schindler myth, and the novel as a type of ancestral narrative.

Oskar often seems to magically save some of his prisoners from the rigours of Nazi policy. When the young Dresner accidentally cracks a machine and is charged by the officer with industrial sabotage, a hanging offence, the reader wonders how Oskar will manage to deal with the situation. He performs remarkably when, as chairman of the court, he outwardly abuses the Jews for their incompetence and stupidity with such vitriol that the sabotage charge is entirely glossed over, as if they were incapable of sabotage. 'Brinnlitz maintained its prisoners' lives by a series of stunts so rapid they were nearly magical.'<sup>92</sup> When Schindler is having difficulty transferring his female prisoners, 'according to Schindler mythology', he sends a girlfriend to encourage the officers of Auschwitz to send them to Brinnlitz. 'It is a scene ... worthy of one of those events in the Old Testament when for the good of the tribe a woman is offered to the invader.'<sup>93</sup> Here the mythical resonance is palpable – this is truly a myth of the tribe. Finally, there is the anecdote of how Oskar evaded a particularly dangerous inspection by an officer who was determined not to be 'seduced'. As the story goes, Oskar tripped the man at the top of the stairs, sending him down with a broken shin and leg.

The anecdote is one of those stories that reflect people's picture of Oskar as a bounteous avatar, a provider who covers all eventualities. Whether the SS man did cartwheel down the steps of Deutsche Email Fabrik shattering his shin and leg-bone is not in itself important. And one has to admit, in natural justice, that the inmates had the right to spread this sort of fable. They were the ones in deepest jeopardy. If the fable let them down, they would pay for it most bitterly.<sup>94</sup>

The Schindler myth was a myth people lived by, and put their faith in. Keneally thus illustrates how a mythical apprehension of the world may help a people in danger to feel more comfortable, to cope with their traumatic experiences. Furthermore, it is a myth passed down through the generations to explain the miracle of survival. In a similar way, the Irish people mythologised their national leaders during the Famine, and so their characters were built up in a peculiar way which cast them as 'tomorrow's ancestors'.

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<sup>91</sup> Keneally, *Schindler*, p. 289.

<sup>92</sup> Keneally, *Schindler*, p. 369.

<sup>93</sup> Keneally, *Schindler*, p. 346.

In his depiction of Holocaust survivors, Keneally gives form to the unborn nation. The metaphors for redemption which Keneally employs are most often cast in terms of freedom and the potential for a space to live: the national territory. This is especially clear when it comes to the novel's title, *Schindler's Ark*, which evokes salvation. Schindler is definitely a figure of redemption in this novel, because his efforts to save the Jews under his care are heroic, almost superhuman. He is a *de facto* founding father. The importance of his role in the lives of so many people is poignantly illustrated near the end, where some of the prisoners get together and make a gold ring out of one prisoner's bridgework. The ring is inscribed in Hebrew with a Talmudic verse, 'He who saves a single life, saves the world entire'.<sup>95</sup> This underscores the themes of salvation and deliverance throughout the novel, which are so tied up in popular memory.

Some further examples of metaphors of redemption occur towards the conclusion. When Oskar has shifted most of his Jews to relative safety at Brinnlitz, he approaches Mancie Rosner and returns her husband's violin which Oskar reclaimed from the SS impound.<sup>96</sup> This touching gesture indicates the effort that Schindler is prepared to expend in order to make the Jews comfortable. However, the significance of the metaphor comes into play when one considers that it was more than just a gesture of warmth or friendship, it was a promise of life: 'He smiled in a way that seemed to promise her the ultimate return of the violinist to go with the violin.'<sup>97</sup> The strangeness of freedom after such a long captivity is illustrated by the young Sternberg, who gulps down handfuls of sugar as soon as he enters the local town. 'It made him cruelly ill ... liberty and the day of plenty had to be approached gradually.'<sup>98</sup> Here the sack of sugar is a metaphor for freedom, and the survival of the Jewish characters and even the entire Jewish tribe. In this way the novel, while predominantly tragic, produces a more positive and redemptive ancestral narrative than the utter bleakness of *Bring Larks and Heroes*. *Schindler's Ark* functions as an effective ancestral narrative which uses myth and memory to create group identification through a relationship with the past. The nation is narrated into being, having survived an attempted genocide.

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<sup>94</sup> Keneally, *Schindler*, p. 373.

<sup>95</sup> Keneally, *Schindler*, p. 399.

<sup>96</sup> Keneally, *Schindler*, p. 360.

<sup>97</sup> Keneally, *Schindler*, p. 360.

<sup>98</sup> Keneally, *Schindler*, p. 416.

## ***The Playmaker: National Ancestry Towards Comic Reconciliation***

*The Playmaker* functions just like *Bring Larks and Heroes*: it narrates the nation using myth and memory to produce a cast of characters who are portrayed as generic, prototypical national ancestors. However, the seeds of redemption sown in *Schindler's Ark* come to fruition in this novel, as it poses a broadly comic revision of the nation's past.<sup>99</sup> Indeed, by the end of the novel, themes of unity and transcendence are so all-pervading that Keneally portrays a markedly different notion of national ancestry. The suggestion of a need for reconciliation both problematises and extends the nature of Australian settler culture. This prefigures the more complete transformation of national identity which is the subject of the next chapter.

Just as in *Bring Larks and Heroes*, *The Playmaker* establishes a cast of characters who represent nationalist founders, or 'tomorrow's ancestors'. Convicts and officers are both significant, and have different roles to play. The narrative represents the first production of a play in Australia in 1789, that of George Farquhar's *The Recruiting Officer*. It is the story of Australia's national formation, the first important steps towards psychological selfhood and political independence. The process of rehearsing the play draws the players (and the playmaker) into a nationalistic kind of social unity, with common values and aspirations. The reader is witnessing the formation of Australian settler society in its earliest phase; the bonds formed during the production of the play will eventually transcend the authority of the Governor, the far-off British monarch, and even the Christian God whose agent on Earth tries in vain to stop the 'immoral' play. This novel depicts a moment of origin for the Australian nation and its cast of 'tomorrow's ancestors'.

Lieutenant Ralph Clark is a complex character and the playmaker of the novel's title, whose circumstances foreground the various social divisions in the novel and suggest the need for some kind of reconciliation. Clark is tormented by dreams of his wife; he fears that his distance from her might produce a challenge to her fidelity. His shows signs of homesickness: torn between love and hatred, desire

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<sup>99</sup> When writing the novel Keneally commented that the first performance of a play in Australia 'was an extraordinary counterpoint to the savagery of life in Sydney at that time.' See Baker, *Yacker 2*, p. 121.

and repudiation, he cannot reconcile his new living conditions with his marital status. It is in his relationship with Mary Brenham that a kind of reconciliation is made possible. At the beginning of the novel he is very distanced from the convicts; he watches auditions for parts in the play, and his role as playmaker and authority-figure is paramount. However, by the end of the novel, the performance of the play has produced a kind of communion between all members of the colony.

Clark is portrayed as a decent, compassionate character. In particular, his intuitive sense of injustice at the capture of Arabanoo, an Indigenous man, resonates with modern ideas of social justice. He states his views at the time, and at the formal dinner: 'Ralph would be left later with a memory of reiterating many times ... that he took no pride in the triumph of the Indian's capture'.<sup>100</sup> Here, Ralph's role is to emphasise the injustice of the capture: using the hindsight which is essential to historical fiction Keneally underscores the early need for reconciliation between the settlers and the Indigenous population of Australia. Although Indigenous reconciliation is not clearly enacted by the conclusion of the novel, the possibilities for it are suggested. Contact with Australia's Indigenous population makes nation-building a fraught process: this is a theme which becomes much stronger in *Bettany's Book*.

Part II introduces the novel's central concern with the convicts, and particularly the cultural memory they bring from their London backgrounds. The Byrne-like character Harry Brewer is haunted by his crimes of fraud, embezzlement and betrayal, and particularly his awareness that he is 'hangable material'.<sup>101</sup> But the greatest weight on his conscience is that in London he swore an oath to a canting crew, and so gave his allegiance to the criminal underworld. He then betrayed this oath by joining the Navy before he could be caught, and so fears reprisal from both the law and the canting crew. As such, he stands between two worlds; he has no place either in society proper or in the criminal underclass. His position here serves to highlight the stark disparity between these worlds; the underworld is

another kingdom, its own commonwealth, separate from the rest of England, which he could visit for a mere outlay of cash. For it was, said Harry, barely a borough of Britain, that reach of St Giles. Home

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<sup>100</sup> Keneally, *Playmaker*, p. 138.

<sup>101</sup> Keneally, *Playmaker*, p. 96.

ground of St Giles's Greek or cant, the criminal language, bristling with words he had not previously known.<sup>102</sup>

This fundamental social divide re-enacts that of *Bring Larks and Heroes*, and language functions as a marker of difference here; cant serves as the primary marker of the underclass. The recital (and translation) of Harry's oath signifies the stark difference between the crew and upper-class society, the repository of Queen's English.<sup>103</sup> This division is made apparent early on, in the character of Tom Barrett, a stylish, brazen young criminal who remains completely unrepentant right up to his hanging.

[Reverend Johnson] was unaware of that other divinity who had travelled with the convict fleet. In making Dick Johnson ridiculously gratified, Tom Barrett was paying vivid honour to the Tawny Prince, here at a native fig tree in a new world, by means of his own whimsical blood sacrifice. You had to be an initiate to understand what Tom Barrett's act meant, and Harry *was* an initiate. To understand that tonight in the convict camps those with liquor would drink to Tom's consummate hanging.<sup>104</sup>

This kind of group solidarity among the convicts is what implicitly forms the basis for national identity, from which all Australians can claim some kind of ancestral descent. Goose functions as the grand matriarch of the criminal underclass, and wields quite some authority among the convicts, having the rare capacity to grant favours. She has a particular power over Duckling, Harry's young 'hut mate', and she sometimes exercises her power to take her away from Harry. Like Mrs Blythe, Goose's authority is unquestioned: 'I am the Flash Queen, Harry. He who tries to put the wind up my skirts finds vipers beneath'.<sup>105</sup> However, Goose's authority is based on unwritten laws and practices: hers is the authority of the convict underclass. This popular society forms the basis for the Australian nation, but must undergo a change, an original moment, to enter the world of the modern nation-state system.

It is the performance of the play which marks this moment of national origin in the novel and definitively establishes the cast as 'tomorrow's ancestors'. Here the nation is made real in a performative sense, and actually brought into being within

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<sup>102</sup> Keneally, *Playmaker*, p. 98.

<sup>103</sup> Keneally, *Playmaker*, p. 101.

<sup>104</sup> Keneally, *Playmaker*, p. 124.

<sup>105</sup> Keneally, *Playmaker*, p. 287.

the framework of comic reconciliation. At the end of the novel Goose's authority collapses with her as she is poisoned by her own Duckling: 'in the lag commonwealth, fealty was exactly cut off at the instant of the sovereign's fall.'<sup>106</sup> Harry is thus released from his loyalty to the convict crew, and his fear that he will be punished for his previous divided loyalties. All the convicts are released from Goose's tight grip, and simultaneously made part of the nation through their parts in Australia's first theatrical performance.<sup>107</sup> While *Bring Larks and Heroes* narrates merely a stillborn nation, *The Playmaker* celebrates the nation's origin as a performance piece which is grounded in comedy.

It is through comedy that Keneally transforms his vision of the nation's past, and by the end of the novel the nation is brought into being through the energy of comic reconciliation. This is Keneally's contribution to the revisionist approach to Australian history, a kind of revision which is present in a muted form in the comic elements of Hughes's *The Fatal Shore*. Keneally is particularly apt at this: 'It is his potent way of renaming Australia, of clearing away accretions of prejudice and old judgements, of moving beyond the easy practice of irony to something much harder and more gracious: a wholesale reimagining of the formation of his country'.<sup>108</sup> In revising the national past Keneally is also revising his idea of nationalist ancestry, and moving beyond the abject alienation and tragedy of *Bring Larks and Heroes*.

A large part of the comic aspect of this novel involves questioning or contesting dominant authority figures. By the time of the play's performance, which forms the novel's climax, Keneally has spent quite some time exorcising ghosts and undermining traditional authority structures and moral codes. The irony of the performance is that it is planned to celebrate the King's birthday, but instead becomes an implicit step towards Independence and thus undermines the imperial authority which first ordered its production. This is clearest in Chapter Twenty-nine, the officers' feast before the play, when the Governor toasts the King.

H.E. now stood with abnormal suddenness and vigour and raised his glass of port wine. 'Gentlemen,' he said, 'may we all in the service of his majesty be delivered from that spirit of fear, delay and inertness.'

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<sup>106</sup> Keneally, *Playmaker*, p. 356.

<sup>107</sup> This is nicely complemented by Manning Clark's theatrical metaphor for the 'beginning' of Australian history. See Carter, *The Road to Botany Bay*.

<sup>108</sup> Peter Piece, *Australian Melodramas: Thomas Keneally's Fiction*, St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1995, p. 177.

Let us have no doubt that for damage it is matched only by the spirit of rancour.'

There was a cry from Jemmy Campbell. He rose. Suddenly he was trembling and he asked in a thin childlike voice, 'But Your Excellency, how can we know whether the King is alive or not? And isn't it dangerous to drink to a dead King?'

There was such alarm in Jemmy's question that no one laughed. H.E. said gently, 'I am sure the day finds him well, Captain Campbell. All the reports are of his recovery.'

Tears appeared on Jemmy's face. 'Reports? The reports are years old! How can we know anything here, Captain? How?'<sup>109</sup>

Campbell is an austere, strict officer who often invokes the authority of King and God: he is a kind of nemesis for Ralph since he opposes the play. That he is reduced to tears at the thought of a dead King indicates that the cracks in colonial authority are already becoming gaping fissures.<sup>110</sup> The scene is comic, but also leaves a 'certain wistfulness' at the table which carries into the performance. The overall implication of this episode is that the significance of Ralph's allegiance to the King pales in comparison with his allegiance to the play. It creates an authentic national unity which indirectly undermines colonial authority and eventually points towards political independence.

Keneally's object was to indicate that a gradual but comprehensive shift had occurred from 'alienation' to 'affirmation' in his own sense of Australia, and his place within it. An altogether sunnier version of national history was the result. In *The Playmaker*, Keneally revised his vision of the European peopling of Australia from a tragic, to a fundamentally comic one.<sup>111</sup>

This nationalist vision is one modern Australians can identify with, and we can thus identify with the novel's characters as potential ancestors. This 'altogether sunnier' vision of the nation's past is largely left for the reader to interpret; at the beginning of the performance Ralph becomes acutely aware of the deep division within the audience. 'For now he indeed knew that there *were* two worlds and two truths – H.E.'s explanation and the Tawny Prince's. The play would be performed for a divided audience and for two minds.'<sup>112</sup> Nonetheless, as a communal event the play

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<sup>109</sup> Keneally, *Playmaker*, pp. 333-4.

<sup>110</sup> This kind of doubt which undermines colonialism is also evident in the novels of Joseph Conrad and, after him, Koch.

<sup>111</sup> Pierce, *Australian Melodramas*, pp. 29-30.

<sup>112</sup> Keneally, *Playmaker*, p. 289.

does succeed in bringing the colony together. Ralph and Mary as well as Harry and Duckling all find their ways to each other by the end of the novel, and there is a strong sense of community during the performance. However, the nation cannot fully come into being until the problem of the land's previous inhabitants has been resolved.

Seen from the immensity of time, Ralph's play might appear a mere sputter of the European humour on the edge of a continent which, then, still did not have a name. This flicker of a theatrical intent would consume in the end the different and serious theatre of the tribes of the hinterland.<sup>113</sup>

Despite the comic resolution and the nationalist aspirations inherent in his novel, Keneally exudes a deep uncertainty about the nationalist project in a settler colony. This hints at the 'dark side' of the nationalist dream.<sup>114</sup> This novel, however, only hints at the possibilities of such a project, and cannot finally enact it within its current vision of nationalism.

Ralph experiences affirmation mostly through the production of the play. When he first came to the colony he continually had dreams about the death of his wife and son, which exacerbated the pain of being estranged from his family. In Chapter Four, however, we are told of how he is healed, relieved from his burden of dreams by Dabby Bryant who tells him of her own dreams and then comforts him in his grief.<sup>115</sup> Ralph's attempt to do the right thing by the Bryants as well as Arabanoo suggests a more positive potential for the nation. This sense of community and altruism contributes much to the themes of affirmation in *The Playmaker*.

However, Ralph's redemption or affirmation is deeply implicated in the two major vehicles for this: the play and his developing romance with Mary Brenham. For Ralph the production of the play is of paramount importance; he feels pride and a connection with the work and the players which affirms his identity and character in a way that is otherwise impossible. By the time of the performance, he is feeling particularly sanguine, and the unity of the nation is quite obvious:

He was awed by the power of a play to summon people ... a miraculous cheer rose from the crowd's disparate voices and became

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<sup>113</sup> Keneally, *Playmaker*, p. 305.

<sup>114</sup> See Bob Hodge & Vijay Mishra, *The Dark Side of the Dream: Australian Literature and the Postcolonial Mind*, Sydney, Allen & Unwin, 1991.

<sup>115</sup> Keneally, *Playmaker*, p. 58.

*one* voice, raising in Ralph for the final time the mad hope that his play would unify this remote planet of lags.<sup>116</sup>

In addition, Ralph receives some degree of approbation from his fellow-officers. Around the table at the King's birthday lunch they jokingly refer to him as 'Mr Garrick', and 'Ralph was ecstatic for this merely whimsical comparison of himself to the great actor-manager'.<sup>117</sup> Much of his affirmation occurs through seeing his players in character, and it is one player in particular who helps him find redemption. The decline of his marriage is paralleled by the developing romance between himself and Mary Brenham, one of the convict actresses. In stark contrast to the relationship between Halloran and Ann, this new-world romance succeeds despite the strong opposition of the Reverend Dick Johnson.<sup>118</sup> The unity among the colony and the players is mirrored by the unity of Ralph and Mary, a consummate joining which is only fitting at the conclusion of a comedy. In addition, Ralph's affirmation is mirrored by Mary's release from her London past as well as the pain of the bruises caused by Caesar's beating.<sup>119</sup> By the end of the novel she, like Harry and Ralph, has experienced a potent personal affirmation which knits her into the fabric of the new society and makes her one of 'tomorrow's ancestors.'

This affirmation is a dominating theme because it is achieved not only by a few characters, but by most of them. Nancy Turner is redeemed from her alleged crime of perjury, and she experiences the same affirmation of her character as the others via the play.<sup>120</sup> Of all the players, though, the one who is most clearly redeemed is Ketch Freeman, the colony's hangman, whom Ralph recruits early in the novel.<sup>121</sup> Because of his very public duties as executioner, Ketch is shunned by the rest of the colony; women will not associate with him and the men avoid him. However, throughout the rehearsals Ketch is entirely changed.

'Sir,' he said, bowing. It showed Ralph what an excellent means of reform a play is. From a play – and he promised himself to tell Dick Johnson this – a convict learns how politer people carry themselves, which is something he would never learn in Church. 'Sir, Mr Clark, I

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<sup>116</sup> Keneally, *Playmaker*, pp. 344-6.

<sup>117</sup> Keneally, *Playmaker*, p. 331.

<sup>118</sup> Keneally, *Playmaker*, p. 329.

<sup>119</sup> Keneally, *Playmaker*, Chapter 20, pp. 235-46.

<sup>120</sup> Keneally, *Playmaker*, p. 342.

<sup>121</sup> Keneally, *Playmaker*, p. 35.

would like to convey to you my thanks for giving me room in your play. The minds of my fellow criminals are now distracted from my normal exercises, and laugh with me about my gestures as an actor.’<sup>122</sup>

Although Ketch is a minor example, he is a significant one. He shows the potential for character development and progress which is emblematic of the novel as a whole. Keneally is representing a *societal* shift from alienation to affirmation, rather than merely a set of individual shifts. The stark contrasts between *The Playmaker* and *Bring Larks and Heroes* illustrate this shift clearly, and in both novels it is construed through the link between ancestry and nation.

While the tragic vision of *Bring Larks and Heroes* underscores the failure of the ethnic-genealogical vision of the nation, *The Playmaker* posits reconciliation as a prerequisite to the success of the civic vision. This is clearest in the successful relationship between Ralph and Mary. While Ann and Halloran are denied a life together, Ralph and Mary have a child together, Alicia, who with her mother ‘disappear[s] from the public record’.<sup>123</sup> Although Ralph’s life after the novel is melodramatic and ‘excessively tragic’, he fathers a child in Australia and so his time there has some meaning, some positive result. Telling of the death of Ralph as well as his son and wife, the very last lines of the novel leave us with a rather ambiguous conception of its resolution: ‘So in a pulse of time the blood and all the complex of dreams and very ordinary fervours of the Playmaker were extinguished, except for his lag-wife Brenham and the new world child Alicia. Of them fiction could make much, though history says nothing’.<sup>124</sup> Much of the sense of affirmation at the conclusion of the novel is concerned with how these characters contributed to the Australian nation in its earliest days, and Ralph is clearly the founder of a line. Unlike Halloran, Ralph has become one of ‘tomorrow’s ancestors’.

Many of the other characters in the novel, who played roles in Ralph’s play, settle down to life in Australia and bear children. Henry Kable, the convict overseer, not only achieves status and wealth, but with his wife Susannah raises ten children on their farm.<sup>125</sup> The ‘perjurer’ Nancy Turner ‘lived to be pardoned and to beget a numerous family from a watch thief called Stokes’.<sup>126</sup> Curtis Brand began his own

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<sup>122</sup> Keneally, *Playmaker*, p. 233.

<sup>123</sup> Keneally, *Playmaker*, p. 363.

<sup>124</sup> Keneally, *Playmaker*, p. 364.

<sup>125</sup> Keneally, *Playmaker*, p. 360.

<sup>126</sup> Keneally, *Playmaker*, p. 360.

farm and left it to a blind boy, an ‘intriguing detail’ which gives an added dimension to this narrative of ancestral nation-narration.<sup>127</sup> Even the outcast Ketch Freeman ‘would at last be exempted from any further hangings, find a convict wife, have seven children by her and live on into his sixties’.<sup>128</sup> In both *The Playmaker* and *Bring Larks and Heroes* the nation is essentially a collection of ancestors: models for communal identity.

However, all these claims for national unity are hampered by one problem: the inhabitants of the continent who were dispossessed of their land. Keneally acknowledges this at the outset, with the dedication: ‘To Arabanoo and his brethren, still dispossessed’. No novel with such a dedication can be unreservedly triumphant and celebratory. The capture and bondage of Arabanoo was also a historical event; many Indigenous people were captured and ‘civilised’ in such a way. In describing the process Keneally clearly expresses the good intentions behind it, but also the outright arrogance and paternalism. The white man ‘hoped the native would hereby become aware that he was not a slave or a captive, but merely an enforced guest waiting to discover the extent of his host’s hospitality’.<sup>129</sup> This speaks clearly to a nation still concerned with stolen children, detention centres and riots on the beach.

What *The Playmaker* does is outline the beginnings of the settlers’ injustices against the Indigenous population and to suggest the need for some sort of reconciliation. However, because it is so concerned with narrating the (white) nation, it cannot fully enact this reconciliation in the context of an ancestral myth of descent. What it does do is suggest the nation’s ‘unfinished business’, outline the need for reconciliation and show an example of it on an individual level. This redemption is illustrated by the central image of the ‘redeemed forest’ in Chapter Twenty-one. Dabby tells Ralph of her relation to Arabanoo – one night she went to his hut to comfort him; she then experienced with him a waking dream or a kind of shamanic vision quest. Arabanoo unfurled his intestines which reached to the sky, and took her up there to share with her his own cultural heritage. What she sees is ‘a redeemed forest and an Eden,’ and she meets Arabanoo’s gods who are actually the same gods from her childhood.<sup>130</sup> This transcendence of earthly colonial matters is

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<sup>127</sup> Keneally, *Playmaker*, p. 361.

<sup>128</sup> Keneally, *Playmaker*, p. 361.

<sup>129</sup> Keneally, *Playmaker*, p. 135.

<sup>130</sup> Keneally, *Playmaker*, p. 250.

the extent of the reconciliation that this novel enacts, but it is enough to problematise Australian national identity.

Ultimately, *The Playmaker* is notable because it uses the resources of myth and popular memory to articulate lines of descent, linking the national to the ancestral. In doing so it presents a much more positive, redemptive view of the nation's past with a comic resolution which draws all of the characters together. However, this idealised vision of the nation is haunted by the Indigenous presence, or absence by the end of the novel. For Keneally to truly reconceive of the nation in a post-humanist fashion, he needs to enact this vision of reconciliation more wholeheartedly, which is what his later work attempts.

### **Conclusion: Extensions towards Post-Nationalism**

Keneally's later ancestral narratives extend his main theme in ways that begin to change his initial vision, and pave the way for later works that conceive of nationalism through ancestral narrative entirely differently. Just as *The Playmaker* recasts the national past as comedy, Keneally's 1995 novel *A River Town* fictionalises the author's family history in a light-hearted tone full of comic occurrences.<sup>131</sup> Here Keneally is clearly placing himself and his own family within the national history, and so contributing towards the self-consciousness that Adrian Hastings emphasises.

Set in 1901, the year of Federation, this novel openly aims to narrate a moment of national origin. The diversity of characters also represents national progenitors across class and racial boundaries. Furthermore, the building of the bridge across the Mackay River symbolises not only modernisation for the town of Kempsey, but enacts a type of reconciliation where both halves of the town can come into contact with each other. Arranged in complex ways with regard to dominant nationalist historiography, these types of narratives present a more sophisticated manifestation of the 'subalternity effect' David Lloyd discusses.

In these ways, these later novels extend Keneally's use of ancestral narrative as it was first put forth in 1967. These narratives embody precisely the 'myths of descent' which, according to Anthony D. Smith, enable the modern nation to rise

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<sup>131</sup> Thomas Keneally, *A River Town*, Port Melbourne: William Heinemann, 1995.

out of ancient ethnic groupings. They narrate migration myths as well, and tell of the formation of settler culture in Australia. Through these historical novels Keneally is reproducing and reinterpreting the patterns which, for Smith, compose a national identity. These ancestral narratives 'narrate the nation' by casting their characters as proto-nationalists through the basic resources of myth and popular memory.

*Bring Larks and Heroes* lays the basis for a tragic conception of national inheritance where the major characters do not survive and the nation is basically stillborn. *Schindler's Ark* overturns this exceptionally tragic idea of nationalism by representing the potential for survival and the continuation of the nation through even the most traumatic and disturbing experiences. *The Playmaker* continues in this vein of narrating the nation by establishing a cast of characters who are essentially proto-nationalists who give birth to a slightly different vision of the nation. While there are significant differences, the construction of nation through ancestral narrative is the same in all three novels. The nation is identified as a modern kind of ethnic identity; borders are drawn around it and it is outlined as an independent, autonomous entity.

However, Keneally's more recent work undermines this national vision in important ways, and highlights the vast potential for change which Smith identifies as central to national cultures. Here Keneally emphasises ideas such as transnationalism and currents across national boundaries, and attempts to enact reconciliation much more coherently to address fundamental absences in Australia's settler culture. This effectively shifts Keneally's nationalist ancestry towards post-nationalism in important ways which clearly demonstrate the malleability of ancestral narratives.