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**To Voice or not to Voice the Tasmanian
Aborigines: Novels by Matthew Kneale and
Richard Flanagan**

Celia Wallhead

Contents

To Voice or not to Voice the Tasmanian Aborigines: Novels by Matthew Kneale and Richard Flanagan	6
Abstract	6
1. Introduction	7
2. Problems of representing indigeneity	9
3. Strategies for envisioning the indigenes in Kneale's and Flanagan's Tasmanian novels	12
4. A comparison of the narrative strategies of the two novels in giving the native and the marginalised European a voice: filling silences with laughter	17
5. Conclusions	33
Works cited	34

To Voice or not to Voice the Tasmanian Aborigines: Novels by Matthew Kneale and Richard Flanagan

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Abstract

The current debate in post-colonial studies continues to include discussions of whether it is licit or politically correct to represent, for the purposes of entertainment, or even edification, the situation of peoples who have suffered under colonisation. We ask if it is better to avoid the subject altogether and forget them, or give them a voice, even if it means recreating their humiliation and pain. A particularly extreme case is chosen for study here: that of the extermination of the Tasmanian Aborigines. There has been a spate of books on the subject in the last year or two, both fiction and non-fiction, which have added to the debate. I look more closely at two prize-winning novels: Matthew Kneale's *English Passengers* and Richard Flanagan's *Gould's Book*

To Voice or not to Voice the Tasmanian Aborigines: Novels by Matthew Kneale and Richard Flanagan

Celia Wallhead

of *Fish*. Analysis of their approach, setting, narrative strategies and characterisation reveals that this post-colonial generation of writers is understandably much more sensitive than the generation which first began to question colonisation, of which Conrad is the most visible. Kneale and Flanagan attempt to give a voice to the hitherto silenced Aborigines, and create individual figures instead of stereotypes. They also portray marginalised Europeans who suffered alongside the natives, and show them, not only as fully human, but also noble and talented.

1. Introduction

Two prize-winning novels of recent years have focussed upon the evils of colonialism in the context of the extermination of the Aborigines of Tasmania -originally known in the West, not by its real name, but by the name imposed by the colonisers: Van Diemen's Land. Matthew Kneale's *English Passengers* (2000) won the 2000 Whitbread Book of the Year and was short-listed for the Booker Prize, while Richard Flanagan's *Gould's Book of Fish: A novel in twelve fish* (2001) won the 2002 Commonwealth Writers Prize. These novels not only share a historical context, being set in Tasmania under colonial rule in the 1820s, but also some of the characters, and they both include a farcical incident with a pig. They also share in the denunciation, not only of the treatment of the Aborigines, but of the whole enterprise of recreating Europe

and the old world in the new territories, especially since this entailed the denial of the right of a native to make his own self-assessment. The colonial gaze was always already distorting. Flanagan's suffering and cynical narrator writes:

It was my first great artistic lesson: colonial art is the comic knack of rendering the new as the old, the unknown as the known, the antipodean as the European, the contemptible as the respectable (*Gould's Book of Fish*: 68).

When the coloniser recreated "home from home" in the "travelling" or "migrant metaphor" (Boehmer, 1995: 52) common to all Empire, he-and it was always a he-denied the value of the new. Flanagan's narrator sets out his second lesson, and we see that it has even more to do with the identity of the thing upon which the colonial gaze is focussed, whether it is native fish, as in this case, or by extension -also suggested in this case-people as fish:

This was my second lesson in colonial art: you discover the true nature of your subject at the same time as you discover your audience, but it is an added disappointment (*ibid.*: 78).

His meaning is that there is no essential truth, you (mis)represent the Other in the terms that the coloniser wants to see or hear; or, as one of the characters, Pobjoy, the jailer,

To Voice or not to Voice the Tasmanian Aborigines: Novels by Matthew Kneale and Richard Flanagan

Celia Wallhead

says: “definitions belong to the definer, not the defined”. (*ibid.*: 337)

2. Problems of representing indigeneity

But whatever the high moral purpose of the late colonial or post-colonial writer, (and we must remember that “the path to Hell is paved with good intentions”), the portrayal of the indigene is fraught with problems. As long ago as 1975, Chinua Achebe, while a visiting professor at the University of Massachusetts, had delivered his famous public lecture entitled “An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*”. Here he established his belief that Conrad, especially in his 1902 short novel deliberately set Africa up as “the other world” so that he might examine Europe by its yardstick. According to Achebe, Africa is presented to the reader as “the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilisation, a place where man’s vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality” (quoted in Phillips 2003: 13). Africans are represented as ugly and less than human, and however much critics who have defended *Heart of Darkness* against charges of racism have pointed out Conrad’s anti-colonial purpose, Achebe has huge problems with a novelist who exploits Africa and Africans, denying their full and complex humanity and diversity, merely to discuss Europeans and what happens to

them when they undergo a disquieting encounter with something or someone other than what they are used to. Achebe has not changed his opinion over the years: in a recent interview with the writer Caryl Phillips (Phillips, 2003), he maintains that “Great artists manage to be bigger than their times”, so Conrad should have transcended the late-nineteenth-century view of a primitive African world. While Conrad’s insights would not have troubled many of his original readers, they are deeply problematic in this de-colonised, post-colonial, world.

Achebe demands a “better argument” to put forward a benevolent attitude: “You have to admit that Africans are people. You cannot diminish a people’s humanity and defend them”. (Phillips, 2003: 13). When asked by Phillips which writers he thought had best represented the continent of Africa and African people, Achebe accepted that Graham Greene was one, because he made limited claims and didn’t attempt to be too profound: “We can’t be too profound about somebody whose history and language and culture is beyond your own”. (ibid.) Phillips puts a crucial question to him: “But you’re not suggesting that outsiders should not write about other cultures?” Achebe admits that he would not go to those lengths, not merely because this would be a sort of curbing or censorship (although he would excise *Heart of Darkness* from the can-

To Voice or not to Voice the Tasmanian Aborigines: Novels by Matthew Kneale and Richard Flanagan

Celia Wallhead

on), but he actually sees something positive in the outsider portraying what to him is alterity:

This identification with the other is what a great writer brings to the art of story-making. We should welcome the rendering of our stories by others, because a visitor can sometimes see what the owner of the house has ignored. But they must visit with respect and not be concerned with the colour of skin, or the shape of nose, or the condition of the technology in the house (Phillips 2003: 13).

By the end of the interview, Achebe has succeeded in bringing Phillips round to his point of view, that Conrad, however lofty his mission, has compromised African humanity in order to examine the European psyche:

Achebe is right; to the African reader the price of Conrad's eloquent denunciation of colonisation is the recycling of racist notions of the "dark" continent and her people (ibid.).

Thus Achebe has much to teach us about how to frame visions of alterity, how to construct ethnicity in fiction. The first thing to avoid is *using* people and places to talk merely about oneself. This practice causes subjectivity to be diminished and stereotypically reductive images to be perpetuated: the "other" (a problematic word in itself) will forever be subaltern and "other" instead of central. Secondly, writers should not be too serious, or attempt to be profound, or the enterprise may

only convince those superficially acquainted with the subject. Limitations should be recognised and written into the underpinnings of the story. Thirdly, the respect required of the “visitor” must extend, not only to the obvious, sensitive -though superficial-areas such as colour, but also to more important areas like so-called material “progress”.

3. Strategies for envisioning the indigenes in Kneale’s and Flanagan’s Tasmanian novels

Bearing these points in mind, I have set out in this study to examine whether contemporary writers are coping better with the problems of representing the other in their fiction. I have chosen a specific case, that of the Tasmanian Aborigines, because the problematic context of the Australian Aborigines in general has been attracting attention, a spate of works on the subject having appeared in the last couple of years. I say “works”, because the question has been discussed not only in book form, but also in film. Mark Abley, in his review “Hunters of Australia” (Abley 2003), reports on a film, a government investigation, and five books. Phillip Noyce’s 2002 film *Rabbit-Proof Fence* aroused considerable public response. He calls it “alternative history”, as it is based on the trek of three real historical Aboriginal girls back to their home town of Jigalong from Western Australia, where they had been taken to breed

**To Voice or not to Voice the Tasmanian Aborigines:
Novels by Matthew Kneale and Richard Flanagan**

Celia Wallhead

the blackness out of them. In 1931, when the film is set, the intention was not integration, but eugenics. In 1997, Australia's Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission had published *Bringing Them Home*: the "Stolen Children" report—689 pages of heart-breaking stories and forthright analysis. The authors claimed that through a good part of the twentieth century, Australia's policies toward Aboriginal people had been "genocidal". The suggestion is that what started in the nineteenth century continued into the twentieth, and only now, in the twenty-first century, are we appalled by it. The "stolen generations" debate is discussed by Robert Manne in his long essay *In Denial: the stolen generations and the Right* (Manne 2001). Manne shows how discussion of Aboriginal issues has been around for fifty years, but disagreements over them have politicised and embittered vast areas of Australian history, making the whole context problematic for writers. As Abley puts it:

A growing sensitivity among urban Australians to the inequities around them accompanied a new willingness among Aboriginals to speak out. One result was a tense scrutiny of the country's central myths: chief among them, that British and Irish settlers had peacefully founded an egalitarian society in a sparsely populated wilderness (Abley, 2003:6).

But the struggle of memory against forgetting, as conducted by historians like Henry Reynolds, showed that along most sections of a very long frontier, many thousands of Aboriginal people had been murdered -in some cases, massacred.

So the underside of the tale of triumphant possession that is Australian history, is the parallel saga of dispossession. The culture of forgetting is combatted by such works as John Connor's *The Australian Frontier Wars, 1788-1838* (2003), which deals with the notorious Black Line set up in Van Diemen's Land in 1830, and Mark McKenna's *Looking For Blackfellas' Point: An Australian history of place* (2003). The latter work discovers what was absent from the official histories of the area known as Blackfellas' Point in Twofold Bay. McKenna found that memory had room for only some of what had really happened in the past two centuries in the area. Local history recalled the whaling industry of the 1840s, for example, when men of various backgrounds, including Aboriginal, worked alongside each other. But it had forgotten the white sealers a generation or two before, who raped Aboriginal women and murdered their menfolk -a principal theme taken up by Matthew Kneale for the "alternative history" of his novel. Speaking of McKenna's enterprise, Abley asserts: "His search for memory is an act both of generosity and reclamation: a bring-

To Voice or not to Voice the Tasmanian Aborigines: Novels by Matthew Kneale and Richard Flanagan

Celia Wallhead

ing to light” (Abley, 2003: 7). It takes a brave writer to enter this hornets’ nest.

The case of the Tasmanian Aborigines is one of the worst scenarios ever of colonial domination, not only in Australia, but in the whole of Empire. Even in writings which attempt to “excuse Empire”, such as Niall Ferguson’s recent *Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World* (2003), where he argues that the British Empire was a “Good Thing”, there is no attempt to deny the shameful treatment of indigenous peoples in Australia and other places. No “Holocaust denier”, Ferguson sets out in detail the measures taken by the colonisers which led to the disappearance of the Aborigines. Both Kneale’s and Flanagan’s novels also recreate in their fact-laden fictions, the fighting, the discrimination, the starvation, the disease-spreading, and finally the head-hunting, which were visited upon the Tasmanian Aborigines by the Europeans.

So on the surface, it would appear that perhaps they are not avoiding the pitfalls into which Conrad fell, for here are two very popular, entertaining, stories, which have brought pleasure to their readers and many and plaudits to their authors. Is it not just another case of the white man setting up a “savage” mirror into which he can gaze to reassure himself that he is civilised, or, in a no less culpable way, using other people’s

misery to explore universal questions about man's capacity for evil? Though it may seem so, when we look more closely, we can see that these writers have avoided the dangers of causing offence by putting into effect a practice which would be in accord with Achebe's recommendations. Firstly, they have not diminished the Aborigines' humanity, because they have either given them a voice, where hitherto they had none, or they have compared them -not necessarily unfavourably-with other *Europeans* suffering similar displacement, discrimination and victimisation. Certain natives have been portrayed, especially by Kneale, as highly individual. Both writers coincide in setting these serious matters within a comic, often Shandean, framework, while at all times respecting the country and the natives in the sensitive areas.

Humour itself is not free of problems; if voyeurism is bad enough, surely laughing at another's misfortune is worse. These dilemmas have been brought out into the open in post-colonial discussion. At the 2002 Annual Conference of the Association for the Study of the New Literatures in English (ASNEL), held at the University of Erfurt, there was a panel discussion about "The Function of Humour in Postcolonial Discourse", which raised such questions as: Are there distinct kinds of postcolonial humour? What are its strategic func-

To Voice or not to Voice the Tasmanian Aborigines: Novels by Matthew Kneale and Richard Flanagan

Celia Wallhead

tions? Who is entitled to poke fun at whom? How can “postcolonial” humour be traced back to either indigenous practices and/or European traditions of humour? Can humour serve to question and transcend or consolidate cultural bounds?

We have to concede that not all these questions can be answered readily or satisfactorily, and accept that there will always be polarised positions like those of Achebe and his “adversary”, V.S. Naipaul. Yet I would argue that in serious writers who do not eschew the moral purpose of art, the last question may be answered with the former of the two alternatives proposed: that humour *can* serve to question and transcend cultural bounds. As long as there is no loss of dignity on the part of those who cannot defend themselves, and the butt of the joke is someone who should know better, has enjoyed privileges, and therefore who deserves ridicule, a comic view can be appreciated by a readership of sharing communities.

4. A comparison of the narrative strategies of the two novels in giving the native and the marginalised European a voice: filling silences with laughter

In Flanagan’s *Gould’s Book of Fish*, a present-day narrator living in Hobart and making and selling pseudo-colonial furniture (and drinking! -in every way a modern version of the eponymous convict painter and forger Gould) comes upon a

curious, even magical, book as he searches in a junk shop on the Salamanca water-front. The *Book of Fish* turns out to be a “deadful hodgepodge” of stories of convict life , with interspersed illustrations of fish. The author, one William Buelow Gould, is a life-term convict who seems to have been ordered by the surgeon to paint all the fish caught in the area of the penal colony of Sarah Island. The book actually exists, Flanagan tells us that there is a copy in the Allport Library and Museum of the Arts, State Library of Tasmania, but with no text, only illustrations. In the case of the magical book, the text disappears, and the present-day narrator (also representative of us, the reader, trying to recuperate the past), undertakes to reconstruct it from his memories of having read it. By the end of the book, he has fused with Gould, who has drowned and metamorphosed into a fish.

This curious narrative approach attracts attention to the concept of writing, as opposed to orality or visual representation, as a strategy to gain power over others. Another point that foregrounds textuality is the fact that it was illegal, under pain of death, for a convict to keep a journal. Also, to remind us not to take writing for granted, we are told of the difficulties experienced by the convict scribe to get ink from natural sources such as kangaroo blood, crushed (stolen) gems or squid ink

**To Voice or not to Voice the Tasmanian Aborigines:
Novels by Matthew Kneale and Richard Flanagan**

Celia Wallhead

(*Gould's Book of Fish*: 14-15). The concept of the visual depiction of something is also used to suggest the power of the coloniser over the helpless convicts and natives, and reminds us of the natives' belief that to take their portrait captured their soul.

The narrative technique of twelve chapters, each based on a fish, leads the reader to see the fish as people, and vice-versa, the people as fish. Flanagan begins his novel with a quotation from William Faulkner: "My mother is a fish", and the dedication depicts the women in his life as fish: "For Rosie, Jean and Eliza, swimming in ever widening rings of wonder". In chapter 3, "The Porcupine Fish", the settlement surgeon, Mr Tobias Achilles Lempriere (of *Lempriere's Dictionary* fame?), who makes Gould do the drawings, is the prickly porcupine fish: "The Surgeon grew a dorsal fin" (*ibid.*: 136). Catching a fish, drawing it and understanding and portraying a person are all one to Billy Gould:

But my third attempt pleased me -oh, it was no work of genius, I'll grant you-but in the slightly fearful, slightly bellicose uplift of the eye's large pupil I could feel the sudden excitement of being the angler & him being unexpectedly hooked. [...] But then I pulled back & oh! oh!-Oh I knew I now had him, yes, that was most surely him, & oh the bloated body & oh the ridiculous display of prickles & oh the ludicrously small tail at the end of the balloon of the flesh

as he finally broke water & became visible. A current of joy passed through me because now I really had him, finally caught for all to see (*ibid.*: 137).

Flanagan thus uses fishing as a metaphor for recuperating the past, and the fact that the angler is a marginalised convict suggests that this is a subversive view, but far truer than the official authorised version that appears in the history books.

In the early part of the novel, once Billy Gould's voice has "taken over" the narration from the frame narrator in chapter 2, the natives are viewed as "other". Gould refers to them as do all the whites, as "murderous savages" (*ibid.*: 106), or just the usual "blackfellows" (188) or "blackfellas" (321). But later on, as Gould comes to see the natives as people, and not as mere apes, as most Europeans saw them, he feels shame for his treatment of them. For example, he has been intimate with "Twopenny Sal", also called "the Mulatto" and "Cleopatra", for many years, without ever seeking to know her real, Aboriginal, name (327).

The Commandant of the penal colony reinvents Europe on Sarah Island (157). His "Nova Venezia" is based on the descriptions of the new industrial Europe sent to him by Miss Anne, the sister of the real, dead, Commandant, whose identity he has usurped. Miss Anne functions rather as the Intended in

**To Voice or not to Voice the Tasmanian Aborigines:
Novels by Matthew Kneale and Richard Flanagan**

Celia Wallhead

Heart of Darkness, in that she is the referent for Europe and the link which does not really exist. The Commandant has a great train station built on the tiny island and the imported trains just go round in a circle. He has a Great Mah-Jong Hall built with the finance of Chinese pirates and Javanese users (192), and it all falls into ruin:

In the rain that now fell inside, Miss Anne's observations on the illumination of Pall Mall by gas light & her pivotal role in Count von Rumford's treatise on communal kitchens began running into her descriptions of the steam press & mesmeric healing, & all were soon encased in a hardening shell of more bird dung. As sea eagles spiralled far above, swifts began nesting above Miss Anne's lyrical reports on macadamised roads. While bats blurred her observations on the invention of the electric telegraph, a mob of sulphur-crested cockatoos took roost above her inspiration of Wordsworth's latest rewriting of *The Prelude* (done in best Grasmere blue), & in the manured waste that gathered below a small rainforest began growing. In such a fecund catastrophe of decay everything became muddled & then one & all of it was covered in more & more stinking, encrusting lice & maggot-crawling crap (193-4).

As Gould concludes: "Van Diemen's Land -intended by the authorities to be a transplanted England-is mutating into a bastard world turned upside down [...]" (197), whereas the

world of the Aborigines had functioned well in close relation to nature.

Through using a convict as narrator, Flanagan is able to subvert the “System”. Gould breaks out of his crumbling cell and makes his way into the forbidden Registry. Here he finds that the truth about convict and colonial life has been completely erased and rewritten by the Danish chronicler Jorgen Jorgensen. The horrors of the daily life of the marginalised and victimised, the tortured and mortally sick prisoners and natives have been eliminated, making it appear that life in the colonies was, if not a bed of roses, at least fair play and civilised. Gould feels this is an insult to his personal suffering and that of his fellow prisoners, past, present and future:

It came upon him like the heaviest, the most intolerable of burdens pounding away at the front of his head as he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand: that in this universal history, all he had seen & known, all he had witnessed & suffered, was now as lost & meaningless as a dream that dissolves upon waking. If freedom, as Capois Death carrying his spirits of the past in a bottle of purlale had maintained, exists only in the space of memory, then he & everybody he knew were being condemned to an eternity of imprisonment (290).

Even the Commandant is disillusioned at the end; as he dies, he declares sentiments similar to Kurtz’s enigmatic but all

**To Voice or not to Voice the Tasmanian Aborigines:
Novels by Matthew Kneale and Richard Flanagan**

Celia Wallhead

too obvious “The horror! The horror!” (*Heart of Darkness*, in Abrams et al., 1986: 1873):

There is no Europe worth replicating, no wisdom beyond the flames consuming my palace. There is only this life we know in all its wondrous dirt & filth & splendour (372).

Matthew Kneale uses an entirely different narrative approach to convey much the same message. He creates two stories which begin far apart in space and are even separate in time, but which converge as surely and inevitably as the Titanic and the iceberg a hundred years later, as expressed in Yeats’s poem “The Convergence of the Twain”. Against the backdrop of the genocide in Tasmania, and in counterpoint to this story of a harrowing period of history, Kneale sets his second story, this time concerning British characters, which slowly and inevitably comes into contact with, and merges with, the story of the Aborigines. This story provides comedy, albeit comedy based on the types of failings in the British characters which are condemned in the first one. The second story begins thirty years after the start of the first one, in 1857, and concerns an English-hating Manx sea-captain, Captain Illiam Quillian Kewley, and his motley crew, whose only aspiration is to smuggle a little brandy, tobacco and French pornography into England. Unfortunately for them, they find themselves obliged to take on board three temperamental Englishmen bound for Tasma-

nia on a mission both of scientific exploration and of a sacred and epic nature, since it is dedicated, no less, to the discovery of the exact location of the Garden of Eden. The desire is not so much to recreate Occident in Orient, as to find or establish a perfect version of it. The Reverend Geoffrey Wilson has come to believe that it is not in the Holy Land but in Tasmania. At loggerheads with him almost from the outset is the obnoxious, white supremacist Dr Thomas Potter. Caught in between is the dilettante botanist, Timothy Renshaw. Potter is based on a disgraced surgeon, Robert Knox, who wrote a best-seller in 1850: *The Races of Men: a Fragment* (456).

Kneale's objective is to tell the "truth" about the Aborigines' fate, a story that has been silenced or glossed over in the history books. In order to reveal glimpses of this truth, he has had recourse to an Aborigine narrator. This character is Peevay, renamed "Cromwell" by the Europeans, a young half-breed, son of an Aborigine mother (who also appears in Flanagan's book and is based on a real historical woman), who has abandoned him, and a white escaped convict who kidnapped and raped her. Peevay's story is mainly concerned with his memories of his kin and their sufferings. His childhood and adolescence are marked by his constant search for his parents. He longs for a mother, to be like the other children, and dreams

**To Voice or not to Voice the Tasmanian Aborigines:
Novels by Matthew Kneale and Richard Flanagan**

Celia Wallhead

her up through his imagination. When he eventually finds her, the traditional plot of joy at being united is subverted, as his mother still rejects him on account of the circumstances of his engendering. Thus he is not a stereotyped or even idealised figure, but is human and rounded:

So I finally saw her. She never was tall and beautiful like I thought, no, but was quite short with strong arms and legs, and quick eyes ready for some fight. Still I never minded. This was blissful and great good fortune. This was jubilation and tidings of joy (79).

Reported in later life as this memory is, we see how Peevay has acquired the static phrases of Biblical language. Equally, his view of his father in his imagination is remote from the real state of affairs, as he discovers when they meet:

When I dreamed meeting him, which I still did sometimes, I made him a fine fellow with a kindly face and hair, rather than some piss-poor one smelling of salt and mutton bird and white man's stink (259).

Peevay paints a vivid picture of Aboriginal life through the medium of what for him is a foreign tongue. In the English language which he has learned, Peevay is able to tell of what befalls his people. He is the man who shows the reader what his people have lost. Peevay's half-brother, Tayaleah, also known as George Vandiemer, is based on the true case of

an Aboriginal child sent to Lancashire in 1821 to learn English language and culture. He becomes proficient in mathematics, which is held to be the “highest and rarest form of reason” (Epilogue: 456), thus disproving the conventionally-held belief that the Tasmanian Aborigines were little more than apes. In the novel, *Tayaleah, or George Vandiemien*, is torn between two worlds, that of his family and that of those English people with good intentions who treated him well. Unable to accommodate himself in either one of these incompatible worlds, he appears to commit suicide. Thus he meets an early death, just as the original George Vandiemien had done:

Ever since he came to Flinders Island on Robson’s boat I saw Tayaleah was like some fellow who is snared between his awake and his dreamings, and is pulled by both, stronger and stronger, never knowing what is true, till he is torn like paper. Tear got too big, so he jumped (274).

Peevay understands what it is to live in two worlds and not know which one is “true”. But Peevay’s narrative voice is not the only one. Each character speaks in the first person. This is necessary because Peevay obviously could not see into the black heart and sinister motivations of Dr Potter; also, the self-centred, pompous “English passengers” find the Aborigines inscrutable and possibly lacking a mind or soul.

**To Voice or not to Voice the Tasmanian Aborigines:
Novels by Matthew Kneale and Richard Flanagan**

Celia Wallhead

English Passengers is a feat of ventriloquism, as Kneale has given his novel an anonymous “narrator”, not a voice, but a manipulating hand, that has taken the recorded memories of the Captain, the Reverend, the Doctor, Peevay, his father and other characters, chopped them up and dovetailed the pieces of narrative so that they advance step by step in chronological order until they reach a climax and denouement. Captain Kewley’s knowing and subversive voice directly addressing the reader begins and ends the whole account, thus making it a privileged medium. The Reverend’s voice, in its pomposity, reveals his growing sense of self-importance. Through his unwitting self-betrayal, the Bible itself is questioned as an authoritative text (*English Passengers*: 21). Boehmer (1995: 14) has shown the importance of the Bible as a familiar text as well as an authoritative one in Colonial literature. The pamphlet, as a discursive medium, and instrument of power in the hands of the coloniser, is equally invalidated, in such writings as his *A Proof against the Atheisms of Geology: the truth of the chronology of the Bible conclusively shown* (*Gould’s Book of Fish*: 22).

The traditional voice of authority is shown to be hypocritical and self-seeking. We have an exchange of formal letters between “Sir Charles Moray, Secretary for Colonies, London”

and “George Alder, Governor of Van Diemen’s Land, 1828”, where concern is expressed about the plight of the Aborigines:

It is my understanding that, as a consequence of violence between these and the white population, the blacks’ numbers have become greatly reduced, so much so that they are now entirely extinguished in many districts. I have been advised that, if matters continue on their present course, the native population of the island will, before long, be entirely extirpated. It is imperative that such an eventuality be avoided [...] it is nothing less than essential that the good name of His Majesty’s Government be protected (99-100).

The Colonial Secretary is more concerned about the government’s reputation than about human lives. The Governor, for his part, is anxious to be seen to be doing something about the deteriorating situation. When he writes: “While I care little for my own reputation in this matter [...]” (101), he is hardly plausible. His action is to divide up the island, which is “as large as Ireland and as mountainous and inhospitable as Scotland” (101), forcing the Aborigines onto settlements. He has prematurely given up on the possibility of the natives and the settlers ever seeing eye to eye and living in relative harmony. For him, the Aborigines are uncivilized and intractable, and he and most settlers make no attempt to understand them on their own terms:

To Voice or not to Voice the Tasmanian Aborigines: Novels by Matthew Kneale and Richard Flanagan

Celia Wallhead

The blacks, you must understand, have no comprehension of what I may term system, this being the very root of order. Despite their wandering and elusive ways I have hoped that they might show some curiosity towards this mighty and civilized society that has appeared so suddenly in their midst -in our agriculture and manufacturing, our complex laws and processes-but I am afraid I have been disappointed (100-1).

His solution is to put posters up all over the area, ordering the Aborigines to move out. Needless to say, as Peevay remembers (“Peevay, 1829”), they failed to have the required effect:

Stuck on wattle tree was a tiny spear made from shining stuff like Mother’s gun, very beautiful, and hanging from it was some strangest thing. This was like some dried skin, but thin and easy to tear like leaf, and when wind came it moved, like dead bird’s wing. Black lines were on it, like pictures of nothing, plenty of them, so they covered that whole thing.

‘That’s just some white men’s shit,’ said Mother, as if we were foolish fellows to be so curious (103-4).

Thus formal accounts in general are undermined here, as in *Gould’s Book of Fish*, where all the colonisers’ documents end up on a colossal funeral pyre which turns into an “antipodean auto-da-fé” (331).

In counterbalance to textuality, Peevay remembers an oral tradition with a secret oral cosmology:

When we sat so in the dark, after our eating, Tartoyen told us stories -secret stories that I will not say even now-about the moon and sun, and how everyone got made, from men and wallaby to seal and kangaroo rat and so. Also he told us who was in those rocks and mountains and stars, and how they went there. Until, by and by, I could hear stories as we walked across the world, and divine how it got so, till I knew world as if he was some family fellow of mine (52).

As long as Peevay belongs to the world of his mother, these traditional explanations are sufficient as a metaphysics. But because he is a hybrid and half belongs to the white man's world of his father, he comes to understand his ignorance, which he recognises as potentially dangerous:

So time passed. I grew taller, until, by and by, I did suppose I knew everything now, and there were no mysteries to confound any more. Of course in truth I knew piss-poor little. Why, I knew only half, and that whole half was sat there waiting, like one kanunnah, licking his lips (53).

A more disinterested discourse is found in certain personal letters. George Baines, "Employee of the New World Land Co, 1828" sends personal testimony home in a letter to his father (60-76). Some of the atrocities perpetrated on the natives are described here, such as the massacre on the cliff, which, according to Kneale, really happened (Epilogue: 455). The

To Voice or not to Voice the Tasmanian Aborigines: Novels by Matthew Kneale and Richard Flanagan

Celia Wallhead

horrors suffered by convicts in Australia and Tasmania, so minutely detailed by Flanagan, are also revealed here, since Peevay's father, Jack Harp, gives his version of the 1820s. Kneale thus made a space for the voice of the marginalised and silenced criminal, a space which was taken up by Flanagan and extended to cover almost the whole novel. Harp's account of what he remembers of these years fills in the normally excluded areas of the full picture of colonial life. The account of his visit by Julius Crane, "Visiting Inspector of the London Prison Committee, 1837", also subverts the official picture on crime and punishment, as he appears a very human person, who would like to alleviate the suffering of the convicts, but is not allowed to (195). Crane gives us a personal account - complete with dramatic encounter with Peevay's father - rather than an official report, so the harsh and denigrating conditions of the convicts' lives are not glossed over or forgotten.

Kneale's most acerbic criticism is obviously reserved for the writings of the racist doctor, whose descent into insanity accelerates as the plot advances. His views on white supremacy are set out in a pseudo-scientific discourse, which admits of no other authority:

The Celtic type (instance: Manx) is altogether inferior in physique to the Saxon, being smaller, darker, and lacking in strength. Typically the forehead is sloping, showing evidence of the 'snout'

characteristic, noted by Pearson as an indication of inferior intelligence (119).

This emphasis upon the cranium reminds us of the Belgian doctor in *Heart of Darkness* measuring Marlow's head before he goes off to the Congo. The theme of native heads will loom large both in this novel and in Flanagan's. But as it turns out, the Manx sailors prove to be much more intelligent than the Englishmen. An Englishman's head proves to be inferior, and the comparison between the head of an Englishman and that of a native is turned to ironic and comic, if grotesque, effect in Flanagan's novel, where the skull of the Surgeon, Lempriere, is taken to be that of a native.

Dr Potter's hierarchical list of the racial types to be found at Cape Colony in 1857 (168-9), makes him sound like the racist police chief McBryde in Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924), with his theory of racial types and climatic zones. Curiously, Kneale includes in *English Passengers* a Superintendent McBride of the Hobart police, who intervenes in the macabre case of the doctor's body-snatching of Peevay's mother (339). Flanagan's Lempriere, whose head-hunting literally rebounds upon his own head is reported thus:

He came back & sat down & told me how the most temperate climes lie between the 40th & 50th degrees of latitude & how it is

To Voice or not to Voice the Tasmanian Aborigines: Novels by Matthew Kneale and Richard Flanagan

Celia Wallhead

from this climate that correct ideas of the genuine colours of mankind & of various degrees of beauty ought to be derived (*Gould's Book of Fish*: 230).

5. Conclusions

In his Epilogue, Kneale comments on the seeming ease with which the supremacist world view was accepted at the time, and became a precursor to Hitler's *Mein Kampf*: "If only the Victorian British had troubled to look a little more carefully at the evidence before them". (456). Kneale shows, albeit through fiction, that only through a leap of the imagination, based on wishful thinking, did the Victorians come to believe that there was factual evidence to prove white supremacy. There was sufficient evidence to the contrary, as for example, in George Vandriemen's mathematical capabilities. In these two books, the privileged fail and the underprivileged are noble and talented. It is interesting that Kneale's book came out in the same year that the first results on the Human Genome Project were published, demonstrating the essential similarity between racial types. Also in the same year, an Aborigine sportswoman, Kathy Freeman, was the star of the Sydney Olympic Games, where Australia was host to the world. But such happy endings would be implausible in novels set in the historical context. Thus in both of them, almost everyone dies,

though the noble die with dignity and the most obnoxious characters meet more terrible fates, albeit often terribly funny at the same time. Kneale's and Flanagan's novels have been made possible by the historical recuperation carried out by such as Connor, Manne and McKenna, and Reynolds before them. Their combined work may help stimulate and smooth the process of change, with, as a goal, the common desire for reconciliation. To remain silent on the subject would deny their efforts and goodwill, and ultimately do a disservice to the first possessors of the land.

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**To Voice or not to Voice the Tasmanian Aborigines:
Novels by Matthew Kneale and Richard Flanagan**
Celia Wallhead

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