

## Chapter 4 Ancestry Beyond the Nation

The differences between Keneally's earlier historical fictions and his later ones indicate the inherent malleability of ancestral narrative. Novels such as *Bring Larks and Heroes* and *Schindler's Ark* use ancestry to represent the nation in opposition to a dominant culture, and present a rather conventional form of ethno-nationalism. However, Keneally's later novels move ancestry beyond the nation; they both extend and transform national identities beyond simple binaries and opposites. Indeed, Keneally's most recent ancestral narratives argue for a kind of hybridity which conceives of the value of humanity beyond and aside from national boundaries.

The notion of transformation is central to this argument about narrating the nation through ancestry. Transformation is a post-colonial project, as argued by Bill Ashcroft in *On Post-Colonial Futures*.<sup>1</sup> Ashcroft focuses on how post-colonial societies empower themselves and take control of their own futures, a project which is closely related to nation-building.

When we examine the responses of colonised societies to the discourses that have inscribed them and regulated their global reality, we see that their dominant mode has been transformation. It is transformation that gives these societies control over their own future. Transformation describes the ways in which colonised societies have taken dominant discourses, transformed them and used them in the service of their own self-empowerment.<sup>2</sup>

On the most basic level, nationalism allows a people to take control of colonial governments and transform them to suit their own circumstances. However, Ashcroft is more concerned with cultural products than political ones, and the ways in which literary forms can be transformed for the same purposes. Keneally's later ancestral narratives mirror the kind of world Appadurai describes.<sup>3</sup> This is a world characterised by flows and currents between peoples and nations; he describes

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<sup>1</sup> Bill Ashcroft, *On Post-Colonial Futures: Transformations of Colonial Culture*, London: Continuum, 2001.

<sup>2</sup> Ashcroft, *Futures*, p.1.

<sup>3</sup> Arjun Appadurai, 'Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy', in Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (eds.), *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, Cambridge: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993, pp. 324-39.

cultural forms as fractal rather than having Euclidean boundaries, and most importantly uses the metaphor of rhizomes to characterise identity and origins. This is a different way of understanding ancestry which is ideal to describe Keneally's transformation of national identity: a horizontal, dispersed idea of ancestry rather than one which reaches back into a pure past, as does the idea of roots.<sup>4</sup>

Two Keneally texts clearly demonstrate this idea of the transformation of ancestry as a move beyond the nation. *The Great Shame* grows out of Keneally's earlier work, because it makes a connection between ancestry and national identification.<sup>5</sup> This book uses the resources of myth and memory to construct a social history, not unlike *Schindler's Ark*. However, it is also distinctive because it focuses on the phenomenon of diaspora which both challenges and extends the concept of nation. Furthermore, it represents a transnational social history, rather than the national historical fiction which is evident in a novel such as *Bring Larks and Heroes*.

*Bettany's Book* also posits an essential connection between ancestry and nationalism, and investigates the legacy of the nation's settler culture.<sup>6</sup> However, this ancestral narrative is also transnational because it deals closely with the Sudan and the plight of African nations generally. Furthermore, this novel wakes up to the 'dark side of the dream' by facing up to the contact history of Australia's colonial period. With its focus on Indigenous Australians and their role in the nation's history, *Bettany's Book* uses a central ancestral relationship to problematise national identification, especially for the descendants of white settlers. In this way Keneally gestures towards reconciliation through ancestral narrative.

Keneally transforms dominant conceptions of nationalism inherited from a simplistic opposition to imperial power, and this represents self-empowerment on an individual as well as a social level. This is a type of post-nationalism which is an important contribution. Most theories of nationalism agree on one thing: it can take both positive and negative forms. Keneally shows that a 'bad' nationalism which is divisive and oppositional can be transformed into a benevolent power. While he does frame an ethnically-based nationalism in his earlier fiction, his later fiction

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<sup>4</sup> See Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987 and Gilles Deleuze, and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Keneally, *The Great Shame*, Milsons Point, NSW: Random House, 1998.

<sup>6</sup> Tom Keneally, *Bettany's Book*, Milsons Point, NSW: Random House, 2000.

moves beyond traditional nationalism towards a conception of ancestry which embraces all humans across national boundaries. This notion of transformation is the bridge to Koch's work, although while Keneally uses ancestral identification to challenge and extend nationalism, Koch uses it to undermine dominant conceptions of gender identity.

### ***The Great Shame: Memory, Diaspora and Class***

Although it is more history than fiction, *The Great Shame* has a logical connection to *Schindler's Ark*; it is fundamentally concerned with using myth and memory to represent the experience of colonised people. In fact, Keneally himself emphasises the connection in his Preface:

After Steven Spielberg's film *Schindler's List* revived interest in the story that I had told in my novel *Schindler's Ark*, I was frequently, to my embarrassment, thanked for having documented on a human scale, through jaunty, disreputable Oskar Schindler, the Jewish catastrophe of the Second World War. I had stumbled on the story, written it with passion because it was a great tale, and now with a delighted and slightly guilty bemusement found that people, particularly the Jewish community throughout the world, were talking to me as if I had done something larger – had to an extent validated the past for those who had lived through it, and had restored their history to their children.

What of my own past? I was born in Australia, and I knew that my name and ancestors were Irish.<sup>7</sup>

This passage indicates hows Keneally feels motivated to narrate the lives of his and his wife's ancestors: John Kenealy, Hugh Larkin and Mary Shields. In fact, it was the discovery of a petition from the 'transportation-widowed' Esther Larkin asking to be sent to Australia to join her husband which motivated Keneally to write the book. 'It is a plea which seemed to me to combine the required feudal subservience with an understated poignancy of loss'.<sup>8</sup> In this way, ancestry acted as a direct motivation for Keneally to write this social history, where he connects his personal family history to the wider currents of national and world history. In fact, Keneally has suggested that all writing bears the personal mark of the author: 'In a sense,

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<sup>7</sup> Keneally, *Shame*, p xi.

<sup>8</sup> Keneally, *Shame*, pp. xii-xiii.

you're always writing about your own family wherever and whatever you are writing about'.<sup>9</sup>

Just as in his earlier work, Keneally deploys the resources of myth and memory to reconstruct the past, although here he does so with much more attention to the historical record. He suggests how family history often ossifies into myth, and he also portrays the great Irish nationalists of the mid-nineteenth century within a mythical framework. The telling of the life of the poor in Ireland as well as that of Irish immigrants in Australia and the United States resonates with popular memory, and Keneally pays particular attention to the connection (or lack thereof) between the Young Ireland movement and the people it supposedly represented. In these ways, Keneally uses myth and memory to construct an ancestral identification which connects with the past through historical writing rather than fiction.

Furthermore, through all this, Keneally is fundamentally concerned with constructing and narrating the myth of nation. He tells of the Great Famine of the late 1840s in Ireland, the plight of the peasantry there, and the response of the British administration to the crisis. When the narrative moves to Australia, he relates the situation of Irish immigrants in detail, paying particular attention to the conditions aboard convict transports, and the experience of convicts under the systems of assignment and, later, probation. In Book II he moves across the Atlantic to the United States and tells of the reception of the Young Ireland escapees, as well as the senseless destruction caused by the Civil War, before returning to Australia to narrate the decline of transportation in Western Australia and the final glittering escape of political prisoners from there. This is national mythology at its best, although it is the story of three nations rather than one.

Indeed, this construction of nation through myth is an example of Anthony D. Smith's ethno-symbolism. It is the raw material, the myths and symbols of an ethnic group which allow it to coalesce into a modern national formation.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, it is national identification which Keneally is enunciating in *The Great Shame*: it tells the story for descendants of Irish immigrants in the same way *Schindler's Ark* does for the descendants of Holocaust survivors. These narratives allow people to identify with the past, to understand their family origins and to make sense of their

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<sup>9</sup> Andrea Stretton, 'Running in the Family: Novels, Films and Nations (Interview with Thomas Keneally and Michael Oondajte)', *The Sydney Papers*, Vol. 14, No. 2, Autumn 2002, p. 17.

own identity in relation to this past. In this way Keneally is ‘narrating the nation’, as he always has.

However, Smith’s definition of national identity included ‘the continuous reproduction and reinterpretation of the pattern’ of raw materials that compose national identity.<sup>11</sup> It is the space for reinterpretation as well as reproduction, for change as well as continuity, which makes Smith’s theory particularly applicable to Keneally’s nationalist ancestral narratives. For what *The Great Shame* demonstrates so clearly is a shift away from a static, rigid construction of nationalism through ancestry towards a broader, more complex notion of the individual’s place in a national community. This history is much more concerned with the discontinuities within historical discourse, and the ‘subalternity effect’ which David Lloyd identifies in the case of Irish new histories.<sup>12</sup> This transformation of nationalism through ancestry is effected in various ways.

While Keneally has always been interested in the role and conditions of the Irish in Australia, *The Great Shame* represents his first thorough study of the history of the Irish diaspora.<sup>13</sup> This reflects his reconsideration of Australian nationalism, and his recasting of national identification through ancestry. Ancestry is the entry-point to this historical narrative, and because he is dealing with a diaspora rather than a traditional nation, the idea of communal identity is distinctly more complex. Indeed, the notion of diaspora itself is destabilising: ‘While making no distinction based on the reasons behind the fact of emigration, the term diaspora is the most useful tool for conceiving this vast flood of humanity that is forcing a complete reconsideration of such concepts as *nation, stranger, alien* and *refugee*’.<sup>14</sup> The notion of diaspora has the potential to seriously undermine the emotive certainties of ethnic nationalism.

Indeed, descendants of Irish immigrants around the globe are testament to this complicated process of reinterpreting nationalism. Recently, Ned Kelly has been

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<sup>10</sup> See Chapter Three for a more extended elaboration of Smith’s thesis and how it is being used here.

<sup>11</sup> Smith, *Nationalism*, p. 18.

<sup>12</sup> Lloyd, ‘Outside History’, p. 263.

<sup>13</sup> In this way Keneally embarks on a similar journey to Tim Pat Coogan, *Wherever Green is Worn: The Story of the Irish Diaspora*, London: Hutchinson, 2001.

<sup>14</sup> John McLaren, ‘Dialect of the Diaspora – Sourceland, Empire and Homelands’, in Nena Bierbaum, Syd Harrex and Sue Hosking (eds), *The Regenerative Spirit: Polarities of Home and Away, Encounters and Diasporas, in Post-Colonial Literatures*, Adelaide: Lythrum Press, 2003, p. 36.

reconsidered as not just an Australian bushranger, a nationalist in the anti-authoritarian tradition, but as an inheritor of Irish cultural identity.<sup>15</sup> James Sturgis goes so far as to compare Kelly with a Canadian bushranger in order to examine ‘events which both had their genesis in Ireland in the pre-Famine days but which culminated on the widely separated stages provided by Canada and Australia’.<sup>16</sup> Patrick O’Sullivan’s six-volume anthology *The Irish World Wide: History, Heritage, Identity* is testament to the burgeoning field of Irish Migration Studies and its challenge to traditional disciplinary and national borders.<sup>17</sup> This field is concerned with Irish-ness as a basis for cultural identity.

Keneally begins with an investigation of dissent, which in the past has often constituted an expression of Australian identity. However, the picture quickly becomes much more complicated:

I wanted to try and tell the tale of the Irish in the new world and the old through the experiences of those transported to Australia for gestures of social and political dissent ... But Australia’s places as a zone of sub-Antarctic political punishment would also influence the intense and fatally riven Irish politics of emigrant societies in the United States, Britain and Canada, and I wanted to try to tell some of that tale as well.<sup>18</sup>

This is new ground for Keneally: instead of focusing on one collective identity under one national rubric or even a single hyphenation (such as Irish-Australia), this historical narrative’s journey is much more complex. The scope covers the experiences of the Irish in their homeland as well as Australia, the United States and Canada. Keneally seems almost incapable of seeing them in isolation, so the sheer scope of this historical narrative precludes any consideration of it as a simple national history.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> See novels such as Robert Drewe, *Our Sunshine*, Sydney: Picador, 1991 and Peter Carey, *True History of the Kelly Gang*, London: Faber, 2001.

<sup>16</sup> James Sturgis, ‘Irish Hooligans Ned Kelly (Australia) and William Donnelly (Canada) in comparative perspective’, in Patrick O’Sullivan (ed), *The Irish World Wide: History, Heritage, Identity* (Volume One: Patterns of Migration), London: Leicester University Press, 1992, pp. 110-27.

<sup>17</sup> Patrick O’Sullivan, *The Irish World Wide: History, Heritage, Identity* (6 vols), London: Leicester University Press, 1992.

<sup>18</sup> Keneally, *Shame*, p. xi.

<sup>19</sup> Indeed, Keneally’s transnational approach to history is the strongest point of the book, according to Murray’s otherwise negative review. Robert Murray, ‘An Irish Titanic’, *Quadrant*, July 1999, p. 37.

Certain set-pieces bridge the vast distances Keneally covers. Chapter Sixteen, 'The Skeleton at the Feast', depicts Ireland as a corpse present at the feast of the New World, and evokes the need for retaining a cultural memory of the injustices in the homeland. The conclusion to Chapter 16 is an ideal encapsulation of how this book problematises nationalism through ancestral identification and biological inheritance. It is strongly reminiscent of the Epilogue to *The Playmaker*, which tells of the many descendants of that novel's cast of characters.

The conclusion of Book I of *The Great Shame* appears also to depict the cast of the nation-to-be, by tracing the family line of Hugh Larkin and Mary Shields. 'Hugh and Mary had managed to set in place an indomitable progeny for which the *Goulburn Herald* gave them little credit'.<sup>20</sup> Keneally tells of a family of seven, a descendant with an excellent reputation, and a long-lived uncle in Australia. This seems to follow the pattern of nation-narration through ancestral narrative that is evident in Keneally's earlier novels.

However, Keneally soon introduces another inheritance tale which complicates this standard picture of national inheritance. He goes on to tell of 'Hugh the Ribbonman's' sons in East Galway, and how one became involved in radical politics while the other remained conservative. Hugh's Irish family was just as successful as his Australian one: 'The blood of both sons is well represented in the areas of Laurencetown, Eyrecourt and Killimor'.<sup>21</sup> This means that Hugh left two family lines on opposite sides of the globe: this divided inheritance stands in stark contrast to *The Playmaker's* cohesive national family.

The focus on the history of the Irish diaspora and how it relates to ancestral identification in a nationalist context indicates the fundamental difference between *The Great Shame* and Keneally's earlier novels. Whilst novels like *Bring Larks and Heroes* sought to establish a sense of national identification based on a historical narrative of potential ancestors, by 1998 Keneally had moved beyond rigid boundaries and ethnic-nationalist sentiments based on opposition to a dominant culture. *The Great Shame* depicts a more transnational, diasporic identity where ancestry is the source of a pluralist, complex form of national identity which both challenges and extends the assumptions of traditional ethno-symbolic nationalism.

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<sup>20</sup> Keneally, *Shame*, p. 294.

<sup>21</sup> Keneally, *Shame*, p. 295.

One other important aspect of Keneally's treatment of nationalism through ancestry is in relation to class. Class is central to histories such as *The Great Shame* and *The Fatal Shore* and fuels the notion of 'democratic' ancestry. Chapter Three shows how Keneally's 'ordinary' Irish peasants (both his ancestors and those of others) are mythified into founders of nations, or 'tomorrow's ancestors'. This corresponds with Anthony D. Smith's identification of genealogical myths of descent and ideological myths of descent.<sup>22</sup>

In contrast, *The Great Shame* reshapes a myth of famous Irish nationalists: most of the members of Young Ireland had aristocratic backgrounds.<sup>23</sup> Usually landed and often Protestant, these nationalists had some difficulty relating to and effectively leading the Irish people: this elite status largely explains their failure to achieve their popular-nationalist goals.<sup>24</sup> Despite this elitist strain, Young Ireland in Australia also plays a part as 'tomorrow's ancestors' in Australia: these men are ideological progenitors of the nation, like Cook.<sup>25</sup> Their influence on dissent in Australia is emphasised, as with O'Brien's drafting of a potential Tasmanian constitution.<sup>26</sup> The story of Young Ireland in Australia is certainly not new; notable instances include Patsy Adam-Smith's *Heart of Exile* and T.J. Kiernan's *The Irish Exiles in Australia*.<sup>27</sup> However, Keneally is different in that he narrates the story of young Ireland within the framework of an explicit ancestral narrative. What is also innovative is the way Keneally synthesises the Young Ireland narrative with that of 'ordinary' Irish transportees. *The Great Shame* constantly intertwines the story of the well-known leaders with that of the poor Irish. Transitional sentences within chapters often relate the two narratives to each other: 'As Old and Young Ireland grew apart, in Australia Mary was becoming inured to her work in a slab timber and bark homestead'.<sup>28</sup> This phrase combines Keneally's multi-class vision with his transnational one, and so the nation does not consist of simply the subaltern class.

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<sup>22</sup> See the discussion of this in Chapter Three .

<sup>23</sup> Admittedly, Keneally also writes extensively about the Fenians, a more grassroots organisation, in Book II, but this chapter focuses more on Book I. In any case, Keneally is at pains to insist how the Fenians were largely funded by successful Irish-American organisations.

<sup>24</sup> A sole focus on such figures is what the Subaltern Studies project is working against.

<sup>25</sup> See the beginning of Chapter 3.

<sup>26</sup> Keneally, *Shame*, p. 272.

<sup>27</sup> Patsy Adam-Smith, *Heart of Exile*, Melbourne: Thomas Nelson, 1986; Thomas Joseph Kiernan, *The Irish Exiles in Australia*, Dublin: Clonmore and Reynolds, 1954. Notably, Adam-Smith was inspired by a child's grave which symbolised the inheritance left during the short stay of the Young Irishmen.

<sup>28</sup> Keneally, *Shame*, p 103.

The outcome is that Keneally aims to transform his idea of the Australian nation (and nationalism generally) through ancestral narrative. This uses ancestry as a myth of descent in order to narrate the nation, but in a non-traditional way. Class is certainly one aspect of this transformation. However, the more important indicator of the transformation is the narration of diaspora history, and the articulation of a diasporic national identity through ancestry. *The Great Shame* certainly 'takes its place in Keneally's long attempt to dramatise a role played by the Irish in the peopling of Australia',<sup>29</sup> but this is not simply a narration of the nation through a homogenous set of 'tomorrow's ancestors'. Keneally is no longer interested in just Australia as a sole nation opposed to all others; he is interested in Irish-Australia, Irish-America, and the currents and flows between them.

### ***Bettany's Book: Reshaping Identity Through Ancestral Revelation***

While *Bettany's Book* examines the historical nature of ancestral narratives (as shown in Chapter 2), it is also a fine example of transformative ancestral identification. The importance of ancestry identification is first indicated with a reference to Indigenous ancestry and the fictional representation of Hugh Larkin.

The most significant ancestral identification in the novel revolves around the Bettany sisters, who discover a journal belonging to their ancestor, a prominent pastoralist. This is a revelatory form of ancestry which transcends the willed amnesia of convict ancestry. They come to identify with their ancestors in different ways. This produces an uneasy kind of national identification as they come to a realisation of themselves as inheritors of settler culture. Their identity becomes involved in the process of reconciliation, while the role of Africa in the novel casts into relief the nature of Australian national identity. The Sudan and Australia are actually compared quite closely, and the narrative presents the two countries as more similar than different. In these ways Keneally transforms his ethno-symbolist construction of the Australian nation, which gestures towards a kind of post-nationalist ancestry where the boundaries and limits of what is human are redefined along hybrid lines.

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<sup>29</sup> Peter Pierce, 'An Irish Grand Narrative', *Australian Book Review*, Feb/Mar 1999, p. 14.

Keneally foreshadows this with a mention of the importance of Indigenous ancestry. Prim experiences a significant field trip to an Indigenous community during her Masters' research. It relates to a land claim, an essential aspect of which is the myth of a hero ancestor. 'Tracker's ... hero ancestor, Baurigal, journeying in the void, had made stars descend, had hurled stones, turned beasts and two protean sisters, with one of whom he had copulated, into rocks. He had endowed a cave at Bavaria's base with his sustaining blood.'<sup>30</sup> This early mention of Indigenous ancestry sets the complicated tone for the rest of the novel. However, the most crucial example of identification through ancestral narrative is that of the Bettany sisters.

This heroic ancestry also leads on to the novel's connection to Keneally's own hero ancestor. Hugh Larkin worked for Brodribb and so has many affinities with Sean Long from *Bettany's Book*. Like Hugh Larkin, Long was convicted of a minor political crime: posting a threatening notice to 'some hound of a landlord',<sup>31</sup> which in Ireland meant a life sentence. Long also lost touch with his wife back home when he moved to Australia. In all of these respects Long closely resembles Larkin, whose story Keneally narrates in *The Great Shame*. *Bettany's Book* gave Keneally the scope possible only in historical fiction to elaborate Larkin as Long more fully; his earlier historical work was hampered by the need for documentation or historical evidence, which for many like Larkin is simply not available. The important point is that Keneally has a personal connection to Larkin; he is Keneally's wife's ancestor, and so the ancestor of his children. In his portrayal of Long, identification is central, and Keneally takes the opportunity to elaborate imaginatively on his own ancestry.

Of all of Keneally's writing, *Bettany's Book* is the clearest depiction of ancestral identification, because it is explicitly concerned with how ancestors are perceived and their influence on the life of the descendant. The Bettany sisters may be considered as a double-figure, like many of Koch's characters. Often they represent opposites on a continuum: Prim is rational, Dimp is intuitive: Prim favours her internal reality, Dimp favours her external reality; Prim is an ascetic expatriate, Dimp is a typical hedonistic Sydneysider. It is almost as if the Bettany sisters are one character split into two to enable more complex identifications with

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<sup>30</sup> Keneally, *Bettany*, pp. 16-7.

<sup>31</sup> Keneally, *Bettany*, p. 136.

their ancestors. This is supported by the fact that they are far apart for most of the novel; the correspondence between Sydney and Khartoum almost sounds like an internal dialogue. This duality between the sisters allows Keneally to double his perspective of ancestral identification and present opposing viewpoints. This pluralism is markedly different from the simple ancestral identification of Keneally's earlier fiction. It shows that people can use their ancestry in different ways.

For a long time it is unclear how Dimp incorporates her ancestral narratives into her own life, until she sells most of the paintings Bren bought her in order to fund her projected Bettany film.<sup>32</sup> Her letters highlight how she sees her life, and how she narrates it as drama with herself at the centre. While Prim is away conducting health surveys, Dimp's 'confessional faxes' collect in her office, 'pooling, like a rich centre of infection'.<sup>33</sup> In many ways Dimp is making a history of her own life and negotiating the boundaries of her own identity informed by the Bettany memoirs.

Prim takes a similar narratological approach to her life, although it is not as obvious because she is not a storytelling 'culture hero' like Dimp. This is also because she has more legitimate grounds for complaint: her lover and supervisor at Sydney University dispenses with their relationship through an accusation of plagiarism.<sup>34</sup> The tragic enormity of this betrayal overcomes Prim; she stays in her home for three months, succumbing to depression. To escape this she eventually moves to Canberra, taking up a job with a non-government organisation providing aid to Asia and the Sudan. This is obviously a self-imposed exile; Prim responds to her disempowerment at the hands of male academics by radically reshaping her life. In moving to Africa she 'was motivated by altruism, but also by the fact that she lacked the facial markings, the orderly scarrings, the broad eyes and splendid pigmentation considered essential elements of beauty amongst many Sudanese'.<sup>35</sup> This aspect of her motivation is reinforced by her aforementioned tendency to exile herself as a response to her parents' death. At this point she is yet to discover her ancestral narrative.

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<sup>32</sup> Keneally, *Bettany*, p. 513.

<sup>33</sup> Keneally, *Bettany*, p. 434.

<sup>34</sup> Keneally, *Bettany*, pp. 28-9.

<sup>35</sup> Keneally, *Bettany*, p. 30.

Only well into her life in the Sudan does Prim realise that her relationship with Dr Sherif Taha has become her primary reason for staying there, that her exile is no longer an adequate justification. 'I am here now because of Sherif, she realised ... She knew that one day she would have to go home, and that this was as inevitable as death, but closer.'<sup>36</sup> At this point Prim realises that she is narrating her own life-script in the historical context of Sydney University and the worsening situation in the Sudan. What Keneally is doing here is establishing the sisters' background so the ancestral narrative can assume a deep significance. The question is the extent to which the Bettany sisters are able to identify with their ancestors, and see their ancestral narrative as informing their own lives. Furthermore, if the sisters are able to change their lives or learn from the past, then Keneally has realised the transformative potential of ancestral narratives.

*Bettany's Book* makes clear the significance of the relationship between ancestors and descendants. When Keneally switches between the contemporary and historical narratives, the correspondence between Dimp and Prim reveals their emotional investment in their shared ancestry. Dimp writes to Prim telling her that a friend has acquired the Bettany memoirs as part of an estate, and delicately passed them on to Dimp as Bettany's direct descendant.<sup>37</sup> Here the basic family history is revealed: Jonathan (who 'Missed a knighthood by a whisker'<sup>38</sup>) was highly esteemed in colonial society.

Keneally represents this landowning class through Jonathan Bettany, a hybrid figure who is trapped between the two social worlds of the Exclusive, 'Merino' set (symbolised by the Finlays) and the grassroots world of the convicts – that of Sarah, Long, Alice, and even Bettany's own father. Bettany is in a unique situation: his father was convicted of a minor political crime and transported to the antipodes, but he almost immediately regained social status when he established a law firm in Hobart.<sup>39</sup> This aspect of Bettany's background (which he shares with his real-life inspiration, Brodribb) is a 'Stain' on his origins. Their previous ignorance of their ancestry is a symptom of the family 'Stain'.

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<sup>36</sup> Keneally, *Bettany*, p. 320.

<sup>37</sup> Keneally, *Bettany*, p. 89.

<sup>38</sup> Keneally, *Bettany*, p. 90. Please note that all quotes in italics indicate that the reference is to a letter in the novel (Keneally's italics).

<sup>39</sup> This semi-convict status is somewhat analogous to the experience of Mitchel, O'Brien, Meagher and other prominent Irish political prisoners of the nineteenth century.

Dimp is particularly interested in the narrative nature of this historical record; it is Bettany's voice that engages her imagination, and this is the first stage of the transformation she experiences. In particular, Bettany's memoir has a close relation to the emerging revisionist approaches to Australian history which began to undermine the pastoralist-heroic tradition.<sup>40</sup> This is initially done through the presence of convicts in history and ancestry. Dimp is encouraged to research Sarah through the convict records, and finds an intriguing letter from a ship's captain which vociferously criticises the zealous religious surgeons who made the whole business of transporting convicts much more difficult.<sup>41</sup> However, the additional perspective given by Sarah's letters also intrigues Dimp – for her it fuels the texture of the narrative. 'Bernard's letters indicated that she was an ardent but not a flippant woman, the opposite of the bawdy Cockney trollops of convict mythology ... She foresaw herself writing to Prim about them too. "This is also a third world woman, because the past is the third world".<sup>42</sup> While for Dimp the story is film-worthy, Prim comes to identify more with Sarah.

Jonathan's journal, titled *Bettany's Book*, is the companion volume to a dull account of pastoralist settlement, and is more interesting because it recounts his own personal tragedies and anguish. Dimp is utterly engaged with the discovery, and amazed to find she has some Jewish heritage: her avid enthusiasm is apparent when she rhapsodises to her sister in a letter.

*But – and this is fascinating – these papers show that Mrs Bettany, our ancestor Sarah, was not only a convict, but Jewish as well. Don't you wish our poor parents were around for that piece of news? To hear that! The wife of nearly-Sir-Jonathan Bettany, great man of sheep! Isn't it stimulating? I wonder if that modicum of Hebraic blood explains my filmic tendencies, and your career as a pilgrim ...*

*So I am sending you in batches what I have transcribed of the old boy's journal, and the old girl's letters, in a belief that it's important to know what the founding virtues of your ancestors were. But, more important, to know what were the founding crimes.<sup>43</sup>*

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<sup>40</sup> Keneally, *Bettany*, p. 127. This novel's contemporary narrative is slightly dated; it is actually set in the late 80s and early 90s, during the worsening civil war in the Sudan and around the time of the Mabo case. Notably, this was also the beginning of the History Wars.

<sup>41</sup> Keneally, *Bettany*, p. 129-30.

<sup>42</sup> Keneally, *Bettany*, p. 130. The phrase 'the past is the third world' is a fascinating coinage: it is probably based on Lowenthal's 'The Past is a Foreign Country.'

<sup>43</sup> Keneally, *Bettany*, pp. 90-1; italics in original.

Dimp's enthusiasm is piqued by the new discovery, and it is clear (despite her flippant comment) that she is constructing a myth of origin for herself. Indeed, Prim's standpoint as an aid worker in the Sudan makes her quick to dampen her sister's enthusiasm: *'You have a tendency to look for signs in the heavens, or signs anywhere ... Every person on the earth has sixteen great-grandparents ... I don't want you poring over it [the journal] as if it's some map of your own life ... ancestor worship is one of the chief religions of the Sudan, but it is unnecessary to practise it in Double Bay'*.<sup>44</sup> Prim's concern is that Dimp will make too much of her ancestor's story, that she will use it to justify some rash or irresponsible act. However, Prim does not quite practise what she preaches, and finds herself beginning to identify with Jonathan despite all her misgivings: *'There was in Bettany's eye, she was sure, some of her own discontent. More than she would ever tell her sister, Prim fancied she saw in him a desire like her own: to find new landscapes in which to remake himself'*.<sup>45</sup> Thus, while Prim denigrates Dimp's growing sense of ancestral identification, she cannot resist selecting an aspect of the ancestral narrative and incorporating it into her own life.<sup>46</sup> While Dimp is on her interpretive crusade her sister slowly comes to recognise the personal significance of her ancestral narrative.

The Sarah documents would resound with Prim. She would see that she too was in a sort of Female Factory, confined – more broadly and benignly than Sarah Bernard – by consent and affection, but mostly by fear of leaving the Sudan and going home. By the time she came to read the Bernard letters and the Bettany transcripts she was conscious of having chosen, two years past, her Sudanese exile above all else and of having slighted her sister.<sup>47</sup>

This is the crucial part of Prim's identification with her ancestor: it enables her to reconsider her life and realise she has done the wrong thing by her sister. This is the transformative power of ancestral narratives on a personal level.

However, the Bettany ancestry also has a national relevance through Keneally's open revelation of Australia's convict past. Convict ancestry was, until recently, considered to be a shameful heritage, so much so that repressing this

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<sup>44</sup> Keneally, *Bettany*, pp. 126-7.

<sup>45</sup> Keneally, *Bettany*, p. 91

<sup>46</sup> This elective identification is made more viable by the vague portrayal of Sarah which Pierce notes: *'There is the intimation of a powerful presence who yet eludes us, and perhaps the author too.'* Peter Pierce, 'A Plenitude of Story', *Australian Book Review*, November 2000, p. 40.

heritage was popularly known as ‘Hiding the Stain.’<sup>48</sup> This use of ‘the Stain’ is a conceptual metaphor which carries connotations of dirtiness, filth and even disease and decay.<sup>49</sup> Through this metaphor, convict ancestors are seen as shameful, disgraceful, needing to be hidden away; this is a connotation of ancestry which proceeds from Australia’s origin as a penal settlement. This kind of response is apparent in Sir Malik when Dimp mentions Felix’s first, Indian, wife: ‘the mention of her caused Sir Malik to flinch’.<sup>50</sup> However, this is only a minor example; the metaphor of ‘the Stain’ is dominant throughout the whole text.

Bettany’s father was a convict, and this is a weighty inheritance. Furthermore, he was not an ordinary convict; he was transported as a minor political prisoner for administering illegal oaths for a religious society dedicated to reforming property laws: a type of Christian Marxist organisation.<sup>51</sup> Thus he is out of the ordinary run of convicts – the Bettany family recovers from the setback and Bettany senior goes on to continue his successful law firm from offices in Hobart. However, ‘the Stain’ rears its head several times in Jonathan’s life. It destroys his previously amicable relationship with the Exclusive landowner Finlay, who accuses Jonathan of hiding his convict origins.

The jibe brought on the normal panic in me, a panic of rage but also of the inescapability of my description. It seemed to me once more so obvious and so universal that whoever looked at me saw above all a felon’s child. No matter how much of their fleece I had brought them, no matter the stock books I kept, or how I comported myself, the intervening description of who I was cast its yellow, questionable light on all I did.<sup>52</sup>

This rupture has a terrible legacy: Jonathan is cast out of the high society of the Finlays and the Bachelors, who are long-term family friends. Speaking of Bettany senior’s adultery with his own mother, Charlie lays the sins of the father at the foot of the son. ‘You’re the spawn of a scoundrel ... It is inherited in you – the air of hurt and blithe innocence!’<sup>53</sup> These episodes serve to reinforce the metaphor of ‘the Stain’ and its significance in Jonathan’s life, but it is in the character of Sarah that

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<sup>47</sup> Keneally, *Bettany*, p. 168

<sup>48</sup> This notion is central to much of both Keneally’s and Koch’s work.

<sup>49</sup> This notion is drawing on the theory of conceptual metaphor as proposed by George Lakoff and others in *Metaphors We Live By*.

<sup>50</sup> Keneally, *Bettany*, p. 502.

<sup>51</sup> Keneally, *Bettany*, p. 93.

<sup>52</sup> Keneally, *Bettany*, p. 178.

the true ‘Stain’ in the Bettany ancestry resides. Indeed, Sir Malik’s central objection to filming the ancestral narrative is that ‘Your great-grandfather ... cohabited with a Jewish woman prisoner.’<sup>54</sup> It is not the reputation of the past but the morality of the present which concerns Sir Malik. Keneally emphasises the *repression* of convict origins, which explains Jonathan’s desperate need to hear Sarah’s life-story.

I felt I could not know enough and would never know half. I might also have been possessed by the knowledge that, in my father’s case, we all pretended he had never been condemned and had never seen a chain, so that the undischarged friction between his having been a prisoner and his seemingly solid, oblivious life in Van Diemen’s Land went on chaffing [*sic*] and rankling unseen, bearing away in the end the peace of two families, ours and the Batchelors’.<sup>55</sup>

This image of ‘chaffing [*sic*] and rankling’ is ideal to express convict ancestry as a type of intergenerational wound, just like those inflicted by the ball-and-chain. This casts Dimp and Prim’s national identity in a very different light, as they discover they are directly descended from the most notorious underclass in Australia’s history. Their ancestry is not fixed or simple – it inherits all kinds of ruptures and difficulties, especially since Jonathan senior was a convict ‘special’. This serves to cast new light not just on the sisters’ personal origins but on the national history: a great pioneer and sheep owner was contaminated by convictry.

Sarah’s letters are an even more self-conscious narrative than Jonathan’s memoirs, and are therefore more likely to contribute to a sense of personal identity. Her voice is strong and clear: the first letter to Alice opens plaintively, ‘*My God that I should find myself lacking your company and surrounded by these people here!*’<sup>56</sup> The nature of their relationship is the object of speculation, but the harsh conditions on board the convict transport did lead to ‘unspeakable’ crimes. ‘*I don’t know what he thought he was preventing, after all. For the women ... sought unnatural solace from each other.*’<sup>57</sup> This is one of very few veiled references to the possibility that Sarah and Alice may have been lovers, which is another revelation.<sup>58</sup> This is yet another problematic factor in the Bettany ancestral narrative.

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<sup>53</sup> Keneally, *Bettany*, p. 390.

<sup>54</sup> Keneally, *Bettany*, p. 502.

<sup>55</sup> Keneally, *Bettany*, p. 440.

<sup>56</sup> Keneally, *Bettany*, p. 131.

<sup>57</sup> Keneally, *Bettany*, p. 130.

<sup>58</sup> See Hughes, *The Fatal Shore*, pp. 264-72.

This problem is compounded by the increasing rivalry and hostility between Sarah and Alice. The final epistolary exchange between Sarah and Alice is bitter, Sarah accusing Alice of immorality and Alice pointing out Sarah's hypocrisy.<sup>59</sup> The real significance of this episode is the fact that the sisterhood shared by the two convict women lasts only as long as they are incarcerated or in direct danger. The conflict between Sarah and Alice has a contemporary analogy in the ongoing conflict between Dimp and Prim, although the latter literally are sisters. As Alice says to Sarah, '*It is the old quarrel. We have – the two of us – each a different manner for making our journey.*'<sup>60</sup> Again the sisters can identify with this part of their ancestral narrative, and they are able to learn from the tragic story of their personal and national forebears and reconcile their differences.

Keneally's use of 'the Stain' is very similar to that of Koch in that it signifies shameful national and personal origins, and has the potential to wreak destructive and negative effects on the present. However, Keneally re-interprets the metaphor in a fundamental way. In an early letter to his father Jonathan writes, '*You would tell us ... that the great poet [Horace]'s father did not altogether escape the taunt which adheres to persons of even remote servile origin ... But I feel that any risk of such an unjust reflection upon us ... has been outrun here in deepest New South Wales.*'<sup>61</sup> Bettany's hopes of outrunning 'the Stain' are not achievable through his vision of the pastoralist myth of Australian bush life, since he learns the hard way how this myth is no longer adequate. However, the Bettany family ultimately does outrun 'the Stain' – the Bettany sisters become reconciled with their origins and they move on. This is the transformation of nationalism which Keneally effects: a glorified nation is first brought low by the presence of convict ancestry, and then recuperated through a healing process. In this way the Bettany sisters, as orphans, are metaphors for the Australian nation – it is no longer shameful to have convict origins. Here Keneally presents national identity as an outcome of ancestral narrative which is by its nature open to transformation.

The final transformation of national identity is clear in Keneally's call for reconciliation, which is embodied in the figure of Felix. Felix symbolises the dispossessed Indigenous population, but he is also a hybrid figure: his father was

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<sup>59</sup> Keneally, *Bettany*, pp. 522-3.

<sup>60</sup> Keneally, *Bettany*, p. 523.

<sup>61</sup> Keneally, *Bettany*, p. 157.

certainly white, although this paternal identity is unclear.<sup>62</sup> He epitomises the broken promises of colonialism's civilising mission and the agony of hybrid origins. Just like Sherif, Felix is a hybrid figure, caught in the double-bind of colonial mimicry. He can never attain full status as a European, but has forever left his home culture. This poses a serious problem for any ethnically-based idea of nationalism.

A crucial element of the History Wars debate is the degree to which colonial contact and the displacement of Indigenous Australians has been left out of nationalist historiography.<sup>63</sup> This forces the Bettany sisters to reappraise their idea of themselves as Australians – this is evident in Prim's crusade against slavery and Dimp's attempts to contact Sir Malik. Though caught in a story of smallpox and massacre, Bettany himself is a fundamentally well-intentioned man, for whom the circumstances of colonial settlement turn bad and escape his control. This situation problematises the notion of Australian national identity but avoids the adversarial polarities of the History Wars by offering a balanced perspective.

The exploitation and violence of contact, and the European inhumanity which accompanied it, is illustrated as a central factor which counteracts a triumphant and successful national identity. The incident with Shegog and his 'bush-wife', and his subsequent spearing, exemplifies this problematic contact history. Keneally portrays an extreme culture clash between European ideals of individualism and property ownership and Indigenous values of community and group welfare. Events proceed at a pace far beyond even Bettany's ability to observe them, let alone control them, and his depiction as a pastoralist hero and moral national founder is seriously undermined when he realises that he is complicit in the massacre.

The execution of seven white men for the massacre hardly seems any kind of justice, because Bettany is well aware of who the original criminals were. 'I knew the pox began not with natives but with white men, and the men themselves were the ultimate polluters, yet had murdered native women and children as if they were the source of the disease.'<sup>64</sup> This is the dark side of Australia's settler culture, which is hardly a cause for national pride. This deeper understanding of the

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<sup>62</sup> The general conclusion is that Goldspink fathered Felix, although there is some hint that it was Bettany himself, and the mystery is never conclusively solved. Within the narrative, there is no concrete evidence either way.

<sup>63</sup> For background see Stuart McIntyre and Anna Clark, *The History Wars*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2003 as well as Keith Windschuttle, *The Killing of History: How a Discipline is Being Murdered by Literary Critics and Social Theorists*, Paddington, NSW: Macleay, 1994.

<sup>64</sup> Keneally, *Bettany*, p. 368.

complexities of the colonial process in Australia has longer-term ramifications: the Bettany sisters must come to terms with their new-found inheritance.

Felix's agonised origins are an extreme example of a shift in identity, and this reflects on the complex origins of the Bettany sisters. Felix recounts to Bettany the story of how Goldspink took him aside to tell him that he was his father. Wracked by grief Felix bludgeoned his head 'many times, since I wanted to drive those words back into the earth'.<sup>65</sup> Patricide is Felix's only possible response to the agony of his hybrid origins. The situation is resolved when Bettany enables Felix to flee to Singapore as a seaman, and Long is executed for the crime which he didn't commit but would have if he had the opportunity.<sup>66</sup> This is what makes it possible for Sir Malik Bettany to be the (traceable) wealthy descendent of Felix, because on the ship Bettany endowed Felix with his name, content to have it known to the world that he was actually his son, even (or perhaps especially) if he wasn't. This is an example of Smith's ideological (rather than biological) myth of origin.

An awareness of their personal role in contact history enables the sisters to see their privileged position in society and how it came to be, so Mr Loosely's words have a special meaning for them:

'What sort of race are we ... when one group accepts liberation purely as the platform from which to oppress others? This is a great mystery to me, since it means that even in the midst of their oppression, their sojournings by the river of Babylon, their containment, their floggings, their misuse, they somehow admire the flogger, the oppressor, the misuser.'<sup>67</sup>

This is a much more complex national story than any that Keneally has told before. The implication is that the Australian nation was made possible by oppressed minorities (like the Irish) establishing themselves by oppressing others still lower on the ladder. As a result Dimp becomes sympathetic to dissenting ideas and also aware of how dissenters can become oppressors.

The same lawyer friend who gave Dimp the Bettany memoirs excites and inspires her with a brief reflection on the Mabo case, which was a current affair at the time. He supports the Indigenous position and enrages Bren's conservative

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<sup>65</sup> Keneally, *Bettany*, p. 487. It must be noted that there is some debate as to whether it was the British who actually introduced smallpox.

<sup>66</sup> Keneally, *Bettany*, p. 538.

<sup>67</sup> Keneally, *Bettany*, p. 245.

friends.<sup>68</sup> The Mabo case made Indigenous land rights a very public issue, and stands as an historical event intricately related to Australia's contact history. Dimp's awareness of the dispossession experienced by Indigenous groups, an awareness which is partly enabled by her ancestral narrative, enables her to support Mabo's position. She is transforming her idea of the nation, and it is the story of Jonathan Bettany and his role in contact history which has made this possible.

Keneally's reckoning with the past through the Bettany ancestry contributes to reconciliation between Australia's white settler culture and the Indigenous people who have been written out of the history books for so long. An awareness of our own ancestor's complicity with the exploitation, the massacres, and the big lie of Australian history is an important step on the path to reconciliation as it encourages us to transform our own idea of national identity. This is not to argue that reconciliation is now finished with; it is an ongoing process which is made possible by understanding the complexities of pastoralist settlement through ancestral narratives. Ancestral narratives allow a personal investment in reconciliation due to our identification with settler ancestors.

Finally, Keneally's evocation of Africa is another aspect of the novel which undermines a simple ethnically-based form of Australian nationalism. For Keneally, Africa is rich and complex, and echoes his interest in the war between Ethiopia and Eritrea in *Towards Asmara*.<sup>69</sup> Keneally focuses on the various legacies of colonialism and the bitter civil war, which in the late 80s plunged the Sudan into abject poverty. In particular, he explores the role of non-governmental organisations ('NGOs') from the West who distribute humanitarian aid, whilst being careful to always respect national sovereignty.<sup>70</sup> This insight into life in the Sudan encourages Prim to reconsider her own Australian-ness the world of nation-states. This is the kind of transnationalism first depicted in *The Great Shame*.

Prim's ancestry comes to the fore when she cannot get the idea of slavery out of her mind, and feels compelled to do something about it. 'She could not understand why the matter pressed on her. Even if she were an abolitionist, she was

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<sup>68</sup> Keneally, *Bettany*, pp. 426-9.

<sup>69</sup> Thomas Keneally, *Towards Asmara*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1989. *Bettany's Book*, however, is the first extended and explicit comparison of Australia and Africa which Keneally has produced.

<sup>70</sup> Keneally suggested his interests in this area as early as 1987: 'I'm starting to get a positive lust to find out the ways the hunger organisations work.' Candida Baker, *Yacker 2: Australian Writers Talk About Their Work*, Sydney: Pan, 1987, p. 124.

not even sure slavery existed. Did she want it to? Did its reality suit some fanatic need in her?'<sup>71</sup> This reference to 'fanatic need' underscores Prim's firm ideals and her links to Sarah Bernard's convict status. When Prim realises that Abuk, a midwife under Ausfam's care, was once a slave, the reality of it is brought home to her as an embodiment of slavery.<sup>72</sup> Prim is only following her ancestral impulses in acting as a saviour, as this is precisely what Sarah did for both Alice and Jonathan. However, her concern with slavery serves to underscore the vast differences between Africa and the West and the complexities of Sudanese society. For the issue is not at all as clear-cut as Prim thinks; slavery is connected to Sudanese nationalism in important ways.

The culture-clash between her and Sherif reinforces Prim's identity through her ancestral narrative but begins to erode her desire to free the slaves. A major problem is that some forms of slavery exist traditionally in Sudanese society, and so when Westerners oppose such traditions it can be seen as a neo-colonialist challenge to Sudanese national sovereignty. The reader can see that in some ways Prim is acting as an arrogant outsider, and she is due for a significant culture shock requiring some adaptation..

Indeed, this ancestral impulse to dissent and do good is soon shown to be simplistic and misguided. The Baroness Von Trotke and Connie Everdale make regular trips to buy slaves and set them free, but for Prim this is problematic. It is not merely Prim's concern that by liberating some slaves they might be perpetuating the trade, or making no real difference.<sup>73</sup> The Baroness responds with pure pragmatism; these individuals will indicate the size of the problem, and produce valuable survey data. Prim's real concern comes when the children are taken to their new home, the True Saviour Mission run by the Wagons.

Prim's feelings ... were edging beyond discontent into a dizzy fury. These children had been raised in a peasant mix of animist magic and Coptic Christianity, and had then been forcibly and rigorously instructed in Islam. Koranic sheiks had taught them that redemption lay in the most fundamental and sweeping observance of the Law. And now, within a day of leaving the Sudan, they were undergoing introduction to the Resurrection as perceived by American evangelicals! Their brainpans already brimming with loss and exile were assaulted

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<sup>71</sup> Keneally, *Bettany*, p. 57.

<sup>72</sup> Keneally, *Bettany*, p. 47.

<sup>73</sup> Keneally, *Bettany*, p. 340.

with this third version, with American religious melodrama whose Christ must seem a different deity from the Afro-Arab Coptic Christ.<sup>74</sup>

This discovery challenges Prim's certainty in her ancestral/national identification, yet she persists in working against the grain. Both Connie and Professor el Rahzi note her concerns as valid but feel that the end justifies the means. 'The rule in Africa is you work with what's to hand.'<sup>75</sup> Prim's moral objection to the way the slaves are liberated puts an entirely new perspective on the situation for her, and through this Keneally challenges the idea of an identity which is simplistically inherited from an ancestral narrative. This leads directly to the grand conclusion, which completely undermines Prim's world. Because of his assault on Siddiq (and possibly because of Prim's unauthorised activities in the South), Sherif is abducted by the government; he has been disappeared.<sup>76</sup> Here Prim finally realises the consequences of her ancestrally-inspired actions, and is awakened to the complexities of the situation in the Sudan. Her immediate response is to again act as saviour: she plans a rally to reveal one of the 'ghost houses' used for interrogation and torture, in an attempt to force the government to at least acknowledge Sherif's disappearance.<sup>77</sup> However, this does nothing to stop the situation and does little to help Sherif. Only by openly confessing to conspiracy with rebels in the South and agreeing to leave the Sudan immediately does Prim get Sherif released.<sup>78</sup> This represents her utter disempowerment by the regime, and furthermore, Sherif and Prim's relationship is forever destroyed; he cannot follow her and create a life in the West.<sup>79</sup> She is forced to reconsider the blind self-righteousness which is part of her national identity, and her ancestral narrative has forced her to consider the complexities of freedom.

Ultimately, even just the presence of Africa within *Bettany's Book* induces the reader to reconsider what is meant by nationalism. Prim's national identity is challenged and transformed through an interaction between her ancestral narrative and her life experience. This complements the complexity of settler culture and the revelation of convict ancestry which forces the Bettany sisters to reconsider their

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<sup>74</sup> Keneally, *Bettany*, pp. 374-5.

<sup>75</sup> Keneally, *Bettany*, p. 376.

<sup>76</sup> Keneally, *Bettany*, p. 504. The phenomenon of 'disappearance', or summary detention, is endemic throughout authoritarian and totalitarian societies.

<sup>77</sup> Keneally, *Bettany*, p. 534.

<sup>78</sup> Keneally, *Bettany*, p. 569.

<sup>79</sup> Keneally, *Bettany*, pp. 585-91.

idea of their place in the world. It also demonstrates the problem with the ethnically-based, oppositional national identity which surfaces in his earlier fiction. It argues for the need to transform identity, and demonstrates the potential for this through ancestral narrative.

### **Keneally: Towards a Hybrid Nation**

‘Europe’ is morally, spiritually indefensible ... And that is the great thing I hold against pseudo-humanism: that for too long it has diminished the rights of man, that its concept of those rights has been – and still is – narrow and fragmentary, incomplete and biased and, all things considered, sordidly racist.<sup>80</sup>

Where postmodernist theory has reacted to the perceived indefensibility of bourgeois humanism by abandoning the very idea of totality, a postcolonial strategy might be to move explicitly, as Fanon already did ... to proclaim a ‘new’ humanism, predicated upon a formal repudiation of the degraded European form.<sup>81</sup>

To precisely identify the nature of Keneally’s shift in nationalist ancestral narratives, it is useful to understand it as a type of new humanism, or hybridity. Post-humanism will be used in a general sense to indicate a concern with cultural identities: the question of what makes us human. ‘I think also that there is still a major role to be played in the whole question of humanism ... The only life that is possible for humanism is if it’s revived in the interest of a universal concept.’<sup>82</sup> This means moving beyond Enlightenment humanism and its imperialist / patriarchal connotations, and particularly moving beyond the ethnic-genealogical myths of descent which have led to the destructive nationalisms of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Keneally certainly works to promote the idea of humanity as one very large family.<sup>83</sup>

A more focused notion of this kind of new humanism is to be found in hybridity, as it is more elaborated in post-colonial theory. Enlightenment humanism

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<sup>80</sup> Aime Cesaire, from *Discourse on Colonialism*, in Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory*, Cambridge: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1972, pp. 172-4.

<sup>81</sup> Neil Lazarus, ‘National Consciousness and the Specificity of (post)colonial Intellectualism’, in Francis Barker, Peter Hulme, Margaret Iverson, *Colonial Discourse / Postcolonial Theory*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994, p. 219.

<sup>82</sup> Edward Said, in Moustafa Bayoumi and Andrew Rubin, ‘An Interview with Edward Said’ in *The Edward Said Reader*, New York: Vintage, 1999, p. 433.

<sup>83</sup> This is also the basic drive of Anthony D. Smith’s work.

is likely to view hybridity as miscegenation, a corruption and transgression of human boundaries and categories. This kind of hybridity is seen as pollution, a contravention of the natural order. On the other hand, a new humanist approach to hybridity sees the coexistence of differences as liberating and creative with the potential to promote peace, harmony and dialogue across boundaries. This kind of hybridity attempts to move beyond the purist Eurocentrism of traditional (Western) humanism.<sup>84</sup>

For the purposes of this thesis, new humanism can be considered in terms of identities: both what it is that makes us human, as well as the various forms of subjectivity which compose our cultural identities. Western humanism's association with imperialism and colonisation all over the world led to particular subjectivities forming the basis for power relations. It is the investment in the power of the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant male that needs to be challenged by the very hybridity it inadvertently created. Keneally's revised ancestral nationalism suggests a way to move beyond purist, linear, arborescent models of identity.

What Keneally has done in his more recent ancestral narratives is move beyond the 'border patrol' mentality of Césaire's 'pseudo-humanism.' This is why *The Great Shame's* transnational, diasporic vision is important: it challenges and transcends many of the traditional national boundaries between Ireland, Australia and the United States. *Bettany's Book* is even more transformative in this regard, because Keneally extends his Australian nationalist vision into Africa, searching for social and cultural similarities as well as a common humanity. In these general ways Keneally is moving beyond the simplistic binaries of imperial and colonial nationalisms: he is actually transforming his very idea of the nation in order to challenge the Eurocentric power base of Western humanism.

From the perspective of this 'degraded European form' of humanism, the transgression of boundaries is a violation of natural order. According to this approach, hybridity is miscegenation and can operate as a kind of intergenerational wound, scarring the inner life of generations of people. This can happen on a social and cultural level as well as a biological one, just like the notion of mimicry, whereby the colonised subject seeks to become like the coloniser. Although this was imperial policy, it also represents a threat to the imperial mission because it

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<sup>84</sup> A fine overview of theories of hybridity is presented by Nikos Papastergiadis, 'Restless Hybrids', in *Third Text* 32 (Autumn 1995), pp. 9-18.

reveals the ambivalence of the relationship between the coloniser and colonised. 'The mimicry of the post-colonial subject is always potentially destabilising to colonial discourse, and locates an area of considerable political and cultural uncertainty in the structure of imperial dominance.'<sup>85</sup> However, Naipaul's novel shows how these 'mimic-men' have an extremely difficult, painful life, trapped as they are between two worlds.<sup>86</sup>

This notion of hybridity or mimicry as a wound is clearly evident in *Bettany's Book*, as Keneally represents the negative aspect of the humanism which is to be transcended. One example is when Sherif remembers his fiancée and her family in the United States, who strove for middle-class respectability but displayed only condescension to Sherif.<sup>87</sup> However, a much finer example is Felix, who could not bear to hear the truth about his origins and resorted to patricide when he discovered that the despicable Goldspink was his father.<sup>88</sup> The final example is Sherif himself, who has trouble reconciling the West and Africa within himself and cannot follow Prim back home after he has been detained and tortured by his own national government.

However, Keneally is also keen to move beyond this negative idea of hybridity and to recast it as potentially liberating and certainly creative. Sherif is an example of someone who has trouble reconciling his painful double inheritance, and his dreams for the future of his nation are expressed through his work as a doctor among Sudanese refugees. The ultimate legacy of Felix is also positive, as Sir Malik Bettany is clearly a successful businessman who has made a home and established a hybrid cultural identity in Singapore. The Bettany sisters themselves are a type of hybrid, since their ancestry represents a transgression of all sorts of social barriers. Finally, Australian society is hybrid in itself, as Keneally demonstrates in the case of the Irish in *The Great Shame*. These are Keneally's movements towards a hybrid, new humanist form of nationalism.

It is primarily by using ancestral narrative for personal identification that Keneally suggests the potential for reshaping ideas of the nation. His earlier fiction, such as *Bring Larks and Heroes* and *The Playmaker*, sought to narrate the nation in an ethno-symbolic sense, and established a cast of characters to act as 'tomorrow's

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<sup>85</sup> Bill Ashcroft *et al.*, *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies*, London: Routledge, 1998, p. 142.

<sup>86</sup> V.S. Naipaul, *The Mimic Men*, London: Penguin, 1969.

<sup>87</sup> Keneally, *Bettany*, p. 203.

ancestors', or national prototypes opposed to a dominant culture. However, *The Great Shame* and *Bettany's Book* use ancestry in an entirely different way, to challenge and extend these ideas of the nation and to promote a new humanist, hybrid conception of national identity. Koch aims to effect a similar type of change, although in the area of gender rather than national identity.

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<sup>88</sup> Keneally, *Bettany*, p. 487.