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***Lights and shadows in Australian historical fiction: how does historical fiction deal with how Australia comes to know its past?***

**(Dissertation and creative work)**

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Submitted in total fulfilment of the requirements for  
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the University  
of Melbourne.

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DECLARATION:

This thesis is the original work of the author towards the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the University of Melbourne, Faculty of Arts, School of Culture and Communication

Due acknowledgement has been made in the text of all material used; and the thesis is fewer than the maximum word limit in length, exclusive of images.

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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis examines how recent Australian historical fiction, particularly that of Kim Scott and Kate Grenville, re-imagines and reframes Australia's past and how it offers new ways of relating to that past. It does so with an emphasis on the perceived disconnect between what is available to archive-based academic historiography and the current understanding of the historical issues most relevant to modern Australians.

It is presented in three sections. The first section focuses particularly on how fiction writers address the historical archives, with examples drawn mainly from works about the early frontier between Indigenous and settler Australians. It examines how different fiction styles and techniques address the construction of history, particularly the contrast between traditional realist narrative fiction and more postmodern techniques, with reference to parallel movements in the writing of non-fiction history. It asks how the concept of the "truth" about the past is dealt with differently in historical fiction, compared to historiography. This section concludes that historical fiction, particularly fiction that uses less traditional forms offers culturally useful ways of addressing modern questions about the past, and relationships with the past.

The second section of the thesis is an extended examination of the process of creating a work of research fiction based on historical material. It begins with a short historical account of the subject of the author's research, and goes on to offer a detailed examination of the research process. It considers in more depth the issue of archival research as it relates to the creation of stories in the past. The original research for this thesis was carried out both online and in physical archives, and the second section discusses how the archival research process influenced the fictional work in terms of both form and content. The second section also discusses how the works and techniques examined in the first section influenced the creation of the research fiction, with additional discussion of the genre of fictional historical biography.

The final part of the thesis is a creative work in the form of an extended extract from a historical novel, based on the life of the 19<sup>th</sup> century historical figure Edward Oxford. The novel, titled *Lights and Shadows of Melbourne Life*, is a first-person narrative that incorporates both real and fictional archival material. It interrogates questions of memory, identity, colonial attitudes to migration to Australia, and through its inclusion of archives and "archives", contrasted with the narrator's commentary, deals with questions of archival reliability.

## **THESIS INTRODUCTION**

This thesis examines historical fiction in Australia. It asks: how has recent historical fiction dealt with the past and with how we come to know it? What stated aims, methods, values and ethical frameworks have contemporary fiction writers brought to bear on Australian history and historiography? How have they dealt with the archives? What literary techniques have they employed?

The thesis is presented in three parts. The first is a critical essay where I present my main analyses and arguments around the above research questions. The second is a reflective essay in which I give an account of the historical knowledge gained in my own historical research, along with a critical reflection on the process of fictionalising the material. Finally, an extract from an historical novel (*Lights and Shadows of Melbourne Life*), written in light of my critical investigations, from original historical research. Throughout the thesis, I assume that my readership – the “we” and “our” I refer to – includes Australians of all backgrounds, including Indigenous, settler and recent immigrant, but I remain conscious of the differing perspectives of these groups.

Section one, the critical essay, focuses on fiction written about contact between Indigenous society and settler/invasor groups at or around the time of colonisation; this focus has been guided by the prevailing subject matter of leading Australian writers of historical fiction, most notably Kim Scott, Kate Grenville, Richard Flanagan, Alexis Wright, and Rohan Wilson.

I will argue through close analysis, particularly of Scott’s work in *Benang: from the heart* and *That Deadman Dance*, that historical fiction, by virtue of the liberties and techniques available to fiction, offers insights and ways of thinking about history, and how we live with it in the present, that are unique to fiction. In this analysis I will examine how Scott’s historical fiction interacts and uses with the archival material that is more usually employed by historiography. I will follow the analysis of Scott with a wider examination of how fiction writers have dealt with the Australian “frontier” and what the use of literary techniques in their writing contributes to the discussion of the frontier as it is understood today. My examination will first focus on Kate Grenville’s *The Secret River* and *The Lieutenant*, followed by an examination of how various fictional techniques, when applied to history, work to produce new ways of understanding. The question of how fiction writers use historical archives is investigated in both the critical and the reflective essays: in the first case with reference to published works and in the second with reference to my production of a manuscript based on my own research for this thesis. The discussion will also address how fiction writers directly address the work of historiography through postmodern techniques.

While this is not a work of historiography, I will draw on historians including Hayden White, Anne Curthoys and John Docker, EH Carr and Inga Clendinnen for their accounts of the work of historiography in order to examine how it relates and compares to fiction. The literary theories of Linda Hutcheon and A. Frances Johnson will inform my analysis of how historical fiction achieves its effects. I will also draw on Australian historians, most importantly Henry Reynolds, Mark McKenna, Bain Attwood, Ross Gibson and Bernard Smith, for critical historical perspectives and alternative ways of

writing about the periods of history under discussion. Sarah Pinto's writing on the emotional registers of fiction as it depicts history is also referenced.<sup>1</sup>

In this thesis, I find that fictional techniques that use points of view attributed to real and composite historical figures, and that fictionalise some unavailable material, are appropriate to the telling of complex and historically undetermined or contested stories; that is, that such techniques are suitable for dealing with such stories because in their form, they can accommodate uncertainty and more than one possible set of meanings. I find that archives in particular are a point of intersection between historiography and fiction, and that absences and unreliable aspects of the archives are the site of frequent intervention by fiction writers. I suggest that fiction is a valid, even necessary part of the overall project of coming to terms with history in the Australian context: this is what historian Tom Griffiths has termed "the intriguing dance of history and fiction".<sup>2</sup> I find that the use of what is variously described as point of view, voice, free indirect speech or focalisation of the narrative is a key (though not the only) justification for fiction's inclusion in that project. Fiction, I will argue, is a form which can actively embrace uncertainty, anxiety, non-teleological thinking, multivocal accounts and multiple audiences.

In the historical fiction of Kim Scott, Kate Grenville and others, the rendering of the Australian past in fiction offers new ways of coming to understand history and its effects on the nation and on individuals, both historically and in the present. These fictional versions of history can be seen as investigating and attempting to resolve longstanding real-world failures of understanding and communication. These writers, using what Richard Flanagan has termed "the full arsenal of fictional techniques", can use tools and methods unavailable to historiography.<sup>3</sup> Their writing can be viewed as doing work once considered the domain of historiography: representing and explaining the past. Such work by fiction writers has inevitably led to a perceived conflict with historiography. Closer examination of the historical fiction of Scott, Grenville and others such as Rohan Wilson and Richard Flanagan, and of the criticisms levelled at historical fiction, will show that such conflicts are of perception only. I will show that the work being done in fiction is independent of history, in the sense of its methods, effects and the texts being produced, even if there is shared subject matter. The recent use of historical fiction to address historical issues in Australia shows, *per se*, that historiography has not been perceived as adequate to deal with those issues, and those perceptions of the failings of historiography are addressed in the critical essay.

In rendering actual events as fiction, some ethical questions arise, such as misrepresentation and the co-opting of cultures and groups of which the author is not a member. The use of voice – the direct representation of events through an individual's point of view and unique sensibility – is also an issue both in terms of the right to represent and the effects of apparent veracity. These issues are inextricably linked to the rendering of protagonists' points of view, which I will argue is a key strength of historical fiction. The ethics of this technique will be discussed later in the critical essay when I discuss the use of voice more generally. The different aims of fiction and non-fiction are

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<sup>1</sup> Pinto, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Griffiths, 2015, p. 2.

<sup>3</sup> Flanagan, 2011, p. 173.

found to be relevant considerations in this matter, for instance in the case of the “emotional histories” provided by fictional works which Sarah Pinto has discussed. As my discussion – particularly around Grenville – will show, the work of fiction in this field is not uniform in its effects; that is, various fictional representations and different ways of writing can give rise to different understandings of the past, with the accompanying debate between groups with different historical “agendas”. Overall, I find that the work being done by the novels discussed here is generally positive and on the path towards addressing the gap between the differing views of Australian history held by Indigenous and non-Indigenous groups.

Such a resolution has in the past been called “reconciliation”, but is variously imagined by different participants in the debate. Most recently, it has been called “makarrata” – a coming together after conflict – by the authors of the 2017 Uluru Statement From the Heart.<sup>4</sup> To some extent, this thesis will attempt to investigate what fiction about our history can offer to the process.

Throughout the critical essay I will refer to what fiction writers have said about their own work, with a view to using those aims as indications of useful questions to ask of the texts, particularly in terms of what could be termed political or social aims. Scott and Wright in particular say they would like their work to be read in reference to such aims.

My thesis is that historical fiction, with its different set of methods and standards, is a valid and unique approach to retelling the stories of the past. Further, the works under discussion, particularly Scott’s, address and interrogate the way the stories have the past have been told previously by historiography, and do so creatively and critically. These works do not simply retell the past: they also confront the impasses that have been created by the way we have previously come to know that past, that is, via traditional historiography and through the archives. For context, the critical essay includes a short discussion of Australian historiography, exploring how the very stories that history has previously told about Australia’s past have themselves become a problem. It will go on to explore how fictional retellings that include reference to the archives and historiography are one way to deconstruct those stories.

Section Two is a reflective essay that applies the theoretical material in Section One, as well as additional theories around the archives and life writing, to my own historical research. The first chapter is an account of the historical material I used to write my own historical fiction; that is, it constitutes a short biography of my historical subject, Edward Oxford. In chapter two, I analyse my research process in the light of the critical essay’s findings on the limitations of historiographic method, with a particular additional focus on archives and how they are used. The third and the final chapter of Section Two interrogates my own writing process and shows how a fictional work can attempt to address questions arising from historical research, from a writer’s individual interests and from wider historical and historiographical questions. In the reflective essay, I use my research and writing practice to develop a better understanding of what the differences between a conventional historiographical account of a life and a fictional account may signify, and why a writer may choose one form or the other. While the base material is not explicitly of the same era as the novels examined in Section One

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<sup>4</sup> Referendum Council, 2017.

Section Three of this thesis is an extract from the novel I wrote as part of my research: *Lights and Shadows of Melbourne Life*, being a fictionalised version of the life of Edward Oxford, who in 1840, aged 18, shot at Queen Victoria and went on to spend 27 years in insane asylums and prisons before emigrating to Melbourne and living a peaceful and productive life under the assumed name John Freeman. In the novel, I have focalized the story in first person using Oxford's own (real archival) as a base from which to recreate his voice.

By doing so, I have created an unreliable narrator whose story intersects with repeated tellings of the key event in his life (the shooting) and with material I have both drawn from the real archives and fictionalised. This material serves to raise questions about the way we come to know history and how we "read" it depending on our circumstances, and how they change over time. These questions refer back to the investigations and analysis I carried out in Section One.

I have also used Oxford's family background (an ancestor who was an enslaved man) to interrogate 19<sup>th</sup> century concepts of race and "colour". Oxford's life trajectory is used to foreground important assumptions about the colonial project, for instance the availability of Australia as a place for British subjects to be sent. The extract constitutes about half the novel manuscript, and includes a plot précis of the full work.

## Section one: Critical essay

### Introduction

In this essay, I will explore how in a particular set of contemporary Australian historical fiction works, conflicts and intercultural encounters of the past are revisited, re-experienced, reworked and re-imagined. The period and topic they address can be described as frontier contact between Indigenous and settler Australians. I will attempt to show that to an extent this fictional work is an attempt to reconcile the present with the past, and is an important cultural contribution to the wider project of historical and political resolution of the issues arising from Australia's colonial past. I will ask in what ways this process of re-representation of Australian history in fiction in recent historical novels can be seen as part of the movement towards a reckoning of the past. Linda Hutcheon's work on "historiographic metafiction" will form the basis for my analysis of how postmodern forms in particular allow fiction to work usefully with history. Throughout, I will refer to how fiction writers deal with the same source materials as do historians, that is the archives and other material evidence, and how their fiction can function as a critique of both that material and its use by historiography.

In 1988's *The Poetics of Postmodernism*, Linda Hutcheon posits a "flexible conceptual structure which could at once constitute and contain postmodern culture"; a structure she argued could emerge from "historiographic metafiction".<sup>5</sup> In *The Road to Botany Bay* (a book about what he calls "spatial history" in Australia), published a year earlier, Paul Carter suggests a need for a "poetic history" in order to somewhat circumvent "the medium of white history", i.e. writing in English.<sup>6</sup> Elsewhere, in pointing out how conventional historiography has shaped our view of history, Carter writes that it's impossible to have "unimpeachably firm foundations" for our understanding of the world. He claims not to be trying to "advocate a different subject-matter so much as a different process."<sup>7</sup> For Carter, ways of knowing history that avoid the illusion of stability and order are desirable, in order to let the earth "assert its native title" (the word choice here cannot be accidental). Where "history itself might be the conceptual breakthrough needed to make imperialism possible" a seemingly ahistorical approach to storytelling may be what's needed to break the spell of colonial, imperialistic thinking about our past, and by extension, our present, he suggests.<sup>8</sup>

Most of the novels under discussion in this thesis were published since Hutcheon and Carter made their observations. I will argue that these books both use and extend the kind of poetics they were writing about. More recent writers, such as Rohan Wilson, have continued to grapple with the questions thrown up by the writing of fiction about factual events of the past, both in their own fiction and in works of theory that suggest ways of, if not resolving the inherent contradictions, at least navigating them to a productive end.

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<sup>5</sup> Hutcheon, 1998, p. ix.

<sup>6</sup> Carter, 1987, p. 350.

<sup>7</sup> Carter, 1996, p. 3.

<sup>8</sup> Carter, 1987, p. 7.

Any discussion of historical fiction inevitably encounters the question of historical “truth” because of its perceived depiction of historical events, traditionally the work of historiography. In section 1.3 below I attempt to separate the practice of history from that of fiction. This is not a historiographical essay, and I am anxious to focus on the cultural work done by fiction, but throughout this essay I acknowledge that writers and critics have often distinguished between two kinds of truth: historical and fictional. In section 4.2 I attempt to more closely interrogate what “fictional truth” might be.

A useful approach to the idea of artistic works carrying a different “truth” to that of historiography, while still addressing history, can be found in the work of art historian and critic Bernard Smith. In his 1980 Boyer Lecture, *The Spectre of Truganini*, in which he analysed the way Australia has talked about the relationship between Indigenous people and settlers, Smith referred to suppressed Australian frontier history as “the locked cupboard of our history”.<sup>9</sup> This construction implies that there is something in the cupboard to reveal; however, as the limits of Henry Reynolds’ research, discussed below, show, not everything in the past is available to historical method.

Smith denies that “the scientific method” of history necessarily affords “a commanding view of the truth”; instead, he suggests that the privileges of historians can lead them into being deceived.<sup>10</sup> Smith characterises the effects of colonisation as “a nightmare to be thrust out of mind,” but a nightmare that recurs in “our dreams”.<sup>11</sup>

The only way the history of the Australian conscience about the past could be written, he claims, is by examining “the work of novelists, poets, dramatists, artists, filmmakers and some anthropologists and archaeologists”.<sup>12</sup> In this, Smith is suggesting that the subjective record kept by artists (writers included) reveals a truth about our collective sense of responsibility; one not sufficiently addressed in the archives. It’s important to note Smith’s use of the word “conscience”. He is, here, concerned with how contemporary people think and talk about history, rather than the history itself. This invites a distinction between history as a practice and the impact of that history, real *and* perceived, on people in the present. Smith shows that fiction has always had a role in cultural dealings with Australian history, before the works under discussion in this essay, by listing a number of early 20<sup>th</sup> century novels that bring Indigenous people in from the fringes of Australian culture to the centre, including those of Katherine Susannah Prichard and Xavier Herbert.

Following this suggestion from Smith that creative work offers a way of understanding a nation’s “conscience”, this essay will attempt to show how recent Australian historical fiction uses archival research, style and narrative to reveal both historical truths and truths about our relationship to our history.

In Chapter One, I offer contexts and definitions around historical fiction, discuss historical fiction’s relationship to historiography, examine criticisms of historical fiction that may help reveal its unique capabilities, and conclude with possible arguments in defence of historical fiction and its methods.

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<sup>9</sup> Smith, 1980, p. 10.

<sup>10</sup> Smith, 1980, p. 12.

<sup>11</sup> Smith, 1980, p. 17.

<sup>12</sup> Smith, 1980, p. 29.

Chapter Two moves to close analysis of the work of Kim Scott, asking how his methods bring accepted understandings of history and the contents of the archives into question, and how his work deals with the problems of representation of the past through language. Scott's work beyond fiction, both in terms of his commentary on his own writing and his activism in language reclamation and Noongar historical projects, is considered for its relevance in understanding his novels.

In Chapter Three, I examine Kate Grenville's *The Secret River* and *The Lieutenant*. *The Secret River* has been criticised for being both too conventional and not "historical" enough. My analysis suggests that its conventional form can be read, to some degree, as working to problematize accepted history by co-opting the teleological form of traditional historiography. Her *The Lieutenant* is used, alongside Ross Gibson's non-fiction *26 Views of the Starburst World*, to examine how archival material forms the basis for both fiction and creative non-fiction about history.<sup>13</sup>

In Chapter Four I move to a broader discussion of technique to consolidate my arguments about the importance of form in retelling history, with Scott and Grenville as my primary examples, but also referring to other Australian fiction as appropriate. I attempt to show how one unique tool of fiction – the use of point of view/voice – affects the telling of a story, and discuss the ethical considerations raised by that particular method. Chapter Four examines how the concept of a "fictional truth", which is frequently cited by fiction writers as a justification for their historical work, might be defined in the light of the works and theories discussed throughout the essay.

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<sup>13</sup> Gibson, 2012.

## **Chapter One: overview and definitions**

### **1.1: Overview of works under discussion**

In this essay I will be discussing a particular subset of Australian historical fiction, published from the late 1970s but primarily after the late 1980s. The period and topic they address can be described as frontier contact between Indigenous and settler Australians. The books that I analyse closely were chosen for their cultural impact and for their recognition by critics and the literary community in the form of prizes and citations in media coverage, as well as their effectiveness in using literary techniques to create new ways of approaching history. Historian S.G. Wheatcroft has pointed out that major awards are a marker of influence, and, along with readership, are a reason to engage with texts that impact on historical understanding.<sup>14</sup> This overview will also mention a number of other recent novels, to demonstrate that the main examples are not isolated but part of a wider literary trend to telling frontier stories in historical form.

My primary examples are the works of Kim Scott and Kate Grenville, with reference to others, noted as follows.

In 1999, Western Australian Nyoongar author, Kim Scott published *Benang: from the heart*.<sup>15</sup> *Benang* uses a mix of real and imagined archival material, framed by a contemporary narrator, to retell some of Scott's ancestors' stories.<sup>16</sup> Scott's 2010 *That Deadman Dance* is a more conventional historical novel (in that it is set entirely in the past), set in early-contact Western Australia.<sup>17</sup> Scott received the Miles Franklin award for both novels.<sup>18</sup>

In 2005, Kate Grenville published *The Secret River*, in which an English convict displaces Indigenous people from land in New South Wales, based on Grenville's family's history.<sup>19</sup> *The Secret River* won the Commonwealth Writers' Prize, and in 2008 Grenville also published *The Lieutenant*, set in the first few years of the colony.<sup>20 21</sup> In 2011, Rohan Wilson published *The Roving Party*, set in 19<sup>th</sup> century Tasmania. The novel deals with conflict between Indigenous Tasmanians and British colonists, and won the Vogel Prize for an unpublished manuscript.<sup>22</sup> *The Roving Party* combines short, matter-of-fact sentences with simple metaphors ("Dawn crept up like a sickly pale child") to create a realistic yet disturbing account of the hunting of Indigenous people in early 1800's Tasmania.<sup>23</sup> Among other historical novels relevant to this discussion is Richard

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<sup>14</sup> Wheatcroft, 1997, p. 3.

<sup>15</sup> Scott, 1999.

<sup>16</sup> Scott and Brown, 2005.

<sup>17</sup> Scott, 2010.

<sup>18</sup> *Benang* shared the award in 2000 with Thea Astley's *Drylands*.

<sup>19</sup> Grenville, 2005.

<sup>20</sup> Grenville, 2008.

<sup>21</sup> For all of *The Secret River*'s prizes and prize shortlistings, see [http://kategrenville.com/secret\\_river\\_prizes](http://kategrenville.com/secret_river_prizes), accessed March 22, 2016.

<sup>22</sup> The Vogel is awarded to an unpublished manuscript by an Australian writer aged under 35.

<sup>23</sup> Wilson, 2011, p. 25.

Flanagan's *Gould's Book of Fish* (2001), winner of the Commonwealth Writers Prize. The novel is set in convict-era Tasmania, and abounds with references to forgery, false archives and to the difficulties and mistaken assumptions around the colonial project. It also presents the conflicts of Tasmanian history frontier as shockingly casual facts. (A massacre of Indigenous people and the collection of body parts is dealt with in a single page.)<sup>24</sup>

Grenville's and Scott's work are part of a wider movement towards telling Australian frontier stories through fiction. Beginning in the late 1970s and early 1980s, numerous works fiction about frontier history by writers from both Indigenous and settler backgrounds.<sup>25 26</sup> These works are distinguished from historical fiction that lacks a focus on the *frontier* nature of the period; that is, the interface between Indigenous Australians and new arrivals. The concept of the "frontier" is discussed below in section 1c.

In 1978, Thomas Kenneally published his novel *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*, written from the point of view of a part-Indigenous character named Jimmy Governor, based on a historical figure.<sup>27</sup> Kenneally was nominated for a Booker Prize for the novel. He has since said it is not a book he'd write today, out of respect for Indigenous people, because of questions about the right to write Indigenous stories.<sup>28</sup> Yet Indigenous writer Tony Birch assesses the book as "a remarkable novel" that effectively analyses the humiliations forced on Indigenous men, and suggests that it passes the test of mutual respect and recognition.<sup>29</sup>

Colin Johnson's (Mudrooroo's) 1983 novel *Doctor Wooreddy's Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World* was an early example of writing back to the dominant narrative from an Indigenous perspective, although its author's claim to be of Indigenous descent has been shown to be inaccurate.<sup>30 31</sup>

Novels and stories which followed *Doctor Wooreddy* were written by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous authors and while they vary in literary quality, they share a stated aim of supplementing the perceived deficiencies of history, both in content and in their approach to storytelling. In 1987, Eric Willmot, an academic of Indigenous descent, published *Pemulwuy*, an account of the life of a young man of the Eora people of the Sydney region who made contact with the first European settlers.<sup>32</sup> In a six-page author's

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<sup>24</sup> Flanagan, 2011, pp. 47-48.

<sup>25</sup> For an analysis of Indigenous writing about history and Indigenous culture generally, see:

<https://www.austlit.edu.au/static/new/files/text/pdf/8232590164853179291-CelebratingTheNewOzLit.pdf> accessed 14/2/2019

<sup>26</sup> Such works had existed before, notably Eleanor Dark's research-based 1941 novel *The Timeless Land*, which alternated the point of view of an Indigenous man based on the real Eora man Bennelong with those of settler characters, but the 1970s works reflected new understandings of the frontier and incorporated writers of Indigenous backgrounds.

<sup>27</sup> Kenneally, 1978.

<sup>28</sup> Kenneally and Adams, 2001.

<sup>29</sup> Birch, 2015.

<sup>30</sup> Johnson, Colin, 1983.

<sup>31</sup> See Clark, 2004 for a discussion of Johnson/Mudrooroo.

<sup>32</sup> Willmot, 1987.

note Wilmot refers to a “conspiracy of silence” among historians about the telling of stories like Pemulwuy’s.<sup>33</sup> Such author’s notes, as Rohan Wilson has discussed, invite the reader to read the novel as a form of history; I’d add that they also encourage what Linda Hutcheon called a “double awareness,” in the reader, in which the fiction is always also history.<sup>34</sup>

Richard Wilkes’ 1995 *Bulmurn* takes place in a similar period to Scott’s novels, in Western Australia in the early 1800s and is also based on a real historical figure, in this case one of the Noongar people who fought colonial authorities.<sup>35</sup> Wilkes describes himself as a Nyoongar (his usage) man and in his dedication describes the period as a “war”.<sup>36</sup>

These examples tend to be less experimental than the work of Scott and Wright. They are closer in form to Grenville’s work, with a focus on linear narrative and historical accuracy.

Published in 2004, Andrew McGahan’s *The White Earth* begins as the story of a white settler farming family, but moves into the territory of history in its central concern; that the family, named White, occupy land that was acquired by means of a massacre. In a central scene, a young man confronts his uncle with evidence: “They were bones. The bones of those people. They were thrown in the water hole.”<sup>37</sup> *The White Earth* won the Miles Franklin Award.

A more experimental recent work is Clare G. Coleman’s 2017 *Terra Nullius*, which rewrites Australian history as a futuristic novel in which all humanity takes on the “colonised” role previously allocated to Indigenous Australians in the face of an alien invasion.<sup>38</sup> Two significant works by Alexis Wright, *Carpentaria* and *The Swan Book*, draw not only on Australian history but on Wright’s knowledge of Indigenous ways of thinking and remembering.<sup>39</sup> Meera Atkinson suggests that Wright’s way of telling us about the interface between past and present creates “a non-linear and nonsensical circulation of mixed-up history that captures and authentically conveys how the traumatised, colonised mind struggles with ‘unacceptable history’.”<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Willmot, 1987, p. 18.

<sup>34</sup> Hutcheon, 2014, p 71.

<sup>35</sup> Wilkes, 1995.

<sup>36</sup> Wilkes, 1995, p 6.

<sup>37</sup> McGahan, Andrew, *The White Earth* Allen and Unwin, New South Wales, 2004, p 359

<sup>38</sup> Coleman, 2017.

<sup>39</sup> Wright, 2006, 2013.

<sup>40</sup> Atkinson, 2015.

## 1.2: Defining the historical fiction under consideration

A simple definition of historical fiction would be that it is any fiction written about history. This description is so broad as to obscure what I suggest is the more interesting question about historical fiction; not what it is but what it is for.

There is an intrinsic contradiction in the term “historical fiction”. “History” is about the facts of the past, as well as they can be established, whereas “fiction” is not constrained by factuality. Existing in the tensions between these two terms, historical fiction is a genre with numerous forms and functions as literature, and any given work of “historical fiction” may contain several elements of those functions. A more common understanding of what historical fiction is might be that it is a story framed in a recognisably historical setting. In this thesis, I have chosen to focus on works that deal with a specific period and topic, and work that seeks to interpret history through contemporary concerns.

It is about the *uses* of historical fiction on which critics have most differed. The way the work is understood, and what its purpose is understood to be, inform how it is read and interpreted.

To be “historical fiction”, a work must first be fictional – that is, incorporating imagined elements. To be historical, it must be concerned in some way with past events, drawing on primary and/or secondary sources to depict those events. Such a definition is so broad that it includes the kind of writing sometimes known as “bodice-rippers”, where the most dramatic, romantic and spectacular events and periods of history are essentially used as background and to provide a plot. This essay is not concerned with this kind of historical fiction; it is interested, rather, in work that addresses the questions of history itself. Similarly, some historical fiction can use events of the past as proxies to explore current issues; those works too are not under discussion here.

An early writer on historical fiction, Georg Lukács, declared that historical fiction should give a sense of the “manners” of the period depicted, and help the reader understand the psychology of past persons.<sup>41</sup> Before Walter Scott’s 1814 *Waverley* – often cited as the first Western historical novel – characters were not reflective of “the historical peculiarity of their age,” he wrote.<sup>42</sup> In Lukács’ view, the role of the historical novel was:

..not the re-telling of great historical events, but the poetic awakening of the people who figured in these events. What matters is that we should re-experience the social and human motives which led men to think, feel and act just as they did in historical reality.<sup>43</sup>

This is a definition of historical fiction that essentially casts it as ersatz history, with fiction supplying the human element that history often finds inaccessible. I’ll argue

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<sup>41</sup> Lukács, 1983, p. 167.

<sup>42</sup> Lukács, 1983, p. 19.

<sup>43</sup> Lukács, 1983, p. 42.

that although this may be one possible function of historical fiction, taken alone it is not as interesting or useful as the contemporary approaches to be examined in this essay. In fact, an excessive focus on this “re-telling” aspect of historical fiction may in fact be the cause of much misdirected criticism of the form.

Similarly, Richard Carroll suggests that “critics are united in their view that to be authentic, historical fiction must also be based on genuine research and accurately depict the period it is set in, within the confines of the known historical record.”<sup>44</sup> Carroll writes: “one of the main tasks of both history and historical fiction is to represent the past to a reader in the present.”<sup>45</sup> However, I will argue that the criteria of “authenticity” is one that can mislead us into being overly concerned with how the work reproduces the past and not how it engages with it. Where Carroll writes that “it is possible to experience history in a credible way through fiction”, I want to suggest that as well as re-experiencing and re-presenting history, a certain kind of historical fiction can robustly criticise and reframe both history and the sources that we use to gain knowledge of it.<sup>46</sup>

Gore Vidal wrote of historical fiction that “all we have is a mass of more or less agreed-upon facts about the illustrious dead and each generation tends to rearrange those facts according to what the times require.”<sup>47</sup> This view of historical fiction allows for more complexity than Carroll’s and Lukács’ tendency to view it as mere reproduction. It acknowledges that the reasons for writing about history are always the reasons of the present, not those of the past. However, it still does not allow for the complications introduced by the kind of fiction that addresses, overtly or implicitly, the workings of the archive and history-creation, or even the problem of writing about real events at all.

In *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, Linda Hutcheon gives close consideration to how historical fiction may address historiography via postmodern techniques. For Hutcheon, historical fiction is useful insofar as it depicts history “critically and contextually”.<sup>48</sup> That is, she values historical fiction not for its ability to show facts and/or to recreate a particular milieu, setting or way of life, but for how it directly addresses historiography’s assumptions about the past and about how we have access to that past. Historical fiction written using postmodern strategies, in Hutcheon’s view, can “open up (the past) to the present (and) prevent it from being conclusive and teleological.”<sup>49</sup> Hutcheon uses the term “historiographic metafiction” to describe this kind of fiction.

The historical fiction with which this essay is concerned is fiction that not only uses the past but seeks to engage with it as it exists for us today; that is, how it addresses what Smith called the national conscience. To be “historical”, such fiction must not only be set in the past, but to question, or at least inquire into, what we know from historiography and how we know it. It is sometimes based on the same sources as history, but at other times on sources not recognised by traditional historiography, such as tradition, oral history and family stories. Sometimes it addresses the “historical record” directly. Rohan Wilson’s analysis of Kim Scott’s *That Deadman Dance* characterises this

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<sup>44</sup> Carroll, 2014, p. 263.

<sup>45</sup> Carroll 2014, p. 255.

<sup>46</sup> Carroll, 2014, p. 253.

<sup>47</sup> Vidal, 1993, p. 125.

<sup>48</sup> Hutcheon, 1988, p. 88.

<sup>49</sup> Hutcheon, 1988, p.110.

kind of work: “He built his narrative out of the evidenced past of the colonial settlement at Albany yet generated a different view of that material by infusing it with Noongar story and tradition...”<sup>50</sup>

All historical fiction, to some extent, uses unverified stories, conflation and elision of known historical facts, literary devices, evidence unavailable to history (such as spoken dialogue) and straight-out making-things-up. It is stylistically diverse and can be intersect with other genres: in *The Historical Novel* Jerome De Groot lists examples of historical fiction that also answer to epic, romance, literary, thriller, detective, fantasy, horror, western, postmodern and mystery.<sup>51</sup> In Australia, poetic retellings (Judith Rodriguez’s *The Hanging of Minnie Thwaites*) and imaginary manifestos (Peter Carey’s *The True History of the Kelly Gang*) could be added to the list.<sup>52</sup>

Fiction is unlike historiography in that, commentary, interpretation and feeling are presented on the same level as is evidence. To that extent, historical fiction attempts to refute the idea that the known facts of the past (as shown to us by history) and historiographical interpretations are enough. If what can be drawn from the archives was enough, then historical fiction, as a way of dealing with history, wouldn’t exist.

There is an argument that it’s better to deal with what is known than to fictionalise beyond the known facts, that is those that can be drawn from the archive. This is a key argument for privileging historiography over fiction, and a key criticism of historical fiction. I will attempt to show how below how this criticism, it misses the point of what historical fiction can do culturally.

By “Australian historical fiction” I mean historical fiction written about Australian history, by writers of any nationality.<sup>53</sup> – has a long history of its own. The first major work of Australian historical fiction is considered to be *For the Term of His Natural Life* (1874), a research-based account of a convict’s life written by 19<sup>th</sup> century journalist Marcus Clarke.<sup>54 55</sup>

Beginning in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century writers such as Colin Johnson, Scott, Wright and Flanagan began to use postmodern techniques to tell historical stories, at around the same time as historians such as Reynolds and McKenna began to seriously question the prevailing versions of Australian history, through the lens of postcolonial theory as well as simple inquiries into neglected records. The result in the field of fiction was a set of works that simultaneously upend the stories told to date about Australian history and bring new forms to the work of doing so.

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<sup>50</sup> Wilson, 2014, p. 2.

<sup>51</sup> De Groot, 2010, p. 2.

<sup>52</sup> Carey, 1994, Rodriguez 2012.

<sup>53</sup> This approach is consistent with my topic-based method, which while taking into consideration the identity of writers, focuses primarily on the work itself. It also avoids any potential debate over which writers are “Australian” and to what degree, and would in any future further research allow, for instance, inclusion of useful works in this genre such as Matthew Kneale’s 2000 novel *English Passengers*, which was shortlisted for a Miles Franklin award despite its author being non-Australian.

<sup>54</sup> Clarke, 1874.

<sup>55</sup> For more on Clarke’s research-based novelistic practice, see Hergenhan et. al., 2009.

While conventional historical fiction – employing linear narrative, limited points of view and the kind of teleological understanding of history that prevailed in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries – continues to be written, this essay will suggest that Australian historical fiction which breaks away from those conventions to offer multi-voiced, uncertain and non-linear versions of history better fits the way we now think about our past.

Australian academic A. Frances Johnson's *Australian Fiction as Archival Salvage* focuses on a 15-year period (1989-2014) in which many of these works were published; Johnson suggests that the Australian historical novel has been reinvented in “politically compelling ways” and that new forms offer opportunities for “exposing the archive *imaginatively* and *ethically*.”<sup>56</sup>

As I will show over the course of this essay, discussion of what makes fiction “historical” and how that fiction relates to history (for example in Inga Clendinnen's essay *The History Question*) frequently return to the archive.<sup>57</sup> The text's relationship to the archive on which it is based is always problematic, and it is in the different way in which fiction writers use and respond to the archive that their work is distinguished from that of historians. This relationship is sometimes covert but more and more often in recent times it is overt, and even, as in some of the works discussed, a major focus of the fiction.

Of course accuracy matters in historical fiction too, but not in quite the same way as in history. What matters is not so much the correctness of the facts presented but the effect of their presentation and of the overall work. Indigenous Australian writer Alexis Wright writes that her fiction is not an attempt to keep an accurate record. She writes to “take the snake out of the hole”, meaning to uncover and bring into the light hidden issues, pointing us to a different set of questions than the strict accuracy of the events depicted.<sup>58</sup> This kind of historical fiction is not history, it is *about* history and how we live with it.

### 1.3) Historical fiction's position with regard to historiography.

In this essay, I discuss books that use historical material, and I need to clarify the relationship of those books and their material to the discipline of history. I will not be arguing that history itself is subjective, completely open to interpretation, or that there is no underlying reality to which it refers. The idea of the truth of what happened in the past is valuable and not to be abandoned (see further discussion in 4.2). I will instead be looking at how the past and its traces are open to use in a variety of ways.

Nor will I be suggesting that historiography itself has been ignorant of the kind of epistemological questions and literary techniques I find in the fictional works. My research, however, has focussed on fiction and fictional forms.

To clarify this distinction, I need to briefly note where history and historical fiction sometimes overlap in both content and form. These overlaps can give rise to the

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<sup>56</sup> Johnson, 2016.

<sup>57</sup> Clendinnen, 2006.

<sup>58</sup> Wright, 2002.

appearance of opposition or conflict, and it will be helpful to understand how this perception arises, in order to focus on historical fiction as a field of work in its own right.

The difficulty in separating historical fiction from historiography is that they both by definition take the same historical material as their subject. Because the past is what historical fiction is seen to be about, critical analysis often focuses on what might be thought of as its historical qualities and questions such as: whether it is accurate, or at least generally faithful to the period it's set in; do its inventions and perceived interpretations of history accord with historians' interpretations; what are the political implications of the story it tells? By way of these questions, historical fiction is positioned as quasi-history and judged by historiographical standards. I'll argue that historical fiction, if it is allowed to define its own terms and aims, is in fact an equally valid way of dealing with our relationship with the past. If it is instead considered as literature, it has a cultural role to play that puts it somewhat outside the framework in which it has hitherto been judged.

An example of this kind of positioning of historical fiction is Inga Clendinnen's response to Kate Grenville's *The Secret River*. In her 2006 Quarterly Essay titled *The History Question: Who owns the Past?*, Clendinnen suggested that by straying even slightly from the historical record, Grenville was a part of a "challenge to historians' role as custodians and interpreters of the past now being mounted by Australian novelists."<sup>59</sup> She condemned the novel for its historical shortcomings: its "opportunistic transpositions and elisions," its use of direct speech, its attempts to suggest that conflict over land could have been avoided, but most of all its attempts to render the interior life of people from another time. Novels set in the past oversimplify the "prickle-bushes" of epistemology that historians must deal with, Clendinnen wrote.

The essay was widely read and cited, and some of the responses to it will form part of my case for the usefulness of historical fiction later in this essay. In this context, however, it serves to shed light on what I'm not doing: I'm not directly comparing history and historical fiction, that is, judging them by the same set of criteria. Although history deals with many of the same events and the many of the same issues as historical fiction does, I am not viewing historical fiction through a historical lens. By "historical lens", I mean the lens applied by the professional practice of history. Of course historical fiction deals with what is commonly thought of as history – the past and our present relationship with it. This focus is what attracts the attention and criticism of historians.

Where historians such as Clendinnen criticise historical fiction for techniques such as inventing dialogue or rendering the consciousness of past individuals, because those techniques are not evidence-based – Clendinnen uses the phrase "earth-and-evidence bound" to describe historians' work – they are in effect arguing against fiction itself. S.G. Wheatcroft warned against allowing historical misrepresentations to be transformed into a "seductive literary form."<sup>60</sup> While I acknowledge that in historiography the depiction of the past has a particular set of concerns and strict standards of truth, I am arguing here that unless the past is to be quarantined as the preserve of non-fiction writers only, historical fiction will be written. The question then

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<sup>59</sup> Clendinnen 2006, p. 15.

<sup>60</sup> Wheatcroft, 1997, p. 3.

becomes why write it, what it can achieve and how best to write it. Many of the issues to be considered in this essay and in the accompanying reflective essay – issues such as use of primary evidence, selectivity, where the boundaries of the story are drawn, the failings of the archive, ethical considerations and the prejudices of the writer – also apply to the writing of history, just as key questions for fiction such as story, style and other creative issues are also inherent considerations in the writing of history. In this essay, however, I will be considering the issues as they apply to historical fiction.

That is not to say that this essay will be free of references to history and historiography. Numerous writers in those fields have addressed the role of story, the archives and the prejudices of the tale-teller in ways that are valuable to my inquiry. Ideas like E.H. Carr's "mountain" (loosely, the idea of an objective referent), Foucault's writing on the archives and Hayden White's theory of the primacy of narrative in history, among others, offer insights into how both fiction and non-fiction can deal with the past and its traces.<sup>61 62 63</sup>

Nor is it to say that applying the label 'fiction' will, in my analysis, allow fiction writers to evade responsibilities to the past and to the present day's relationship with it. Ethics are as much a matter for fiction writers as for historians. The need for fiction writers to work in an ethical way may in fact be even greater, given that historians are generally subject to greater external oversight in the form of peer review, publisher's requirements and other forms of fact-checking.

Over the course of this essay I'll refer to historical events and to their specific place in history, as historical fiction often naturally chooses contested parts of history as its subject. An analysis of historical fiction almost always invites comparison with the historiographical version of the events, on which the fiction is 'based'. That question of what historical fiction does that historiography can't (or vice versa) would seem to be an obvious one when considering the value of historical fiction, but to answer it would require me to first fully define and lay out what history does, and that is beyond the scope of this essay. History itself has many branches and produces works that can be described as literary. Rather than lay out the history of historiography – which would be necessary if I were to try to directly compare historical fiction with history – I'd like to put forward a simpler definition of history as it's practiced professionally, to allow me to move on to examining historical fiction.

Historians, as Clendinnen put it, are "evidence-bound". They work with available evidence – archives, oral history, artefacts and other verifiable or at least testable sources. They use secondary sources, but identify them as such. Their analysis and storytelling always refers back to these sources. More recently, theorists such as White and others, in developing the concept of what was called "the linguistic turn" in historiography, suggested that in effect the narrative comes first and selection of evidence to fit that narrative comes second. To whatever extent this is true, it's a historiographical argument that I need to put aside; the basic orientation of history towards evidence remains.

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<sup>61</sup> Carr, 1961.

<sup>62</sup> Foucault, 1989.

<sup>63</sup> White, 1987.

Evidence may be flawed or used selectively and creatively – but it is nevertheless all historians can work with.

Leopold von Ranke, a key figure in historiography, declared that the role of History was to show “what actually happened” (*wie es eigentlich gewesen* in his original).<sup>64</sup> That view of history’s project is rarely explicitly advanced now, but it is nevertheless implied in many of the arguments for the primacy of formal history over other ways of dealing with the past. The formal practice of history is concerned with stories about the past; with the archives and records of the past; with faithful reconstructions of the past; with interpretations of the past using overt speculation and reflection on past events.

Historians have long acknowledged that some contemporary colouring of the retelling of the past is inevitable; Italian philosopher-historian Benedetto Croce noted that all history work is carried out by contemporary minds: “...the condition of its existence is that the deed of which the history is told must vibrate in the soul of the historian”, he wrote.<sup>65</sup> What I am investigating in this study of historical fiction is more to do with how we go forward than how we look back; that is, how we in the present deal with the past.

In 1961, historian E.H.Carr published a book titled ‘What is History?’ In it, he wrote:

It does not follow that, because a mountain appears to take on different shapes from different angles of vision, it has objectively either no shape at all or an infinity of shapes.<sup>66</sup>

By this, Carr is suggesting not only that history deals with a set of empirical facts, but also that that set of facts is what history should be most concerned with. He allows for interpretation, of course, but insists that not all interpretations are equal. Later in the same book he defines “truth” as being a combination of the underlying facts and the values that we use to interpret them.<sup>67</sup> By doing so, he allows for a variety of truths in history, but not truths that depart from the known facts; in this we can see one of the key differences between formal history and historical fiction, which allows itself to diverge from the facts as known to history. Again, I discuss the idea of a fictional truth in 4.2.

Hayden White writes that history properly aspires to understand the past rather than explain it – that is, he suggests there are simply no rules of historical causation that can be traced and shown to have ordered events.<sup>68</sup> According to White, understanding and comprehension are not external properties of the “facts”; they exist in each reader’s mind. They go beyond scientific method, arising from each reader’s sense of the world. This view offers a way of thinking about history – that it is purely a product and concern of our culture, records and memory – that opens it up to legitimate intervention by cultural means other than the historical. In this essay, the means examined is historical fiction, and its techniques.

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<sup>64</sup> Curthoys and Docker, 2006, p. 58.

<sup>65</sup> Croce, 1921, in Meyerhoff, 1959, p. 45.

<sup>66</sup> Carr, 1961, pp. 26-7.

<sup>67</sup> Carr, 1961, pp. 131-2.

<sup>68</sup> White, 1987, p. 60.

As historical novelist and academic Rohan Wilson puts it: “Where these forms of writing (non-fiction and fiction) begin to radically differ, however, is in the way they view referentiality.”<sup>69</sup> That is, historiographical writing must, even with the benefit of linguistic theory, offer an attempt to represent and refer to the past accurately, whereas fiction may pursue other goals.

Similarly, historiographer Louis O. Mink Jr notes that “we may follow understandingly what we could not predict or infer” – suggesting that reaching and understanding and comprehension of events via narrative and other textual devices is a valid approach, putting aside other goals of historical practice such as explanation through cause and effect. He writes: “An historical narrative does not demonstrate the necessity of events but makes them intelligible by unfolding the story which connects their significance.”<sup>70</sup> In this essay, I want to ask how historical fiction can, through story and other literary techniques not only make events “intelligible” but also investigate the significance of events to the reader and the wider culture.

Historiographer R.G. Collingwood observed that while historical thought is about something real in that it addresses real places and events, “its objects are events which have finished happening ... Only when they are no longer perceptible do they become objects for historical thought.”<sup>71</sup> Collingwood suggests that history is both about specific events, taken individually – and about our *knowledge* of those specific events – which means that history is as much about our understanding as about the events themselves. He offers the view that “the historian’s picture of the past is thus in every detail an imaginary picture”.<sup>72</sup> This is despite Croce’s position that without documentation, a narrative cannot really be called “history”.<sup>73</sup> The question in this thesis then becomes not such much what happened, but how do we understand it? What role can fiction play in reaching that understanding?

Historian M.I. Finley, in *The Use and Abuse of History*, suggests two reasons for practising history.<sup>74</sup> One is to understand how we got to where we are – the cause and effect model - the other is an investigation into human nature itself. Both require access to the “truth” of what happened. The problem for history is that, even with direct testimonies, we can’t be entirely sure why people in the past did what they did. So historians offer stories, probabilities and possible reasons, always couching them as theories rather than outright reasons. Properly, they know that they don’t know.

Historiographers who deal with the boundary between history and fiction often feel the need to assert that they do believe in ‘facts’. In *Is History Fiction?* Ann Curthoys and John Docker write: “We should make it clear from the outset that we do believe in truth and in the search for truth”. What they don’t believe in, they go on, is the idea of an objective status for that truth within history; i.e., that it is completely definable and stable.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Wilson, 2014, p. iii.

<sup>70</sup> Mink, 1970, p. 545.

<sup>71</sup> Collingwood, 1959, p. 68.

<sup>72</sup> Collingwood, 1959, pp 68-69, 81.

<sup>73</sup> Croce, 1959, p. 45.

<sup>74</sup> Finley, 1971.

<sup>75</sup> Curthoys and Docker, 2006, p. 5.

This essay asks what fiction does with the space created by that lack of final meaning. While, as Wilson notes, historians are well aware of the limits of language and some work innovatively with meaning, in the end “either historical representations at least have the potential to correlate with past reality, or they are speculations.”<sup>76</sup> I will argue that that historical fiction begins at that point of speculation.

Fiction is free not only to select from the evidence in ways serious historians may not, but also to fabricate. It is free, if the writer chooses, to take White’s thinking literally and to put story before evidence. Very often historical fiction writers don’t do this – they research and analyse extensively and generally behave very much like historians, as this essay will show, particularly with reference to Scott and Grenville. Still, though, the freedom exists and it’s that freedom and its potential I want to explore here. Eva Sallis termed this kind of writing “research fiction”, describing fiction that springs from “a body of research” and from the experience of carrying out the research. That is, in Sallis’s definition, research fiction does not treat the content of the research as mere material for a “based on” story, but allows it to become part of the writing process. Sallis points out that the uncertainties and lack of “authority” of fiction can make it a better choice than academic prose, with its “authoritative” tone, for writing about contentious social issues.<sup>77</sup> (In Section Two I will discuss my own research and production of research fiction.)

My intention is not to argue that the label of fiction is a kind of free pass to say anything, or to “misinterpret” the past. Instead, I hope to show how, as fiction, historical fiction does not so much represent or misrepresent the past as create something which is neither history nor complete fabrication, but uses the various inputs of evidence, of history-as-written, of present-day concerns and the writer’s own perspective to come up with a literary artefact that speaks to all four.

History itself, as a discipline, has already undergone self-examination that has widened the kind of writing that it can accommodate.<sup>78</sup> This recent variety in ways of writing history have not made historical fiction redundant or unnecessary; it has, rather, opened up the possibilities of our use of the past even wider. Writers of history can be influenced by the styles and approaches of fiction, just as fiction writers can follow the lead of historians. Historians using innovative approaches and writing techniques are now telling a greater range of historical stories and creating literature (in the sense of being more than just a recounting of events, whether by playing with narrative forms, language or by other techniques; my examination of Ross Gibson’s non-fiction *26 Views of the Starburst World* in section 3.2 will offer an example of such innovative work and how it compares to fiction.)

At this point, for reasons of space and focus, I am turning away from the discussion of historiography per se, while always keeping it in mind. I need to restate that I do believe there is a set of real facts about events that happened in the past (history) and

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<sup>76</sup> Wilson, 2014, p. x.

<sup>77</sup> Sallis, 1999.

<sup>78</sup> See, for instance, Ross Gibson’s (2012) treatment of colonial notebooks in *26 Views of the Starburst World* and Mark McKenna’s (2002) personal local history, *Looking for Blackfella’s Point*.

that they should be sought after; I also, though, think that the significance of those events is something else again and can sometimes be found in places other than the practice known as history. Those events may also be, for all practical purposes, impossible to truly delineate to everyone's satisfaction. The ongoing efforts to come as close as possible to the facts is worthwhile, but it is not everything that we can or need to do about the past.

#### 1.4: Historical context for the works examined in this thesis: the Australian “frontier” and the history wars

Before moving on to analysing the Australian historical fiction that is the subject of this thesis, I need to give a historical context for that fiction, both to simplify discussion of the narratives in the fiction and to help understand why that period is the topic of so much recent fiction. In giving that context, I need to touch on a public debate between historians about the depiction of that period, a debate generally known as the “history wars”.

In choosing the work of Scott, Grenville, Wilson and the other examples used in this thesis, I am following a line of inquiry marked out by these novelists themselves; that is, questions around the Australian frontier, or the period of early contact between Indigenous and settler Australians. That period, which varied temporally depending on the location, could be thought of as the Australian “frontier”. The question of how to understand that period, particularly in terms of the numbers of deaths on both sides, sparked a debate known as the “history wars” in the early 1990s.

I will not try to give a full account of the history wars per se: that is a complex debate well covered by others.<sup>79</sup> Rather, I’m proposing that it is precisely this kind of history – contentious and still very much alive in modern consciousness, with ongoing effects in the present day – that is the subject of the most interesting historical fiction.<sup>80</sup>

The publication of Keith Windschuttle’s *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History* and the subsequent controversy, detailed in MacIntyre and Clark’s *The History Wars*, brought to wider attention the ongoing differences among historians about its central question: What caused the population of Indigenous Australians to decline so rapidly in the 19<sup>th</sup> century?<sup>81 82</sup> One side supports the view that introduced diseases and other indirect factors were largely to blame, with direct action by the new arrivals, whether

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<sup>79</sup> See for example a discussion of the history wars in a literary context Jones, 2012.

<sup>80</sup> I’d also note that work being published and planned around the time of submission of this thesis reinforces this view: for example, 2019 Miles Franklin winner Melissa Lucashenko on the next novel she plans to write: “a novel about first contact between the Indigenous people and colonists in Brisbane. It will begin before the arrival of Europeans and address what happened at colonisation and what could have been done differently.” (Lucashenko, 2019.)

<sup>81</sup> Windschuttle, 2002.

<sup>82</sup> MacIntyre and Clark, 2003.

organised or ad hoc, less significant; the other side essentially reverses that view, with campaigns of murder and racial extermination, ranging up to genocide, considered most significant.

The origin of the “wars” can be dated back to a Boyer Lecture series by historian and anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner in 1968, in which he accused Australian historiography of “inattention” to Indigenous issues which “cannot possibly be explained by absentmindedness. It is a structural issue...”<sup>83</sup> In 1981 Henry Reynolds’ book *The Other Side of the Frontier* detailed events that had, he said, been hidden from Australian history, and since then, numerous books and articles have sought to break what Stanner called “the great Australian silence” about the impact of settlement on Indigenous people.<sup>84</sup> Both Australian history and literature continue to address this debate.

In historiographical terms, the period is particularly fraught when it comes to the accuracy and completeness of records. In *The Other Side of the Frontier*, Reynolds critiques the archives in an attempt to give a new version of the response of Indigenous people to settler arrivals, particularly in terms of their resistance and how they understood events to be unfolding. Historian Paul Carter notes in *The Road to Botany Bay* that in one case, several years of a colonist’s diary was completely rewritten to conceal the nature of interactions with Indigenous people.<sup>85</sup> In *Van Diemen’s Land*, James Boyce muses on the lack of minutes from a particular meeting about what was to be done about the Indigenous Tasmanians, implying deliberate omissions of potentially damning discussions.<sup>86</sup> In these and other histories, the records of the frontier are found to be questionable at best.

Larissa Behrendt, writing about the much-retold story of Eliza Fraser, notes that “through these counter-narratives, this wave of historians showed that, while victors write the history, that story can be challenged by dissenting voices and unpicked, until it ultimately frays at the edges.”<sup>87</sup>

Carter observes that material documenting the actual frontier is scarce in Australia, and asks: “why should the letters and diaries evoking the first days always be written well after the primary act of settling down?”<sup>88</sup> Carter suggests that on the frontier, record-keepers were both writing a place into being and waiting for a place in which to write. This would imply that it’s impossible to write a “true” story until the matter being written about, in this case the frontier, is resolved. If this is correct, fiction dealing with the frontier seeks to make of it a place we can understand. It’s perhaps not the frontier as it was that is written about in historical fiction, but the metaphorical frontier; the interface between two sides. In that sense, some of the novels examined in this thesis are recording a time that is unrecorded.

Writing in *Cultural Studies Review*, Felicity Collins suggests that:

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<sup>83</sup> Stanner, W.E.H., 1969, p. 25.

<sup>84</sup> Reynolds, 1981.

<sup>85</sup> Carter, 1987, p. 343.

<sup>86</sup> Boyce, 2008.

<sup>87</sup> Behrendt, 2016, p. 184.

<sup>88</sup> Carter, 1987, p. 150.

It is no coincidence that the dispute between historical truth and postmodern relativism in Australia returns obsessively to the ‘traumatic scene’, or ‘holocaustal event’, of frontier violence between indigenous and settler Australians.<sup>89</sup>

Collins suggests that the new wave of Australian historical fiction (her main example was the film *The Proposition*, but she positions it as one text among many) “attempt(s) to displace the nation’s myth of origin from the sacred trenches of Gallipoli to the ‘immense, historical crime scene’ of the colonial frontier.”<sup>90 91</sup>

In discussing “the frontier” it’s worth noting that my discussion is constrained by the dominant construction of Australia as a single entity, itself in a dialogue or, historically, conflict, with “Indigenous Australians”. Individual First Nation groups may take a different perspective, seeing themselves as a number of groups dealing with similar forces. Kim Scott has emphasised the combination of regionality and nationality in his comments about the work of reconciliation: “For the nation state and this Australian identity crisis to be healed—as well as us (you know it’s Indigenous and non-Indigenous in it together today)—we need strong Indigenous roots in a regional basis.”<sup>92</sup>

My intention is not to elide the differences between Indigenous groups across the continent of Australia, but to discuss fiction that is published to a national and transnational audience; certainly much of the work under discussion is very much about specific places and peoples, but my discussion itself is about the strategies, techniques and effects of that work. Critic Roseanne Kennedy suggests that “cultural memory’s orientation to the present distinguishes it from history”. The role of literature in creating and curating that cultural memory is what interests me here.<sup>93</sup>

Finally, it’s also worth keeping in mind historian Sarah Pinto’s observation that the history wars were not only about the facts of the past but about “the way Australians *relate* to the nation” and that therefore the way events are represented in fiction as well as in historiography, is worth examining.<sup>94</sup> Pinto has also offered the observation that depictions of conflict between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australia can function as “sustained attack upon the nation’s legitimacy” insofar as the “civilization” status of non-Indigenous Australia is shown as questionable: that is, she is suggesting, how we depict historical events has an effect on how we resolve them in the present.<sup>95</sup>

### 1.5: Criticisms of Australian historical fiction: Inga Clendinnen

In their attempts to grapple with these issues of the frontier and their consequences in the present, writers of Australian historical fiction have attracted

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<sup>89</sup> Collins, 2008, p. 61.

<sup>90</sup> Collins, 2008, p. 65.

<sup>91</sup> Hillcoat, John, *The Proposition*, 1998.

<sup>92</sup> Scott, 2000, p. 239.

<sup>93</sup> Kennedy, 2016.

<sup>94</sup> Pinto, 2007, p. 54.

<sup>95</sup> Pinto, 2007, p. 76.

criticism from historians in particular. In 2006 the late historian Inga Clendinnen published her *Quarterly Essay* on the place of history in Australia, with a substantial section on the legitimacy or otherwise of historical fiction, taking *The Secret River* as its prime, but not only, example.

Clendinnen writes of the fictionalised past:

...while the place might look exotic, you understand it so much better than the complicated place in which you usually live. In the novelist's 'past' everyone behaves delightfully "in character", and everyone submits to the plot.<sup>96</sup>

Clendinnen judges that most historical fiction oversimplified history. She writes that as well as negotiating epistemology, historians need to use identifiable sources for any conclusions they draw, while "it is not possible to disagree with Grenville, because it is her own self-created world that we are visiting."<sup>97</sup> The seductions of empathy worry Clendinnen, who believes that empathy and the 'insights' that come from it blind readers to the sheer difference between them and the inhabitants of the past. Such blindness, according to her, renders supposed empathy a barrier to a real understanding of the past.

Novelists 'sometimes project back into that carefully constructed material setting contemporary assumptions and current obsessions', she writes. Clendinnen protests against novelists who, she writes, claim that they are writing history while at the same time using the defence of 'art' to justify any changes or inaccuracies. While conceding that novels may be better at 'people-making' and 'fluent story-telling', she writes that the primary purpose of fiction was 'aesthetic' while history has a 'primarily moral purpose' – and that is what makes the debate so important, she suggested; fiction, on her model, is too neat and certain, and lacking ethical constraints.<sup>98</sup>

At any rate, Clendinnen suggests, the importance of 'collective memory' and the way it can be used to shape culture, means that historians are the only proper custodians of stories from the past: 'Historians' scepticism must be universal.'<sup>99</sup> Stories can be used 'as weapons,' she wrote, with various consequences – oversimplification and partisan misrepresentation among them - and therefore historians, with their critical approach, were their best tellers.<sup>100</sup>

Much of the remainder of Clendinnen's essay is given over to issues of historical interpretation, but in her conclusion, she returns to the question of 'who owns the past?' She answers herself: 'In a free society, everyone.'<sup>101</sup> But she waters down that statement in the same paragraph: 'Given the power of stories, historians must be on constant alert regarding their uses, because ... their [historians'] obligation is to preserve the past in its least corrupted form.' For Clendinnen, historical fiction is a corrupted form of the past, not an enhanced one.

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<sup>96</sup> Clendinnen, 2006, p. 21.

<sup>97</sup> Clendinnen, 2006, p. 26.

<sup>98</sup> Clendinnen, 2006, p. 34.

<sup>99</sup> Clendinnen, 2006, p. 40.

<sup>100</sup> Clendinnen, 2006, p. 43.

<sup>101</sup> Clendinnen, 2006, p. 65.

*The History Question* questions that historical fiction is a proper way of seeking to understand the past, arguing instead for the work of ‘assured historians’ who ‘reveal their moral vision’ as they go, in works in which ‘the least manipulation, the most modest re-arrangement of scene or sensation, and the contract between reader and documentarian is dead.’<sup>102 103 104</sup> Clendinnen’s loyalty is to what she calls “empirical critical history”, the attempt to find “the real past rather than some consoling mythicised version of it”.<sup>105</sup> This of course implies that historical fiction is always “consoling” or otherwise turns away from the important issues it raises (although Clendinnen goes on to call *Benang* a great novel).

Historian Mark McKenna has at times argued a similar line to Clendinnen’s, writing of “the dangers that arise when novelists ... claim for fiction, at the expense of history, superior powers of empathy and historical understanding.”<sup>106</sup>

#### 1.6: Historical fiction’s defences: the case for a different approach

Clendinnen’s essay in particular sparked a number of heated direct responses but no extended defence of historical fiction; for the most part, each fiction writer seemed to defend only their own work in their own way.<sup>107</sup> This section of the essay will survey those defences with a view to testing them in the closer analysis of specific works later.

Kate Grenville published long pieces on her own website putting her view that ‘this is not history, but a novelist taking from the record what suited her fictional purposes’.<sup>108 109</sup> Grenville repeatedly points out that she has not claimed to be writing history, implying that without such a claim, judgments of her work in historical terms were moot. In doing so, she assumed a level of control over how her work was received.

Clendinnen would say this isn’t justified. “That practised slither between “this is a serious work of history” and “judge me only on my literary art” has always annoyed me,” she writes. This distinction does not allow for the possibility that historical fiction can do serious work, even if it is not completely testable against the sources. Clendinnen attempts to corral fiction into what might be thought of as a purely aesthetic role: “Novelists enjoy their space for invention because their only binding contract is with their readers, and that ultimately is not to instruct or to reform, but to delight.”<sup>110</sup>

What Clendinnen and other historians’ criticisms on historical grounds fail to address is that fiction’s core concern is rarely ‘what really happened’ in its most literal sense. Various novelists have said as much, including Peter Carey, who frequently uses

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<sup>102</sup> Clendinnen, 2006, p. 55.

<sup>103</sup> Clendinnen, 2006, p. 36.

<sup>104</sup> Clendinnen, 2006, p. 36.

<sup>105</sup> Clendinnen, 2006, p. 40.

<sup>106</sup> McKenna, 2006.

<sup>107</sup> *Quarterly Essay 24: Correspondence*.

<sup>108</sup> Grenville, 2007.

<sup>109</sup> Grenville, 2006.

<sup>110</sup> Clendinnen, 2006, pp. 31-32.

historical settings in his work. At an appearance at the Brisbane Writers' Festival where he was challenged on the veracity of events in his *true history of the Kelly Gang* he was reported as saying: 'I made it up.'<sup>111 112</sup> Katherine Brabon, who won the 2016 Vogel prize for a historical novel, *The Memory Artist*, (and also holds a masters degree in history from Oxford University), told ABC radio that she found writing fiction about the country in which she specialised as a historian (Russia) allowed her to 'work *against* total understanding.'<sup>113 114</sup>

Novelist Alex Miller dismisses any claim by historians to ownership of history: 'The past, of course, belongs to all of us and is not the exclusive preserve either of the historian or the creative writer.'<sup>115</sup> He asserts the right of each generation to work with the past as it needs to do, and of creative workers to both reinterpret and fabricate material to tell stories: "Much of history lacks a documentary basis and eye-witnesses. So what are we to do? One way or another, we will tell our stories."

Novelist and academic James Bradley goes closest to a blanket defence of historical fiction in his response to Clendinnen in *Quarterly Essay*. He suggests that history and fiction have different goals:

Knowing the facts is one thing, even when they are illuminated by historians of the stature of Mark McKenna or Henry Reynolds or Clendinnen herself, and ... incorporating them into our sense of ourselves is altogether another.<sup>116</sup>

Even if the writer of historical fiction does their best to ensure the fiction does not contradict what history has to say; even if the writer works hard to keep the fiction within the plausible and has sound, historically based reasons for what she writes, Clendinnen's charge still holds: the story is not true and will mislead the reader on both what happened and what it was 'like' to be there. Stories and accounts of the past told this way might be called lies or at least highly contingent and unreliable, but that misses the point of fiction. The meaning of the facts is something that can change with perspective and context, with *when* you are as well as *who* and *where* you are.

Writing fiction gives access to methods of producing meaning that are unavailable to historians, as I'll discuss in Chapter Four. The use of those methods may be seen as a fraud – making things up to bolster one's preferred view of history, as Clendinnen suggests. But if rather than judging historical fiction as a direct representation of the past, we accept that it is one treatment of the past with its own particular aims, we can approach an understanding of how it works in practice.

Historical fictions address the same questions as history does, but in more creative ways. Alexis Wright writes that her work was partly an attempt to tell 'not the actual truth, but a good portrayal of the truth which I see, and that is the living hell of the lives

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<sup>111</sup> Carey, 1994.

<sup>112</sup> Carey at Brisbane writers festival ex Clendinnen/ p 32

<sup>113</sup> Brabon, 2017.

<sup>114</sup> Brabon, 2016.

<sup>115</sup> Miller, 2006.

<sup>116</sup> Bradley, 2016, p. 74.

of many Aboriginal people'.<sup>117</sup> Wright is suggesting that fiction allows a subjective point of view to be expressed in ways history cannot. For example, where a study of Indigenous history in Western Australia might simply note the one-sided nature of the archive, Kim Scott's *Benang*, as this essay will show, cheerfully mocks, re-contextualises and fabricates new parts of it, as well as providing a fictional account of the events, while his *That Deadman Dance* engages with questions about the possibility of telling "history" through language at all, particularly the language of the colonisers. A. Frances Johnson argues that new postmodern historical writing can foreground historical issues while avoiding recreating the damaging narratives of previous historical and fictional writing.<sup>118</sup> These are not techniques available to history and where they succeed, they justify their use.

In the next chapter, I will examine Scott's work more closely: how he portrays the Australian frontier and how his chosen forms address the failings of the archives.

## **Chapter Two: Kim Scott's *Benang* and *That Deadman Dance*: writing back to the archives and the problems of writing.**

### Chapter introduction:

Kim Scott's *Benang* and *That Deadman Dance* both deal with the history of contact between Noongar Indigenous people and settlers in the 19<sup>th</sup> to early 20<sup>th</sup> century in Western Australia. *That Deadman Dance* is set almost entirely in the past and appears at first to be a conventional historical novel; an impression which conceals a more complex reading to be explored in the analysis in section 2b). *Benang*'s structure is more complex and conforms to Linda Hutcheon's definition of historiographical metafiction: it moves between a contemporary setting, a specific historical period and at the same times addresses the historical record, both fictional and actual. This analysis will first look at how *Benang* deals with questions of historical knowledge and archives, then how both novels approach the problem of using fiction to write about history. I will show how historical fiction like Scott's goes beyond the work of filling in gaps in the archive, either fictional or real, and even beyond the work of re-telling history from points of view not present in the archive. *Benang* and *That Deadman Dance* achieve those aims, as I will show, and that exercise is a crucial strategy unique to historical fiction. But *Benang* does more than revise and re-visit historical events. In its self-reflexive aspects, particularly its metaphors of writing and research, it provides a critique of the history-making processes that made that revision necessary. Scott doesn't just go beyond the archive, or provide a new reading of it; he undermines and deconstructs it, to the point of questioning the very language in which it is written.

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<sup>117</sup> Wright, 2002.

<sup>118</sup> Johnson, 2016, p. 70.

## 2.1: Kim Scott: *Benang* and the archives

In *Benang*, Scott fills in the gaps of the archives with a large amount of plausible but non-historical material. He builds a narrative loosely based on the experiences of his ancestors and relatives, explicitly taking the Indigenous perspective.

*Benang* opens in late 20<sup>th</sup> century Western Australia, with a narrator named Harley, but quickly becomes a complex mix of the story of Harley's ancestors combined with the story of how Harley came to know *their* story. Harley's white grandfather, Ernest, has been trying unsuccessfully for years to write the story of their family, and the book opens as Harley takes over the work against his grandfather's wishes. He goes into his grandfather's study and is overwhelmed by the archives:

I found myself hovering over sets of documents, things filed in plastic envelopes in rumbling drawers and snapping files. Certificates of birth, death, marriage, newspaper clippings, police reports; letters (personal; from this or that historical society); parish records, cemetery listings; books, photographs ... (25)

Harley tells the reader:

It was still his story, his language, his notes and rough drafts, his clear diagrams and slippery fractions which had uplifted and diminished me.

I wanted more. (37)

*Benang* can be read as providing that "more", with Harley's curiosity as a metaphor for modern Noongar desire to understand colonial history. The story Harley is speaking of ("his story", or history) is a family story. Starting with Harley's quest for knowledge of his past, the novel covers the lives of his ancestors, including Ernest and a group of both white and Noongar forebears stretching back four generations. The central questions about Harley's past come from his grandfather's attempts to "breed" a white man from Harley's mixed descent, with Noongar and settler ancestors on both sides. In the novel, Harley's story merely begins with Ernest's archive; *Benang* is the story of what exists beyond, or is concealed by, that fictional archive, while at the same time forming a critique of the real archive of Indigenous affairs in West Australia, and an account of Scott's efforts to transcend it.

The story that Harley tells about his Indigenous forebears could not possibly have been drawn from his grandfather's archives, or even from what he is later told by his Indigenous relatives. It is full of small, subjective details, such as how a young man felt riding a bike (89) and what a woman saw when she looked into a waterhole (276).

Yet the story's outlines are dictated by the material Harley finds in his grandfather's study. Scott, in writing the novel, researched the Western Australian archives relating to his ancestors and the wider Indigenous community, and some of that

archival material is reproduced verbatim in *Benang*, attributed to its real-world authors.<sup>119</sup> In an afternote to the novel, Scott gives a list of real historical archives and sources he used in writing the book, and he has extensively discussed his methods in public forums, including in the non-fiction book *Kayang and Me*.<sup>120</sup>

In the single short passage from page 37 above, where Harley demands “more”, we see the dilemma of those who have been made the object of history via the archive (after, of course, being the object of colonisation and other forms of objectification). The “notes and rough drafts” – the archive – are all that are available as a basis for Harley’s storytelling, as they are for conventional history. Yet those notes – “his clear diagrams and slippery fractions” are the direct cause of the harm done to Harley, in that they refer to the system of classifying people according to their percentage of Indigenous descent. That harm includes both his alienation from his Noongar roots and the racial discrimination he suffers in white society because of them, but also the fact that to Ernest, he is not a person with full autonomy, but an outcome of a breeding project. In this, Harley represents the wider group of Indigenous subjects of colonisation in Australia, or at least the Noongar people of Western Australia, of which Kim Scott is a member. Ernest might be seen as representing both colonial authority and the version of history which relied on the colonial archives without taking into account the Indigenous perspective.

Ernest has “bred” Harley to be, as Harley says, “the first-born-successfully-white-man-in-the-family-line”. (11) Later the novel quotes academic analysis of the 1936 Aborigines Amendment Act of Western Australia; the quote has a focus on the definition of who was covered by the Act, based on their proportion of descent. This quote is immediately followed by Harley discussing his grandfather’s ambitions to have his part-Indigenous descendants become “white.” (149) Much of the rest of the novel is concerned with the effects on individuals of their stated proportion of white descent; Harley, it is clear, represents the wider group of Indigenous subjects of colonisation.

In the extract from page 37 above, Harley wants “more”: more information, which is not available in the archive, and more of a story which includes him as a subject, which is not available from history. The only way to get “more” is to make it himself: to create a fiction. *Benang* is that fiction, but at the same time it is an account of its own creation; a clear possible reading is that *Benang* mirrors Scott’s own experience in trying to draw out a story from written archives. How to write about what is not known (in a factual sense) but only felt, lived, or shared as family stories is a theme that recurs throughout *Benang*.

Just previous to this extract, Harley’s grandfather tells him:

... ‘And now there’s no one left to tell you what you want. You can never know.’  
But I knew, and I said ... I wanted to say ... (36)

Harley feels a deep need to know and tell the story of his family. In *Kayang and Me* (co-authored with family elder Hazel Brown), Scott discusses how his family history

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<sup>119</sup> For example, the note from AO Neville, Protector of Aborigines on the need to ‘elevate these people to our own plane’ on p. 11.

<sup>120</sup> Scott and Brown, 2005.

had been hidden from him: “I had very few close relations who identified themselves and were accepted as Noongar.”<sup>121</sup>

For Harley, the situation is similar. *Benang* is a fiction in which the protagonist fictionalises his family history, and tells us how he does so. It draws on the archives, but also directly addressed the problematic nature of a history that is based on those archives, given that they are those of the colonisers, not those of the Noongar people. On page 157, Harley tells us:

Yet again I stood in a doorway, listening, trying to understand.  
Or rather, what I mean to say is that the child, my father, Tommy Scat, stood in the doorway...

In this passage we can see multiple layers of narration at work: Scott the author is writing Harley the protagonist, who in turn is fictionally projecting himself into the subjective presence of his own father. The “listening, trying to understand” acquires a double meaning – not just the child attempting to comprehend the adults around him, but the present-day figures, including the reader, trying to make sense of limited information from a limited perspective.

In Scott’s work and other fictions of this type, the kind of “more” that Harley wants is shown to be more important, and more relevant to the present (as Harley is a contemporary rather than historical figure) than what the archives contain or what can be drawn from them. Regardless of what the archives show, Harley is aware of a different truth, which he seeks to reveal – to “say”. Here it’s worth remembering Alexis Wright’s contention that her fiction is not concerned with the record so much as what she felt about the past.<sup>122</sup>

That Harley tells his story in English, the language of the coloniser and of his oppressive white grandfather only complicates matters, but it’s a complication that is necessary, and one that *Benang* addresses directly. His grandfather calls the Noongar language “a black tongue” (36). But Harley’s telling of the story strips the concept of “whiteness” of its assumed value, and makes being “uplifted” to whiteness seem a state to escape from. This is how Scott reverses the assumptions contained in the colonial archive, where Indigenous family trees read like breeding registers that lead to the “first white man born” in an Indigenous family.

As Henry Reynolds noted in *The Other Side of the Frontier*, Indigenous voices are comparatively lacking in the archives of early Australia; where Indigenous people are represented at all, it is overwhelmingly via the filter of a colonial gaze.<sup>123</sup> While Reynolds attempted to use interviews and oral histories where available to reconstruct “the other side” for his historical work, the vast majority of his sources are written archives, almost all written by non-Indigenous persons. Most of his reconstruction is, in his own account, effectively done through the eyes of the colonisers. Additionally, as he notes, white colonists edited and dissembled in their written records – for instance, recording that they were often offered sexual contact with Indigenous women, but “none

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<sup>121</sup> Scott and Brown, 2005, p. 16.

<sup>122</sup> Wright, 2002.

<sup>123</sup> Reynolds, 2019.

admitted to temptation” despite the clear evidence of mixed-race children born to those women.<sup>124</sup>

First-person accounts are few, and even those are, in written versions at least, contained in the colonising language (art is sometimes an exception). The archival material Scott had to draw on for *Benang*, pertaining to colonisation of Western Australia, particularly in the period when Indigenous people were being “assimilated” and controlled by the Protector of Aborigines, was full of the assumptions and objectifying constructions of the colonial authorities. Scott’s strategy was to create a fictional context for those archives that first, filled in the gaps and gave the Indigenous point of view the archives lacked, but also, by contrasting an animated fictional personage with the dry language of the archive, reveals the official records to be bureaucratic constructs freighted with racist and colonial views.

Scott has written of his “obligation to speak for those people in my family who history has silenced.”<sup>125</sup> His co-opting of the colonists’ language helps him neutralise it.

I achieve what ‘feels right’ to me by taking on the very language I encounter in my research – as offensive and painful as that often is to read – and through various ‘literary’ and imaginative means trying to ‘defuse’ it.<sup>126 127</sup>

In *Kayang and Me*, Scott writes: “Well, I know a story can be more true than the truth, and I know how a story can get to the very essence, the spirit of something. Especially when it’s something like injustice, and the abuse of power.”<sup>128</sup> As Harley fills in his family history with a combination of fictional details and quotes taken directly from the historical archives, a different truth to the one he was offered by Ernest emerges – and by extension, the reader is offered a different perspective on what the archives suggest. For example, this is how *Benang* represents the use of Indigenous women as servants, and the removal of the children they bear with their white employers:

As an extract from the real-world archive:

*Our policy is to send them out into the white community and if the girl comes back pregnant our rule is to keep her for two years. The child is then taken away from the mother and sometimes never sees her again ... So that it really doesn't matter if she has half a dozen children. (AO Neville) (157)*

As fiction:

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<sup>124</sup> Reynolds, 2019, p. 57.

<sup>125</sup> Scott, 2000, p. 171.

<sup>126</sup> Scott, 2000, p. 170.

<sup>127</sup> The way Scott’s fiction engages with language generally, and English in particular, is discussed further below in my discussion of *That Deadman Dance*, section 2b).

<sup>128</sup> Scott and Brown, 2005, p. 153.

Tommy knew that Ern liked to hug all the maids, to help them pat the pillows and turn back the blankets. Every so often, Ern took a maid to the railway station and changed her for another one. (157-158)

The real archival material is given without comment, but Scott reframes this material by juxtaposing it with the lived experience of his fictional characters. These realistic depictions of individuals' lives would have been impossible in non-fiction; records simply weren't kept in that way. In these two versions of essentially the same tale – the way female Indigenous servants were treated – we can see the difference between the original archive, containing numerous assumptions about the right to direct others' lives, and the fictional account that grants the servants and their children agency and feelings that are absent from the archive.

The novel is filled with references to writing and its power, reminding the reader throughout that what was written down about Indigenous Western Australians had the power to change their lives, and to become the official history of their people in the absence of archives depicting their point of view.

Harley goes on to show us his grandfather's various machinations in search of power over his Indigenous associates. At the same time, he inserts his grandfather's reactions to being depicted in this fashion by his grandson:

Yes, my grandfather was a shrewd man. A rat-cunning mind, dear reader, mark my words. (and here I must interrupt myself to record my grandfather's response to having such words read to him. His mouth went tighter, his nose and cheeks began to twitch...(43)

The "more" that Harley wants is knowledge of his family and history. As he begins to get to know his Indigenous family, through a combination of spending time with family members and writing their story, he tells the reader:

I feared I was losing my people, that options narrow down all the time ... even when my family welcomed me back, they did so warily – but it became easier when I no longer carried my grandfather on my back. (87)

In the novel, Harley literally carries his grandfather around on his back, but the metaphor is clear; the young man of Indigenous descent finds it easier to get to know his Indigenous relations when not burdened by his white ancestry.

As the novel progresses, the archival material and reports of Harley's investigations give way to long sections describing his forebears' lives (this is the section that is most similar to a traditional historical novel in terms of how it reconstructs the past as a linear story). Regardless of what the archives show, Harley is aware of a different truth, which he seeks to reveal – to "say". An example might be this rendering of the thoughts of a white constable:

Constable Hall didn't glance at Fanny but her image – dark, and featureless – came to him with the words – *Fanny: Aboriginal* – inscribed beneath it. His trained mind, see. (195)

Constable Hall's thoughts are not recorded in the fictional archives of the novel, just as actual police officers' inner thoughts are not in the Western Australian archives, but Harley's depiction reveals how the colonial framework created prejudice. At the same time, the passage serves the fiction through a character-revealing insight into the constable's vanity and inability to really perceive the people he is dealing with. Hall cannot discern Fanny's actual face and features, only her blackness and the bureaucratic label attached to that skin colour. He understands this as not a weakness, but as a function of his "trained mind", integrated into the classifying systems of the state. So we see the contrast between the way the bureaucracy perceived people like Fanny, and the way she might have perceived herself and/or the way her descendants think of her. A. Frances Johnson puts it this way:

...*Benang* is jam-packed with discomfiting metafictional devices that permit a rereading of the ways in which language has enmeshed and determined colonial power-structures.<sup>129</sup>

Throughout the book, Harley gives the story of people whose full stories are omitted from his grandfather's archive, just as Scott is giving the story of people who are omitted from the official government archive. Scott doesn't just go beyond the archive, or provide a new reading of it; he undermines and deconstructs it, to the point of questioning the very language in which it is written, the process of writing it in the first place, and Harley's later attempts to write about it.

Scott himself puts it this way:

It's as if using the tools of the colonising society, but writing from a different motivating impulse, or spirit, means you end up with something else.<sup>130</sup>

For Harley, writing this story helps "tie me down". (147). In the text, this is literal – Harley, in a magical realist move, literally floats around in the air – and the more he writes his family's story, the less he drifts. So his words prevent him from floating away into a space that lacks meaning; writing reverses the effects of his being "uplifted" by his grandfather. The term "uplifted", drawn from the archive, where it was used to mean shifting Indigenous people into a state of "whiteness" over successive generations of inter-racial parentage, is, in *Benang*, conflated with the idea of being "light" – light-skinned, but also lacking gravitas:

If I am to be so light, well, so be it. But at least let me learn to adopt a certain weightiness of manner (148)

At one point, Harley's uncle also starts to float, and it's an older man, more connected to Indigenous culture, who is able to pull them both down from the air. (147) As he tells his story in his own way, Harley gains gravitas and metaphorically becomes

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<sup>129</sup> Johnson, 2016, p. 72.

<sup>130</sup> Scott, 2000, p. 170.

less “light” – reconnects himself to his “dark” ancestors. Harley is using the same tools his grandfather used – words on paper – to undo the effects of his grandfather’s calculations and breeding. By treating the colonial archive (represented by Ernest’s archive) as only a starting point for a family story, Harley reclaims a sense of himself that grounds him. This can be read as analogous to Scott’s use of written English to, if not undo, at least offer a new reading of the colonial archive.

In *Kayang and Me*, Scott writes of how he personally struggled with articulating the significance of his particular heritage.<sup>131</sup> (13) He says he was particularly interested in the different ways Noongar people were and are treated according to the colour of their skin (19). The language of the archives – phrases like “the first white man born” in a district, and “the last full blood Aborigine” (27) seemed to Scott to point to a concept of race that needed investigation (28). However, much of what needed to be said about what happened to his family was unsaid, only suggested in the labels on photographs and the classifications in official documents. *Kayang and me* gives extensive family history from a relative of Scott’s, but much of it is unsubstantiated by records, and therefore lacking the status of “history”.

*Benang*’s strategy is twofold; it tells the story from the Indigenous point of view, and it tells it with the assumption that the archives are flawed. Such a reversal of the assumptions and largely one-way gaze contained in the colonial archive is one of the key manoeuvres of this mode of historical fiction. Scott has discussed the rarity of first-person Indigenous accounts and, on one occasion, said outright that historians cannot be fully trusted with history: “I think novels can help compensate for what’s not available in the historical material.”<sup>132</sup>

The historical practice that uses those archives does, of course, not blindly accept their assumptions, and the role of the archive in history and historical fiction is discussed further in this thesis in section 3b) and in the accompanying reflective essay. However the inability of history to operate outside the scope of the archive is a shortfall that fiction such as Scott’s seeks to address, not through mere supplementation of the archive, useful as that may be to offering a more rounded view of history, but through active engagement with the archive and all that it implies.

To return to this passage from Harley in *Benang* on page 36:

... ‘And now there’s no one left to tell you what you want. You can never know.’  
But I knew, and I said ... I wanted to say ... (36)

*Benang* is a novel-length filling-in of those ellipses. It is what Harley wants to say about what he knows beyond the archive and beyond accepted history. It is what Scott finds in the archive, and what he finds missing, and what he has to say about the fact that it is missing. Scott’s version of writing back to history doesn’t only address history, but historiography, and language itself.

Scott, as a writer of literary fiction, is also concerned with the representation of “reality” through language, and with the operation of language in itself; the next section

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<sup>131</sup> Scott and Brown, 2005, p. 13.

<sup>132</sup> Leadbetter et al, 2010.

of this thesis will look more closely at how Scott (and his cohort) address the difficulties of representation through language in the context of historical fiction.

## 2.2: *That Deadman Dance* and writing about “reality”.

*That Deadman Dance* is a novel that appears to be deeply grounded in “reality.” It tells the story of contact between Indigenous people and whalers, and then with colonists, in a minor port in Western Australia in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. The story revolves around a young man, Bobby Wabalanginy, who is witness to a number of first contacts and, through social and work experiences, adopts a number of different modes of being, the two most significant being the world of the Noongar and that created by colonisation.

The novel opens with a lyrical description of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Western Australian coast, where Bobby Wabalanginy is watching for whales to hunt and, seemingly incidentally to the plot, writing on a slate: “Moving between languages, Bobby wrote on stone.” (1)

Writing is a central theme of the novel. The novel’s title and a key theme come from a dance created by Noongar people in response to seeing the uniforms and behaviour of marines who arrived in their country with the English navigator Matthew Flinders. Phillip Mead has analysed how that event is sourced by Scott not only from Flinders’ journal but also from the work of anthropologist Daisy Bates and from Noongar retelling.<sup>133</sup> The dance is part of the Noongar attempt to enter into the colonists’ culture, and comes to symbolise the gap in understanding between the two cultures. Late in the novel Scott writes:

Bobby Wabalanginy knew that he could sing and dance the spirit of this place ... he would show them how people must live here, together.”<sup>134</sup>

This passage precedes a dance that singularly fails to prove any such thing,: in fact, it produces an opposite effect.

Dance, as a dominant cultural form in Noongar life, seems to Bobby to be a reasonable way to communicate. But *That Deadman Dance* itself is a novel, and it is written in what at first reading appears a conventional narrative form; that is, it is the colonist’s art form. Its Noongar characters, however, don’t *only* dance to communicate: they write, and it’s in the way they use the colonial medium that the novel situates both explanations of history and possibilities for the future.

The book spans Bobby Wabalanginy’s lifetime. It adopts a more detached narrative voice than is used in *Benang*, rarely using first person. Bobby, who we see as an adult writing in a prologue to the novel, is a child when the first ships arrive, and lives and works in both cultures. In the prologue, we are told: ‘Bobby wrote straight from his mother and father’s tongue to that of Chaine.’ (5) That is, he moves from Noongar language to that of the colonists.

After these opening scenes, the book returns to an earlier time and proceeds chronologically, with references back to Bobby’s childhood. The act of writing appears

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<sup>133</sup> Mead, 2012, p. 147.

<sup>134</sup> Scott, 2010, p. 390.

throughout the novel, albeit not as much in the foreground as in *Benang*. As an old man Bobby is “rumoured to own” a collection of papers, echoing the archives in *Benang*. This focus is not just on writing per se: it is also on English as contrasted with Indigenous language, as foreshadowed in the line above from the prologue. One character, Wunyeran, is fascinated by the *book* (original emphasis) kept by Dr Cross: a journal. Scott’s narrator rarely intrudes into the story, but on this occasion the text goes on:

When Bobby Wabalanginy told the story, perhaps more than his own lifetime later, nearly all his listeners knew of books and of the language in them.<sup>135</sup>

It would be easy to miss that “perhaps more than”; it can only imply that Bobby’s story is to be written down, perhaps as the book the reader now holds.

But not, as we do, that you can dive deep into a book and not know just how deep until you return gasping to the surface, and are surprised at yourself, your new and so very sensitive skin. As if you’re someone else altogether, some new self trying on the words.<sup>136</sup>

Given that *That Deadman Dance* is a story of first contact, this passage, relatively early in the book, is a signpost to the reader that at least part of the story is about the transformative power of words; not just the power of writing them down, but also about the transformation from one kind of person to another through the acquisition of a different language that affected Noongar people. The “new and so very sensitive skin”, in this context, conjures up the same images of acquiring whiteness as are explored in *Benang*; but at the same time, as the (non-Noongar) reader is exposed to Noongar words, “we” (Scott’s construction of the reader) find we are undergoing, in a very small way, the same mental transformation does as Bobby.

Scott has spoken about the origins of the novel, saying it was an attempt to investigate how Noongar people – who showed through the “deadman dance” that they were interested in adapting the new arrival’s cultural forms – might have used written fiction:

Those early Noongar would probably be really interested in how you could use the novel form to just be expressive and where you could get with telling a story like that.<sup>137</sup>

This focus on Scott’s part has, however deliberately or inadvertently, made *That Deadman Dance* an exploration of the effects of the use of written and colonial language. The scene of writing is depicted in multiple ways. Wunyeran creates a dance based on Cross’s nightly journal writing (112), Bobby is given a journal by a female settler and “ran ink over the pages of that journal; made lines, prints, laid traces of what was happening.” (289). When Bobby is learning to write, he renders the speech of the settlers

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<sup>135</sup> Scott, 2010, p. 85.

<sup>136</sup> Scott, 2010, p. 85-86

<sup>137</sup> Scott, YouTube video.

phonetically, and in what purports to be only an example of his style, we find their patronising statements and the harsh truth of the effects of colonisation ironised:

*A most inelajint kuriositee.  
We haf taken ther land.  
Deseez and depradashen make them few. (157)*

While *Benang*, through its device of a young man writing his own story via the “archives”, foregrounds historiographic concerns, *That Deadman Dance* presents the same issues more subtly, and with a different approach to the question of saying anything at all about (past) reality through writing.

The correspondence between “reality” and language is a problem for all texts, historiographical as well as fictional. Where Derrida suggested that the text was a self-contained entity, historiography often treats archival material as dealing with a “real” referent.<sup>138</sup> *That Deadman Dance* detaches the direct link between the written words and reality, in that what Bobby and the other characters write is fiction in itself.

Rohan Wilson suggests that the regular recurrence of scenes of writing in *That Deadman Dance* serve to remind the reader not only of the role of the written word in historiography, but also of the textual nature of the novel:

...with each repetition of the scene of writing in *Deadman*, the slippage between figure and referent that occurs with metaphor begins to gather pace. The text splits, and a sequence of elaborate substitutions are enacted.<sup>139</sup>

Linda Hutcheon has emphasised how postmodern work is “always a critical reworking, never a nostalgic “return”.”<sup>140</sup> While *That Deadman Dance* could be read as a conventional fictionalised history of the time and place depicted, it is also a critical reworking: the emphasis on writing makes the book self-referential – that is, its use of fictional “writing” reminds the reader that it is itself a fiction, and that all texts are constructed.

In doing so, it also helps highlight how any text – including historiographical texts – share that difficulty of depiction. What Hutcheon calls a “double awareness of both fictiveness and a basis in the ‘real’” is deployed in *That Deadman Dance* in such a way that the novel both tells a plausible story and at the same time works to question the possibility of telling any “truth” in writing.<sup>141</sup>

It’s worth noting again at this point the difference between historiography and historical fiction; that historiography is using language to point to real events, and that historical fiction, however much it refers to history, ultimately uses language only to point to itself.

Real events may be the “inspiration” or what the work is “about”, creating Hutcheon’s double awareness, but once the claim to reality has been abandoned, a

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<sup>138</sup> Derrida, 1976.

<sup>139</sup> Wilson, 2014, p. 4.

<sup>140</sup> Hutcheon, 1988, p. 4.

<sup>141</sup> Hutcheon, 2014, p 71.

different way of understanding applies. Paul Carter, in his introduction to *The Road to Botany Bay*, notes that historical accounts imply a spectator who simply wasn't there: history, in the act of being written, creates that spectator and therefore a subject position with regard to the events.<sup>142</sup> In fiction, however, an audience – even if it is only the writer him/herself – is automatically invoked. History may or may not acknowledge itself as a text that employs story and writing and relies on the inter-referential nature of words; fiction always does, in its very nature. *That Deadman Dance* is full of such acknowledgements. When Bobby is learning to write, a listing of the letters of the alphabet quickly diverges into a list of words starting with “d” - ‘those words like dead, like decay and then don’t, desist’ – a list that refers to the effects of colonisation.<sup>143</sup>

Fiction like this does not pretend at any point to be giving direct access to reality. The knowledge and understanding that come from fiction are always already subject to the limitations of language.

Rohan Wilson notes that the Kantian tradition of knowledge keeps coming back to questions of meaning, such as: “can we know reality through language? What is the connection between event and description? Can statements about the world be true?” He goes on to suggest that writers such as Scott and Richard Flanagan put the struggle (and inevitable failure) to create accurate meaning through language at the centre of their works.<sup>144 145</sup> At the same time, he writes, they address the tension created when historical novels are assessed as if they were a form of historiography.

So historical fiction of this nature has a multiple challenge: to relate to an idea of objective reality, or referent (or, as historian E.H.Carr would have it, “the mountain” that is really there), to address the difficulties of knowing that reality through archives, to address the difficulty of expressing that knowledge through language and finally – and this last is what is unique to fiction as compared to historical accounts - to address its own fictional nature.

Wilson claims that: “there is always a tension between reading *Deadman* as a kind of broad-brushstrokes historical account of the past, and reading it as a narration of its own anxiety with that reading.”<sup>146</sup> This is true to an extent, but a critical reader, after having discerned that there is more going on than a straight historical account, can and should favour the reading that interrogates the very idea of a “broad-brushstrokes historical account.” The historical account, in this case, provides a structure which carries the reader along, but in my reading, the work of interrogating both history and the way in which historical meaning has been created is in the details of the novel, particularly those about writing, reading and language.

That is not to say that the narrative is unimportant, or mere window-dressing. On the contrary, the alternative “narrative” being offered is the true outcome of this work, but it is one that does not fit the linear paradigm previously expected. A key point from Phillip Mead’s analysis is that *That Deadman Dance* employs a “poetic narrative mode”

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<sup>142</sup> Carter, 1987, p. xvii.

<sup>143</sup> Scott, 2010, p. 288.

<sup>144</sup> Wilson, 2014, p. v.

<sup>145</sup> Wilson, 2014, also extensively discusses J.M Coetzee, who is not a subject of this essay.

<sup>146</sup> Wilson, 2014, p. 16.

made up of “intensely imagined moments” strung together rather than a linear story.<sup>147</sup> Mead claims that this mode is in the service of a regional imaginary, but it can also be seen as making the past available for new interpretations, broken down into moments that are not bound by a master narrative.

In the case of *That Deadman Dance* and the other fiction considered in this thesis, it matters a great deal that the topic is the frontier and contact history between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. The same deconstructive work could, in theory, be carried out by historical novels about any other topic of the archives (and often is), but the reason these writers have chosen this topic is that it is an area that has not, and perhaps can not, been resolved by conventional historiography.

A. Frances Johnson notes that in *That Deadman Dance* “(a)cts of writing, inscribing and marking carry especial weight ... to show how Nyoongar ... are skilled at learning the language of the colonizer with a view to building and refining relationships.”<sup>148</sup> The act of writing, she suggests, is, in the novel, rescued from the “racist ethnographic fictions of the official archives”.

Wilson suggests that *That Deadman Dance* is shot through with anxiety about meaning-production.<sup>149</sup> I’d suggest that Scott’s work does not so much *show* anxiety as *produce* it through careful manipulation of meaning-making. For example, Wilson writes:

The metaphor of the Dead Man Dance, rather than clinching the meaning as Scott hopes, instead generates other uncontrollable readings that only demonstrate the impossibility of a univocal meaning in a text.<sup>150</sup>

I’d suggest that *That Deadman Dance*, as an entire text, actively seeks those uncontrollable, multiple meanings and declares itself comfortable with them. Scott himself has stated this as an aim for his historical fiction, saying of *That Deadman Dance* that in telling the story this way he wanted to access “the strength of fiction, which is I think its richness, the layers, the ambivalences: provoking thought.”<sup>151</sup>

In this reading, while Scott’s work certainly invokes uncertainty and multiple perspectives, it does so willingly rather than being forced to do so by the exigencies of epistemology. By entering into a space which is unknown to historiography, and by doing so through the device of fiction, it both abandons the idea of a final, fixable meaning (“the mountain”) permanently, and opens up a new territory where language, rather than being an unreliable tool for knowing, is part of an ongoing dance with constructive not-knowing. In this book there is no need to “clinch” a meaning: dance has been elevated to an interpretive form equal with writing (“Bobby could look through the eyes of anything.”<sup>152</sup>) But dance is not a form that is fixed; it exists in the moment of dancing, is embodied rather than recorded and, much more overtly than in the case of the written word, it relies on the audience to bring their own meaning to it.

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<sup>147</sup> Mead, 2012, p. 147.

<sup>148</sup> Johnson, 2016, p. 25.

<sup>149</sup> Wilson, 2014, p. 4.

<sup>150</sup> Wilson, 2014, p. 22.

<sup>151</sup> Scott, YouTube video.

<sup>152</sup> Scott, 2010, p. 377.

This, I think, is closer to what Scott may have had in mind when, with reference to historical Noongar individuals, he wrote: “I wanted to build a story from their confidence, their inclusiveness and sense of play and their readiness to appropriate new cultural forms.”<sup>153</sup> *That Deadman Dance* contains multiple examples of Noongar people using those new cultural forms – writing in particular – but they use those forms to couch a content which does not appear in the archives.

As well as how the written word is used, it’s worth examining is how, in *That Deadman Dance*, Nyoongar language is used to position Nyoongar identity, and to further problematise the question of language as a representative tool. Scott is closely involved in Noongar language reclamation projects, and in the novel, Noongar is used both to unsettle English speakers’ sense of meaning and to further take the reader into the subjective experience of the Noongar characters.<sup>154</sup>

On page 85 of *That Deadman Dance*, Wunyeran is introduced to writing: “the scratched markings one of the men made on something like leaves. *Book. Journal*, they said”.

The word “*book*” is italicised here just as English texts will italicise a non-English word, i.e. to denote its foreignness. In the context of early Australian colonisation, this move by Scott is part of the reversal of gaze common to this kind of historical fiction; we, the readers, are invited to consider English as the foreign language. Bobby’s satisfaction, in the opening pages, with rendering Nyoongar language – “*Kaya*” – in English characters – is not just showing his dexterity with the colonising language, but also positions Nyoongar as the first language of the novel. *Kaya* is the first word of the novel – italicised – but then *hello* and *yes* are italicised. From the outset, we are unsettled as to which is the correct language for this story.

A climactic scene, in which Bobby tries to resolve conflict with the white settlers through dance, suggests that the correct language may differ on each side, setting up the ultimate failure of representation. Throughout the book, the settlers and Noongar are shown to be attempting, but failing, to understand each other through language. The only interactions that reach a real rapport, however, are those of Dr Cross and Wunyeran, achieved mainly through companionship and at any rate literally buried with both of them, and those of the escaped whaler Jak Tar and his Noongar wife Binyan. That Jak Tar is shown thinking of Noongar people he observes as “people” rather than “natives” or “aboriginals” is telling, and an implied rebuke to the language usually found in colonial archives.<sup>155</sup> Certainly Jak Tar and Binyan learn each other’s languages, but their understanding precedes a shared language.

In that climactic scene, Bobby refuses to sign a document exonerating a white man from two murders he witnessed, and so effectively blackmails the colonists into forming the audience for a dance, with which he intends that “by his spirit he would show them how people must live here, together.”<sup>156</sup> That is, he wields the power of *not* using

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<sup>153</sup> Scott, 2010, (Author’s note) p. 398.

<sup>154</sup> Scott and Brewster, 2018.

<sup>155</sup> Scott, 2010, p. 289.

<sup>156</sup> Scott, 2010, p. 390.

written language, with the effect of forcing a confrontation between Nyoongar and colonial ways of thinking.

That Bobby's dance fails to communicate what he intends is the tragedy of the book; the written word prevails, but does not succeed in bringing understanding or peace between the two groups, Nyoongar and colonist. The reader, having been brought to identify with the Nyoongar people through Scott's fictionalised account, and therefore desiring an outcome other than that that occurred in actual history – that is, the breakdown of black-white relations in Western Australia – is left with a desire to “read” the dance that is, ironically, only described in words. Thus the world of words and writing are demonstrated to be insufficient to the task of telling this particular history, and *That Deadman Dance* invites the reader to consider other ways of knowing.

The parallel threads of Noongar and colonial understandings and expectations are sustained through the plot of settlement, conflict, whaling work and marriages, up to the single turning point of the final dance, at which the two sides are shown to be talking past each other; to be operating on such different levels and coming from such different metaphorical places that there is no hope for a resolution, at least one that will be right for the Noongar.

We cannot avoid knowing the outcome of this history, but Bobby does not know it. He lives it in real time, and in the text we only get those occasional glimpses where the narrator refers to a time after Bobby's life, glimpses which are shielded from Bobby's view. This is how fiction can produce empathy; it brings us to understand that what, from our point of view in the future looking back at history, seems to have been inevitable, seemed like no such thing to those who lived it. Fiction undoes what Paul Carter called the historical “gallery” or spectator, and questions Carter's “cause-and-effect narrative history”.<sup>157</sup>

In her analysis of *That Deadman Dance* and other historical fiction, Alison Ravenscroft suggests that new ways of writing about history must “insist on the importance of aesthetic form” – that is, that new styles of writing are necessary, not just new information. She even suggests that “the dance” of *That Deadman Dance* can be seen as an analogy for those different ways of expressing historical knowledge:

It may be that to let the story of the Australian past, present and future be rewritten, white Australians will need to relinquish the position of novelist and historian, for now, in favour of the position of reader of Indigenous-signed textualities: to become literate before the dance.<sup>158</sup>

In *That Deadman Dance*, I conclude, Scott has created a hybrid document that uses present day and culturally specific (Noongar and Noongar descendant) concerns to shape a retelling of history that interrogates and reframes, variously, the archives, the gaps in the archive and the stories that have previously been told from those archives.

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<sup>157</sup> Carter, 1987, pp. xvi-xvii.

<sup>158</sup> Ravenscroft, 2017.

### **Chapter Three: Kate Grenville and other writers of Australian historical fiction**

#### **Chapter introduction:**

In this chapter, I will examine the way a non-Indigenous writer in Kate Grenville deals with the frontier on the other side of the country, in the Sydney region, in *The Secret River* and *The Lieutenant*, and how questions of empathy and the effects of archival research play out in her work.

Kate Grenville's *The Secret River* was a widely read and debated work of historical fiction that, although more conventional in its narrative form and the choice of protagonist than Scott's work, engages deeply in less overt ways with fiction's relationship with historiography. I've chosen to examine Grenville's work partly because of its wide readership and additional cultural impact in the form of adaptations to other media, and partly because the intense debate around *The Secret River* in particular offers an opportunity to further explore issues of accuracy, the use of archive, the role of narrative and the right to speak about particular stories. This chapter also discusses other writers of Australian fiction with reference to these issues, and in order to investigate what may be offered by fictional techniques beyond those discussed above.

*The Secret River* is a fictionalised account of the life of one of Grenville's ancestors, a London-born man who arrived in Australia as a convict and 'took up' land on the Hawkesbury River already occupied by Indigenous people. Grenville subsequently published two other books set in the frontier period: *The Lieutenant* and *Sarah Thornhill*. *Sarah Thornhill* was a sequel to *The Secret River*, but *The Lieutenant* recounted the unrelated story of a member of the First Fleet in the late 1780s, based on his own notebooks. This analysis will discuss *The Secret River* and, particularly in reference to archives, *The Lieutenant*, with additional material from Ross Gibson's *26 Views of the Starburst World*, a non-fiction work that draws on the same source material as does *The Lieutenant*.

On its publication, *The Secret River* became a focus for debate about the place of historical fiction in Australia, partly because it was so widely read, becoming a national bestseller in 2005.<sup>159</sup> Among its awards were the Commonwealth Writers' Prize and the NSW Premiers' Award for Fiction. It was recast as a stage play by Andrew Bovell, being performed by leading companies around Australia, as well as a television series in 2015. The novel has been set as a VCE English text in New South Wales and Victoria.<sup>160</sup>

Historian Inga Clendinnen's critical response to Grenville's work has been discussed above but other writers have also examined Grenville's work closely. This may be a function of its popularity; being widely read, Grenville's work naturally invites closer scrutiny. Much of the existing material around *The Secret River* focuses on the historical accuracy of her work. This approach seems to be invited by Grenville's

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<sup>159</sup> *The Secret River* sold 100,000 copies in Australia over 10 reprints in two years and has been translated into 20 languages: see Reynolds, 2013, Austlit 2018. The novel also has 15,000 ratings on the Goodreads website (Goodreads, 2019).

<sup>160</sup> Sydney Theatre Company, ABC.

apparently conventional, and certainly accessible, narrative style. There is nothing in *The Secret River*'s style that is particularly experimental or post-modern; in form, it is close to the structure of a comparable non-fiction account.

In this, it is positioned at the realist end of the spectrum of recent novels about Australian frontier history. While the subject matter remains the same, the style they use ranges from conventional realism (Andrew McGahan's *The White Earth*) to futuristic/speculative (Clare G. Coleman's *Terra Nullius*) to a terse, matter-of fact style resembling the American modernists in the brevity and directness of language (Rohan Wilson's *The Roving Party* and *To Name Those Lost*).

The stylistic range of these novels suggests that writers of historical fiction are choosing to deal with the past in ways other than Linda Hutcheon's postmodern "historiographic metafiction", although as discussed above, that form appears particularly well suited to deconstructing the colonial narrative. In this chapter I will explore how other forms deal with historical fiction, and how works that may appear conventional may still interrogate, subvert and rewrite history.

### 3.1: Kate Grenville: sympathy for the past and historical empathy

*The Secret River* opens with the childhood of protagonist William Thornhill in England in the late 1700s and proceeds chronologically through his training as a river worker, to his commission of a crime, transportation to Australia in 1806 and later "taking up" of Indigenous-occupied land on the Hawkesbury River, along with his family. Although fictional, it follows the biography of Grenville's ancestor reasonably closely, and uses only identifiable real locations. (Her actual ancestor, Solomon Wiseman, is renamed.) It has none of the magical realist or postmodernist turns of writers like Scott, Flanagan and Wright.

Although the book is written in third person, the opening chapters focus exclusively on Thornhill's point of view, as a child and young man. Apart from a preface describing his arrival in Australia, for the first quarter of the book Australia is not depicted at all. Thornhill steals some timber from an employer, and is sentenced to death, commuted to transportation to Australia.

"*I am to live?*" he asked, looking from one face to the other ..."<sup>161</sup>

On arrival, Thornhill and his young family work towards freedom and land ownership, with Thornhill a convict and his wife as his "master". The novel emphasises Thornhill's English roots and the involuntary nature of transportation for Thornhill and by extension, all convict Australian settlers. I will argue that although this may seem (and has been suggested by some critics) to exonerate colonial society of responsibility, *The Secret River* undercuts this effect through the use of subjective detail and juxtaposition of events and scenes.

Thornhill's interactions with Indigenous people begin as occasional meetings with indigent individuals. The relationship between the new arrivals and the Indigenous people begins to darken when an acquaintance of Thornhill's, Smasher Sullivan, shows him a pair of hands he has cut from a body – "*Last time that bugger thieves from me,*" Smasher called...". Immediately afterwards, Thornhill sees an Indigenous man's body hung from

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<sup>161</sup> Grenville, 2005, p. 70.

a tree.<sup>162</sup> From this point on, Smasher Sullivan emerges as representative of the violence of colonisation, enacting the rapes and murders that occurred during early settlement.

On being freed, Thornhill convinces his wife Sal, who wants to go back to England, to “settle” on a piece of land on the Hawkesbury River:

No one had ever spoken to him of how a man might fall in love with a piece of ground. No one had ever spoken of how there could be this teasing sparkle and dance of light among the trees, this calm clean space that invited feet to enter it.  
<sup>163</sup>

This passage, where Thornhill “falls in love” with the land he’s been forced to come to, appears conventionally romantic (even Romantic), but its context within the novel invites a reappraisal in terms of how it positions the project of colonisation. The image of feet entering an empty space is Thornhill’s; the reader has been made aware only three pages previously of the clear existence of Indigenous feet already on the land. A much later passage, where an old Indigenous man, Jack, who bears a scar from Smasher’s attacks, refuses to leave the land, provides a contrast with Thornhill’s “love” and desire to *possess* the land with a different point of view.

Grenville generally avoids representing Indigenous sensibilities, but in this case, she gives Jack a few words to describe his relationship with the place: “*This me*, he said. *My place*. He smoothed the dirt with his palm so it left a patch like the scar on his head.”<sup>164</sup>

Thornhill finds himself envying Jack’s relationship with his country: “Anger kindled in him and he shouted, *Bugger you then, Jack, you can bleeding well starve and good luck to you!*”<sup>165</sup>

The contrast between the given nature of Jack’s relationship with the land and Thornhill’s acquiring of the same land through desire, effort and, ultimately, violence, raises questions about how much of a justification Thornhill’s “love” really is. Similarly, Sal’s desire to go back to England reminds the reader that although large numbers of early settlers came involuntarily as convicts, the overall project of colonisation was not inevitable. This works against the exonerating view of the colonists as mere tools of history. Houda Joubail accused *The Secret River* of “contriv(ing) to soothe (the) white readership’s guilty conscience”; another reading could be that Grenville is, rather, engaging with the exonerating narrative in order to question it.<sup>166</sup>

*The Secret River*’s resistance to teleological, Enlightenment and even Western-supremacist understandings of history is built up over the course of the novel through implied contrasts and juxtapositions. Grenville does not so much interrogate the archives, *Benang*-style, as tell their story again, but with a different set of questions than had

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<sup>162</sup> Grenville, 2005, pp. 103-105.

<sup>163</sup> Grenville, 2005, p. 106.

<sup>164</sup> Grenville, 2005, p. 329.

<sup>165</sup> Grenville, 2005, p. 330.

<sup>166</sup> Joubail, 2015.

previously been put to them.<sup>167</sup> As Grenville is not Indigenous, she chose not tell the story from an Indigenous perspective; the novel does, however, question the justifications for “settlement” of Indigenous land. It does so by offering opportunities for the reader to simultaneously identify with Thornhill’s motivations of family and love for the land – an identification many Australians whose ancestors were convicts and early colonists found in the novel – and *also* to question whether those motivations fully justified the colonial project.<sup>168</sup> By setting the settler narrative alongside the effects of settlement on Indigenous people, she returns to a question that W.E.H. Stanner raised in 1938: was the loss of Indigenous life and culture sufficiently “heavily outweighed” by the gains for the white settler population?<sup>169</sup>

Grenville has written that she was surprised by the negative reaction to the novel by many modern historians, as she’d believed that she was engaged in a similar project of truth-telling to their own:

It was important to me that the incidents and characters were solidly based on history...<sup>170</sup>

It may be that this very closeness to history, both in terms of its basis in recorded events and in its narrative, cause-and-effect sequencing of events; that is, the novel’s *lack* of the overt signals of literary experimentation, is why the novel attracted the level of criticism that it did. These criticisms were not limited to questions of fact; there were claims by historians that their craft was being directly damaged by historical fiction.

As noted earlier, in her *Quarterly Essay*, Inga Clendinnen took *The Secret River* as an example of the kind of historical fiction that was “a challenge to historians’ role as custodians and interpreters of the past”. Mark McKenna accused Grenville of trying to “play the historian”.<sup>171</sup> Further, he wrote, “novelists (like Grenville) are guilty of ‘elevat[ing] fiction to a position of interpretative power over history’”.<sup>172</sup>

Grenville frequently discussed her historical research; in writing her companion volume, *Searching For the Secret River*, she produced a sort of book-length author’s note that simultaneously made historical and fictional claims for the book. That is, she acknowledged a historical reality and insisted her book was relevant to its discussion, but she also allowed herself the right to fictionalise as she saw fit. For instance, she describes her research as “looking for my own sliver of that history” but her writing as an experience where “the only parts of this ‘assembly’ that were interesting were ... where, in a word, I’d written fiction.” Grenville balanced her claims to historicity with repeated comments, both in *Searching for the Secret River* and other public statements, that much of the book was fictional, in that it followed her own feelings about the characters and the demands of plot. In particular, she claimed to be using her characters to resolve the

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<sup>168</sup> For readers’ responses to the novel, see for instance “Kim”:  
[https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/477906480?book\\_show\\_action=true](https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/477906480?book_show_action=true).

<sup>169</sup> Stanner, 2009, p. 124.

<sup>170</sup> Grenville, website, ‘Fact and fiction’.

<sup>171</sup> Clendinnen, 2006, p. 15, Sullivan, 2006 .

<sup>172</sup> McKenna, 2005.

question of their existence in Australia at all: “The choices (Solomon Wiseman) made were to do with how to ‘be’ in the country he’d come to.”<sup>173</sup>

Not only Wiseman, but many others of the book’s characters can be seen to be operating in this frontier territory of how to ‘be’ in Australia. In the following exchange in the book, one of the key conflicts between Indigenous people and settlers, that over land use, is condensed and ostensibly explained. A group of settlers have gathered to debate how their farming impacts on the staple Indigenous food, the yam daisy. A settler called Blackwood is speaking:

*See, them yams grow where you putting in the corn, he said. You dig them up, means they go hungry. (...) But Sagitty burst out angrily. They never done nothing, he cried. See them breaking their back to dig it up and that?*<sup>174</sup>

Here, in a few words, is the argument of Terra Nullius that was, historically, used in Australia to justify expropriation of land: that land that was not “worked” was available to those who would actively farm it. To readers heavily invested in the lives of the characters by this mid-point of the book, this argument may or may not be convincing, but it certainly has the weight of appearing to be what the settlers actually thought. In a book written by a mainstream writer, marketed widely to a mainstream Australian audience, such discussions serve as proxies for the real-world debate over the rights of Indigenous people. By entering into the fictionalised thoughts of the settlers, readers are invited to accept that this is what the *actual* settlers thought – but also to decide whether or not to agree with them. Grenville is empathising deeply with the settler characters in her book, without necessarily making an argument that they were correct in their views.

In *Searching for the Secret River*, Grenville explicitly advances this view of the story she presents:

The story of the yam daisies made sense of conflict all over the country. It was the story of settlement in miniature ... it was never a simple matter of right and wrong.<sup>175</sup>

Clendinnen’s criticism of Grenville’s book centred around her own experience of having been “cured of any residual faith in the utility of empathy” by her own historical work.<sup>176</sup> That is, she argued, it was impossible to “step inside” a historical figure, whether fictional or based on a real person. Clendinnen suggested that this kind of empathy doesn’t even function well in the present day when it comes to people of other cultures.<sup>177</sup> My own response is that to accept Clendinnen’s suggestion would be to deny the potential of fiction to offer insight into other lives, in this case past lives. In one sense, Clendinnen is correct; it’s not possible to *be* another person in the way fictional empathy

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<sup>173</sup> Grenville, 2006, p. 185.

<sup>174</sup> Grenville, 2005, p. 168.

<sup>175</sup> Grenville, 2006, p. 132.

<sup>176</sup> Clendinnen, 2006, p. 21.

<sup>177</sup> Clendinnen, 2006, p. 23.

suggests. However, fiction is one tool for helping us at least attempt to imagine it. No one really believes that Grenville actually gave a true account of what it was like to be a lighterman on the Thames, however accurate her physical description might be. But the act of trying, in itself, acknowledges that there was something to imagine. And, as A. Frances Johnson points out, writing from “the vantage point of the present” is what history as well as fiction must do.<sup>178</sup>

Grenville addressed the question of empathy elsewhere in her fiction; in her follow-up to *The Secret River*, *The Lieutenant*, she had her protagonist muse, on seeing slaves in a port city: “The slaves he saw were utterly strange, their lives unimaginable, but they walked and spoke, just as he did himself.”<sup>179</sup> This passage is ostensibly about the gulf between the English colonist and the ‘other’ – the slave or the Indigenous Australians to be encountered later in the book – but it can also be read as a statement on the commonality between present-day and historical persons.

Although Grenville entered into Thornhill’s consciousness through extensive use of free indirect speech, she deliberately chose not to attempt to depict 18<sup>th</sup> century Indigenous consciousness. Decisions such as this can be seen to be respectful, in that as a non-Indigenous person Grenville does not “own” the Indigenous side of the story, or it can be seen as omitting that point of view. Jeanine Leane has written that the novel is emphatically not an Aboriginal story. In her view, it works against the Indigenous understanding of events: “It allows for the cultural transmission of settler narratives and values, and in doing so overwrites Aboriginal history and experience.”<sup>180</sup>

I discuss this question further in the section below on the use of voice, particularly the voice of people holding identities other than the writer’s own, and certainly *The Secret River* is an example of what one writer called “white narrative focalisation”.<sup>181</sup> However, Leane also makes the point that novels written from a settler point of view offer “synchronic slices of settler consciousness *of* and *about* Aboriginal people at any given time”.<sup>182</sup> I would argue that it’s through this rendering of settler consciousness that popular and non-experimental works like *The Secret River* are able to advance the debate on historical events. Such works can either hold those settler ways of thinking up for scrutiny by making them explicit, or directly question and challenge the assumptions contained in that consciousness.

Larissa Behrendt supports the view that the actions of the protagonists and the understanding of events can, in this case, be separated: “Grenville, unlike her fictional family, understands that the land that brought the Thornhills such riches was acquired through an act of stealing.”<sup>183</sup>

Grenville argues that it was necessary, for her at least, to fictionalise history in order to understand what had happened. Her encounters with the archives were, at base, similar to Scott’s, in that she found them both rich sources and full of frustrating gaps. In *Searching for the Secret River*, Grenville says she didn’t find in the archives full and

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<sup>178</sup> Johnson, 2016, p. 120.

<sup>179</sup> Grenville, 2008, p. 25.

<sup>180</sup> Leane, 2016.

<sup>181</sup> McNamara, 2013, p. 30.

<sup>182</sup> Leane, 2016.

<sup>183</sup> Behrendt, 2016, p. 181.

coherent descriptions of encounters between new arrivals of the kind she was writing about and Indigenous people in the 1810s and 1820s. And she found that she was concerned with that time and place for her own reasons – family history, an interest in reconciliation and whatever personal tastes led her to find the period imaginatively exciting. The only way for her, as a fiction writer, to explore these issues was in fiction. “There are cupboards in Australian history that we have just drawn a curtain over; we sort of know they're there but we sort of don't want to look at them,” she said in an interview.<sup>184</sup>

Grenville’s historical fiction serves her stated purposes. But in its linear narrative form and indirect free speech, *The Secret River* doesn’t re-present events and concerns in a particularly innovative way. In her critique of the novel, Alison Ravenscroft suggests that innovation in form is necessary to properly tell the story, and that this novel fails that test.<sup>185</sup> While the next section of this chapter will explore the ways in which form and technique matter, I’d suggest that the case of *The Secret River* shows that valid methods may vary from author to author.

Grenville began her work on the novel with undirected research into her family history, but also with an ambition to understand more about what had happened between her family and the Indigenous people they, as settlers, confronted. As she investigated that confrontation, she came across larger issues – essentially those of colonisation itself – that the exact story arc of her ancestor, Solomon Wiseman, did not allow her to fully lay out. But, she wrote, in creating a fiction, she was moving beyond Wiseman’s specific story: “I was beginning to sense the real dimensions of this thing. There was a story here that was bigger than my ancestor.”<sup>186</sup>

For Grenville, that story encompassed both Indigenous-settler relations and the Indigenous sense of place, and justified the changes she made to the historical record. In this, of course, she excused herself from the transparency of argument that historians favour. Grenville used fictional licence to include issues for Australian history that are poorly documented, most notably writing a fictional massacre of Indigenous people by the white character, Smasher. While this massacre is not based on any particular event, it is recognisable as sharing features of many known such events.

The massacre itself is depicted graphically, with specific details of wounds and murders of named individuals:

Black bodies lay among the ruins of their humpies. He saw the big body of Black Dick, laid out full length with the flesh of his chest torn open by a ball.<sup>187</sup>

Grenville’s acknowledgments for *The Secret River* note that she did extensive research and that “characters share some qualities with historical figures. All the people

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<sup>184</sup> Kate Grenville interview, 2005.

<sup>185</sup> Ravenscroft, 2013.

<sup>186</sup> Grenville, 2006, pp. 139-140.

<sup>187</sup> Grenville, 2005, p. 308.

within these pages, however, are works of fiction.”<sup>188 189</sup> Black Dick and the Indigenous women and children who are depicted dying in the massacre, in other words, are not “real” individuals, but stand in for those who were. This is one of the methods available to historical fiction to animate events for which there is limited documentary evidence. There’s a tradition in Holocaust writing of recording, in detail, the lives of the murdered (for instance see *East of Time*, Jacob Rosenberg; Daniel Mendelsohn, *The Lost*) but in the case of Indigenous people, the names and identities of the dead are rarely available.<sup>190</sup>

<sup>191</sup>The kind of fictionalising seen in *The Secret River* serves a role of making historical events seem more real. *The Secret River* invites sympathy for the settler characters, then unsettling our view of the assumptions behind their colonisation.

This simultaneous emphasis on use of the record and fidelity to what she sees as the story - or as Grenville puts it in *Searching for the Secret River*: “pummel(ing) it into shape as I saw fit” – invite a more nuanced interpretation than Ravenscroft’s.<sup>192</sup> That is, I want to ask, if Grenville is not just retelling what’s on the record, what is she doing in the novel?

Grenville wrote that she allowed herself to be guided by the gaps in the record that intrigued her personally and the issues she found interesting. In this, she was working much as a historian does. Where she differs is her way of “writing up” what she found. Her work fits Eva Sallis’s definition of “research fiction”, in which the story isn’t simply based *on* research, but addresses the research.<sup>193</sup> Grenville worked with more material than she could fit into one novel, suggesting that the choices she made in what to include and how to present it are key to interpreting the resulting fiction.

In *Searching for the Secret River*, Grenville writes of the “doubling” of the places she visited in light of her research: “the river I’d seen before, plus this new one.”<sup>194</sup> She had in mind the “doubling” of places as they are now with their historical twins, but that “doubling” could equally apply to her fiction. There is the history on which it’s based, and the story Grenville built around it.

*The Secret River* has an overall arc that at first reading might appear to be a straight and relatively uncritical *retelling* of archival material in a conventional narrative style, as Ravenscroft suggests, simply using made-up names and places. And it is clearly a long way from *recasting* history to include “the other side” in the style of Scott or other postmodern novelists. However, the use of invented details alongside details drawn from the archives suggests a more nuanced reading. The implied comparison between Thornhill’s attachment to the land and Jack’s *belonging* to the land in the extract above is one example of how Grenville unsettles the very story she appears to be advancing, that

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<sup>188</sup> One criticism of *The Secret River* might be that the main protagonist, with whom readers are most likely to identify, is shown as stopping short of committing murder, thus heightening the “exoneration” felt by readers.

<sup>189</sup> Grenville, 2005, p. 336.

<sup>190</sup> Rosenberg, 2005.

<sup>191</sup> Mendelsohn, 2005.

<sup>192</sup> Grenville, 2006, p. 170.

<sup>193</sup> Sallis, 1999.

<sup>194</sup> Grenville, 2006, p. 134

of inevitable and justified colonisation. As Sarah Pinto notes, the losses of the Indigenous people are presented in *The Secret River* as not “other” to the reader, but “as losses, the magnitude of which have impoverished the Australian nation”.<sup>195</sup>

In that, the book is a kind of *re-enacting* of events in order to work through issues of legitimacy of colonisation – that without altering the narrative course of events as they are generally understood in mainstream Australia, Indigenous issues are given greater moral weight. It is one story in what Behrendt calls “a series of competing narratives, brought to life by different groups whose experiences are diverse and often challenge the dominant story that a country seeks to tell itself about its history.”<sup>196</sup> The following section examines how Grenville, in this and other works, draws from the archives and represents what she finds there as fiction to achieve that effect. It accords with Pinto’s analysis that, *The Secret River* is “a novel of losses – of lost control, lost knowledge, lost peoples, lost mythologies, and lost chances. By lingering on these losses, Grenville’s novel becomes an overwhelmingly melancholic rendering of this past” – that is, the novel harnesses emotions to offer readers a new relationship with frontier history.<sup>197 198</sup>

### 3.2: “Raiding the archives” Grenville, Ross Gibson and the archives.

In Grenville’s account, her research and writing process combines a search of the archives for useful details with a constant comparison with the story as she wants it to play out and the effects she wants to achieve.

By rearranging and reshaping the scenes, I could create a sequence.  
This wasn’t quite how it was in the documents, but making a sequence out of these scenes wouldn’t distort what ‘really happened’ in any significant way.<sup>199</sup>

In this approach, she is in conflict with the traditional historical use of archives. Historian Tom Griffiths writes: ‘History became professional and academic in the late nineteenth century by developing a science of the document and servicing the increasingly powerful nation-state, itself a generator and organiser of documents.’<sup>200</sup> That is, the records in their many forms are at the heart of the practice of history. Where Kim Scott directly juxtaposes the archives with his fiction inside the text, Grenville’s work treats archives as a source but does not overtly acknowledge them in the resulting text; that is, the documents themselves do not appear as archives; where documents are mentioned, they are confined to the moment of their creation. Grenville’s fiction is fiction of “being there”, without the self-conscious references to the created nature of the text

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<sup>195</sup> Pinto, 2007, p. 106.

<sup>196</sup> Behrendt, 2016, p. 181.

<sup>197</sup> Pinto, 2007, p. 55.

<sup>198</sup> Pinto finds this “melancholic mode” to be overall not adequate to addressing the underlying issues, arguing that the grief expressed in works like Richard Flanagan’s *Gould’s Book of Fish* is also necessary, though possibly still problematic and not completely sufficient. Pinto, 2007, pp. 164-167.

<sup>199</sup> Grenville, 2006, p. 185.

<sup>200</sup> Griffiths, 2015, p. 5.

that the postmodern writers include in their work, or the scientific approach of using all available evidence.

To better understand how Grenville uses archival material, and how an archive may “tell” a different story in different writers’ hands and in different textual forms, I want to discuss another of Grenville’s books, and the archive on which it was based. In the reflective essay (section two) I discuss the use of archives generally, but a comparison here of Grenville’s fictional account with a non-fiction work may show how the archives invite and guide speculation and fictionalisation.

Grenville’s novel *The Lieutenant* is based on a set of notebooks kept by William Dawes, an astronomer who arrived in Sydney with the First Fleet and had extensive first-contact dealings with the local Eora people, particularly a young woman named Patyegarang, from whom he learned a large number of Eora words.<sup>201</sup> It is the second book in the trilogy formed by *The Secret River*, *The Lieutenant* and *Sarah Thornhill*. The material with which *The Lieutenant* deals has been used by other writers, most notably for my purposes the experimental non-fiction historian Ross Gibson in *26 Views of the Starburst World*.<sup>202 203</sup>

Both the novel and the non-fiction book take Dawes’s notebooks as their source, and both show signs of infatuation with the idea of the archives as a trace of the past; the interest here lies in the different forms in which that idea is expressed.

*The Lieutenant* is, like *The Secret River*, a temporally linear and dramatic novel. Like *The Secret River*, it begins with a description of a young English man – “Daniel Rook was quiet, moody, a man of few words.” – and despite the irony that could be read into “a man of few words” being a gatherer of language, Grenville’s fictionalised Dawes is told in a straightforward manner. It tells a story with a clear narrative arc and little ambiguity about the events depicted. Its dedication calls it “inspired” by the story of Patyegarang, the Cadigal people (a subgroup of the Eora) and Dawes – a version of the historical novel’s “based on” claim to historical truth.

*26 Views of the Starburst World*, by contrast, is, although nominally non-fiction, more experimental, tentative and open to multiple readings of the notebooks. *26 Views* reproduces the pages of Dawes’s notebooks, then offers a series of essays and speculations that, rather than creating a story about Dawes and Patyegarang, ask questions.

For example, Gibson reprints a page from the notebooks about the verb “Naa: to see or look,” in which Dawes has provided “the full morphology of the verb” (i.e., the forms for I see, we see, and so on). Gibson closely analyses the number of times this verb is listed in the notebooks, the other notes kept in adjoining pages and even which words have been struck out and why. That is, rather than concentrating on the *content* of the archive (the Eora language), he focuses on the conditions of its production:

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<sup>202</sup> Gibson, 2012.

<sup>203</sup> (Other writers and artists have worked with the same source: for example, Paul Carter worked with a composer to create a short recording of poems in both English and Eora), Carter, 1995.

“Here at the start, though, in no way assured about the best way to proceed, he told a scrappy story about how he was muddling through...”<sup>204</sup>

The same could be said of *26 Views of the Starburst World*. Although the book is non-fiction and contains extensive historical background and reproductions of the archive itself, Gibson tells the reader: “I am not writing history”.<sup>205</sup> Rather, he is puzzling over the past in the form in which he finds it – the notebooks – to the point where the handwriting itself is analysed for what it might tell about the conditions under which it was written.<sup>206</sup> He acknowledges, both in the form he chose for *26 Views*, and explicitly in the text, that his is only one way of knowing what happened between Dawes and Patyegarang:

...he might have learned that he could exist under the direction of larger forces .. and that they would come back to him, offering new increments of understanding ... he might have learned to write down what he heard without demanding the translation of something so vast and reverberant as a song.<sup>207</sup>

Those “might haves” bring to the fore the interpretive role of the historical writer in a way that Grenville’s work does not. In telling the story of the same two individuals, Grenville provides dialogue, inner thoughts and detailed descriptions of what Gibson only “conjectures”. Where Grenville writes of Dawes “he felt” and “he realised” (177), Gibson uses “must have” or “you can imagine”. Both are attempts to offer the reader a possible state of mind for this historical figure. Both books have the same concerns: the creation of the notebooks (that is, the archive), the character of Dawes (an astronomer who found himself in the role of a first-contact figure) and the relationship between Dawes and Patyegarang.

Grenville has chosen to fit the notebooks into a narrative story – a romantic story of a meeting of minds (not a romance: she alters Patyegarang’s age to rule out that possibility) with additional drama provided by the wider confrontations between the Eora people and the new arrivals. She ends the book with Dawes (whom she calls Rooke) sailing out of Sydney harbour while Patyegarang (Tagarang) watches. Gibson’s book ends with a speculative passage discussing the meaning of Dawes’s later anti-slavery work. Gibson aims to examine and widen the possible meanings of the source material rather than interpret or find a “story”. Grenville closes down alternative meanings, and in this difference, Grenville’s work is more conventional than Gibson’s.

But both books continually refer back to the notebooks Dawes kept, and the Eora language recorded in them.

In *Searching for the Secret River* Grenville describes her fascination with the archive’s physical manifestation – “Wiseman’s hand had held the pen that made those marks” (79) – and *The Lieutenant* depicts the production of Dawes’s notebooks – “using a pencil for greater speed, scribbling...” (176). Even within the text Grenville questions the production of the archive of Eora speech:

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<sup>204</sup> Gibson, 2012, pp. 40-42.

<sup>205</sup> Gibson, 2012, p. 133.

<sup>206</sup> Gibson, 2012, pp. 43-44.

<sup>207</sup> Gibson, 2012, p. 145.

“He had been so satisfied with himself, he saw not, that he had even put a full stop. He was chilled by the confidence of those entries. How misplaced had been his triumph ...” (231)

Ross Gibson devotes several pages to considering the effect on Eora language – “air fashioned by breath” – of being written down for the first time.<sup>208</sup> A. Frances Johnson noted that this kind of “archive fever” affects many writers of fiction, including herself: “every ... artefact was to be considered a repository of presences and absences ....” The challenge, Johnson concluded, was to find a way to write about the material that combined the many facets of colonial experience with a historical story.<sup>209</sup>

Camilla Nelson references Foucault’s assertion that archives – or at least the process of record-making that creates them – are ‘the means or system through which things are established’.<sup>210</sup> Nelson questions the archive’s role as a reliable record, pointing out that for those whose lives are recorded in it, the very mode of recording (focussing on certain aspects of their lives at the expense of others) and the way they are positioned as ‘objects (and not the subjects) of history’ can be a kind of ‘violence’. What this means for non-fiction historiography, I’d suggest, is that every statement based on a fact drawn from an archive needs to, in footnotes if not in the text, query the provenance and implications of that piece of information and to acknowledge that there are vast areas of unrecorded information, and ways of understanding events and individual lives that do not appear in the archives. Clearly this approach would be impractical, but Gibson’s book attempts a reading of the archives that, if it does not achieve that comprehensive level of referentiality, at least abandons the pretence that archival material can be held to “show” any given fact: it acknowledges the underlying role of interpretation.

*26 Views* is more a reflection on the archives and the events that produced them than an attempt to force it into a narrative arc. Although it is non-fiction, it constantly refers to the need for imagination, conjecture and ultimately fiction to establish a meaningful relationship with the past as imperfectly shown to us through the archives. Gibson writes:

“ ‘Fictional’ does not have to mean ‘fanciful’. Certainly it need not mean ‘irresponsible’. ... Addressing the absences and heeding the impulse for fiction, I can offer versions of the many possible ways to account for a mystery, to elucidate an intrigue or a secret that is nested in the dishevelled clues.”<sup>211</sup>

For Gibson, Dawes’s archives show the conditions of their production – random and recursive as Dawes learned the Eora language and formed relationships with its speakers. Gibson’s response was to write a book that used similarly fractured and recursive methods to seek “meaningful associations.”<sup>212</sup> Tom Griffiths described this as

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<sup>208</sup> Gibson, 2012, pp. 104-5.

<sup>209</sup> Johnson, 2016, p. 141.

<sup>210</sup> Nelson, 2007, p. 3.

<sup>211</sup> Gibson, 2012, p. 134.

<sup>212</sup> Gibson, 2012, p. 194.

“a form that *works with* rather than *works away* the estrangement that the notebooks show.”<sup>213</sup> Grenville’s reading of the notebooks, unlike Gibson’s, is given as the only possible version of events, at least within the covers of *The Lieutenant*.

Both Gibson and Grenville have produced books that spring directly from Dawes’s two small notebooks and have the production of those notebooks at their core. They have used the same archive, but Gibson has produced a recursive, discursive set of mini-essays and Grenville has written a full-length, story-driven novel. That Gibson’s work is a historiographic account (despite Gibson’s denials) and the latter is fiction seems to bear out Haydon White’s contention that story is not a function of history itself, but of our telling of history. Real events, he wrote, do not offer themselves as stories, but we make them into stories.<sup>214</sup> In this case, *The Lieutenant* is the story Grenville chose to write; faced with the same material, Gibson chose not story but questions.

Comparing these two books in light of White’s comments, I’d argue that the archives don’t so much contain stories like Dawes and Patyegarang’s, as make available material for historians and fiction writers to interpret according to the questions they bring and the form they choose to write in. Grenville’s authoritative third-person writing style implies a closure that is closer to traditional historiography.

Contrasting *The Lieutenant* with *26 Views* shows the range of uses to which one source can be put. The analysis of *The Secret River* above showed that even apparently non-experimental forms of historical can be read in a way that problematises both history and traditional narrative ways of telling history. In the next and final chapter I will examine further how the chosen form affects the telling of historical stories and discuss the use of specifically fictional techniques, particularly point of view.

#### **Chapter Four: Historical fiction’s possibilities: why form matters, an investigation of fictional subjectivity and of fiction writers’ claims to “truth”.**

##### Chapter introduction:

In this chapter, I will return to Scott’s formal innovations and Grenville’s strong use of point of view, as well as Richard Flanagan’s historical fiction, in order to better understand the effects of choice of form that fiction allows. I will ask what the technique of focalisation, which is a technique unique to fiction, can contribute. I will also address ethical questions about representing past individuals, with my discussion being mainly around the use of voice to represent other people’s subjectivity, and conclude with a closer examination of the concept of “fictional truth.”

##### 4.1: “The full arsenal of fiction”: form and subjectivity rendered via place, voice and focalisation.

In this section, I hope to analyse more closely a few of the fictional techniques that have been employed by fiction writers in their engagement with history and historiography. A sense of place – and that place in a particular time – is a strength of

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<sup>213</sup> Griffiths, 2015, p. 16.

<sup>214</sup> White, 1987, p. 4.

historical fiction, attempting as it does to render events and locations that no longer exist. Voice – the sense that the text is given access to particular sensibility and distinct individuals – is necessary in all fiction, but particularly worth examining when that fiction is about people operating in cultural frameworks that also no longer exist. The overall structure of the works also affect how the history they present is “read”; for instance, a linear narrative may contain implications of inevitability and even the Western sense of time as contrasted with Indigenous concepts.

Kate Grenville’s work, in which events are often focalised through a single point of view, is far from Hutcheon’s “poetics of postmodernism”, where indeterminacy is a chosen position in response to the impossibility of a fixed view on history. *Benang* offers that indeterminacy: it is a more multi-vocal and multi-perspectived version of events. Both novels, however, address both history and historiography, offering new stories and new ways of using what can be found in the archives. The question then becomes whether there is one ideal form in which to write fiction about our history; that is, what form is most effective in dealing with unresolved issues and in refining understanding of the processes of history.

Some critics have suggested that novels that lack structural innovation fail to fully engage with the issues: for Alison Ravenscroft, for instance, the Western (in the sense of “cowboy”) style of Wilson’s *The Roving Party* fails to evoke the reality of the Indigenous people in the story: “This is not a new way of coming to know our past. This is make-believe.”<sup>215</sup> Such analysis would suggest that conventionally realist depictions, in their very structure, essentially “buy-in” to the concept of historical narrative as being pre-ordained and teleological, as criticised by Paul Carter.

And A. Frances Johnson, in outlining the “postcolonial historical novel” as it exists in Australia, suggests that postmodern forms are more likely to “avoid recreating colonial tropes”.<sup>216</sup> In her unpublished thesis, Joanne Jones suggests that realism is limiting, asking whether “any ‘realistic’ narrative about the period (is) philosophically and ideologically limited?”<sup>217</sup>, and suggests that “Grenville’s investment in the form of the realist historical novel, attached to the belief in the universality afforded by empathy, forecloses her struggles with paradox and irresolution.”

Such analyses, in my view, overlook the usefulness of historical fiction written in more conventional styles, particularly where that fiction strives to bring a new understanding of events. Where history has – in the view of revisionist historians like Boyce, McKenna and Reynolds – told flawed and misleading narratives, then narrative works like Grenville’s and Wilson’s offer an alternative which may not be stylistically experimental and may be limited in their ability to critique historiography, but can “speak back” to the dominant narrative on its own terms.

Wilson’s realist approach in *The Roving Party* gives historical events that were already harsh – the formation of parties of whites and sometimes Indigenous men to captured or kill Indigenous Tasmanians for bounty – a sharp edge through the use of close fictional depiction. For instance, he writes detailed descriptions of the effects of gunshots on the victims. *The Roving Party* includes an Indigenous character, Black Bill,

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<sup>215</sup> Ravenscroft, 2013.

<sup>216</sup> Johnson, 2016, p. 70.

<sup>217</sup> Jones, 2012.

who occupies a space both black and white – he joins a “roving party” – and provides only some of Bill’s thoughts and reasons for assisting in the hunting of his own people. For events that were often glossed over in the historical record with terms like “dispersed” and “brought in”, *The Roving Party* provides an alternative, clearer view.

Wilson’s accessible writing style and willingness to depict previously taboo events has brought some aspects of Tasmanian history to a new audience, just as Grenville’s popular and descriptive “histories” at least prompted a debate, new for some, on the events around first contact and early settlement.<sup>218</sup> Both writers, and others who work in more conventional modernist and realist styles, have included in their work the new understandings made possible by both the historical works published during the “history wars” and by the writing of Indigenous authors.<sup>219</sup>

Richard Flanagan, who urged that fiction be used to allow us to “confront fully our experience” addressed the power of the archives in key scenes of his Tasmanian historical fantasy, *Gould’s Book of Fish*.<sup>220 221</sup> First, his protagonist emerges from an underground cell into a foreboding archive full of inaccurate records. He describes the false records he reads as “inexplicable and shocking in their effrontery”. At another point, the records, and the history they are creating, are described as directly in conflict with reality: “The world, as described by Jorgen Jorgensen in those blue-inked pages, was at war with the reality in which we lived.”<sup>222</sup>

Then, at the end of the book, there is a massive bonfire of archives following the death of an Indigenous man: “*The registers!* The registers I had dragged for so many days with so great a sacrifice!”<sup>223</sup>

In this scene, the flames rise up like the dying breath of “a dragon that had just been slain.” What Flanagan seems to be pointing to here is that in the world of the historical novel, the archives are only what the victors have left behind and it may take their burning – to reach the truth that will set us free. *Gould’s Book of Fish* itself takes a form that questions archives; it is presented as a version of a story that its narrator found in an old book, but which vanished after being read.

Flanagan is an advocate for the usefulness of fiction as one way to further our understanding of ourselves and our past. As Sarah Pinto notes, Flanagan is a trained historian who chooses to write fiction.<sup>224</sup> In a response to an article that claimed Australian fiction was in decline, Flanagan wrote that while “serious non-fiction speaks

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<sup>218</sup> The novel won the 2011 Vogel prize among other recognitions, and was widely discussed in mainstream media.

<sup>219</sup> Tasmania has particularly often been written about in the kind of fiction under discussion, possibly partly because of the need to assert historical issues in the face of what Lyndall Ryan called “being told that they (Indigenous Australians) do not exist.” (Ryan, 2012, p. 313.)

<sup>220</sup> Flanagan, 2011, pp. 207-212.

<sup>221</sup> Flanagan, 2001.

<sup>222</sup> Flanagan, 2001, p. 318.

<sup>223</sup> Flanagan, 2001, p. 376.

<sup>224</sup> Pinto, 2007, p. 130.

to contemporary issues and can have great immediate impact ... longer-term it tends to fade.”<sup>225 226</sup> Urging a more courageous approach to fiction, he wrote:

The deployment of more playful forms, the use of fable or allegory or historical elements, is seen to be a creative failure, a retreat. The liberating possibilities, the political edges of story are denied. You sense a collective loss of nerve, a fear of using the full arsenal of fictional techniques to confront fully our experience.<sup>227</sup>

In the phrase “confront fully our experience”, Flanagan is proposing that fiction – and fiction allowed to range across *all* forms – is necessary to not just apprehend the facts of our past, but to comprehend its implications for each of us on a personal level.<sup>228</sup>

History is not excluded from this project – elsewhere in the same book Flanagan finds much to praise in James Boyce’s non-fiction account of the Tasmanian frontier, *Van Diemen’s Land*, but he insists on the place of fiction writers in creating cultural meaning and offering ways to think about historical events.<sup>229 230</sup>

Those “fictional techniques” available to fiction writers to create that meaning, both postmodern and traditional, and the implications of their use are varied, and I can only offer a brief survey here before discussing one – voice/point of view – more fully.

Unlike non-fiction writers, fiction writers are free to work by direct association between ideas and images, using metaphor, for example, or to conflate characters to simplify a reader’s understanding of event. They can write in present tense, reducing the sense of distance from the events described. (Historians *could* do this but rarely do.) They can write about history without directly referring to the historical events in question – say by ostensibly writing about the future, or about some other place.<sup>231</sup> They have access to other modes, such as magical realism, metaphor and symbolism.

And they can, in particular, render the point of view and the character’s voice (sometimes called focalisation) in ways unavailable to non-fiction, including using multiple points of view. Point of view and voice are part of an overall sense of subjectivity. They are established by a number of methods, including a subjective sense of place.

In novels, the characters’ surroundings set the mood and influence emotions and events. There is no doubt that this is how lived experience actually feels; this is why historical fiction needs to ‘make up’ unknown details of place. Our understanding of

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<sup>225</sup> Flanagan, 2011, p. 173.

<sup>226</sup> Flanagan, 2011, p. 173.

<sup>227</sup> Flanagan, 2011, p. 175.

<sup>228</sup> Flanagan goes on to suggest that “narrowly realist” fiction is insufficient for the task.

<sup>229</sup> Flanagan, 2011, pp. 207-212.

<sup>230</sup> Boyce, James, *Van Diemen’s Land*, Black Inc., Melbourne, 2010

<sup>231</sup> For example, Ryan Griffen, the writer/director of the ABC television series *Cleverman*, agreed in a radio interview that some of his ‘futuristic’ fiction about a non-human race and the way they should be treated reflected historical discussion about the humanity or otherwise of indigenous Australians, *Awaye*, Radio National, Sunday June 5, 2016.

William Thornhill is enhanced by seeing his reactions to his surroundings, and his love for the place he “settles” is presented as a major motivator for the character.

The long spit of land it swung around rose from the water, a sweet place with scattered trees and grass ...<sup>232</sup>

In *Searching for the Secret River*, Kate Grenville discusses how she was affected by her experience of the places where *The Secret River* was set, particularly parts of London and the land on the Hawkesbury River that Thornhill “experiences” in the passage above.

To tell a story in an effective way – one that engages the reader – all the senses need to be involved. The sense of place is created by myriad small details, from weather to the sounds of the street to the feel of clothing and building materials against characters’ skin. Many of these details are available to historians and historical writers, but not always enough to form a full impression of ‘being there, and history can and is written without such subjective details.’ That impression of ‘being there’ makes fiction more convincing and opens the reader to empathy with the people described.

This technique gives the illusion of access to the character’s consciousness. In the reflective essay (section two of this thesis), I discuss further the role of a sense of place in focalising the story through a particular character, and in creating a sense of the time being depicted, particularly with reference to Grenville’s work and my own research.

This sense of access to an individual’s inner life is one aspect of the wider fictional technique of rendering characters’ point of view and voice. In *The Secret River*, Grenville freely rendered Thornhill’s point of view: “he began to feel too small for the place but forced himself on” and generally invites the reader to identify with him.<sup>233</sup> Indigenous characters, however, are mostly shown from the outside.

This use of dialogue, free indirect speech, stream of consciousness or authorial reporting of a character’s thoughts can offer the reader an opportunity to imaginatively project himself or herself into events. Dialogue is rarely recorded and accessible to historians, and where it is, it is often formal – as in court reporting – or of unreliable provenance – as in most newspaper reporting of events. Yet dialogue is one of the main ways we experience our interactions with other people. Stream of consciousness – a technique that attempts to reproduce the way we think – goes further and tries to put the reader inside the character(s)’ head.

Grenville’s choices on rendering Indigenous consciousness touch on a complex question about writing about the “other”. In historical fiction, voice can refer to the telling of a story – giving a voice to historical persons who do not have one in the archive, as Kim Scott has done. But it can also mean the sense of subjectivity and identity that goes with speaking (writing) in a particular person’s voice.

Some Indigenous writers have suggested that writers – Indigenous and otherwise – should observe Indigenous protocols in the way they represent individuals and stories. In an essay about such protocols, Jared Thomas writes:

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<sup>232</sup> Grenville, 2005, p. 106.

<sup>233</sup> Grenville, 2005, p. 153.

Representations of Aboriginal culture that are developed without observation of Indigenous protocols are more likely to misrepresent Aboriginal people and communities and undermine opportunities for the sharing of knowledge and strengthening of Aboriginal communities and their relationships with others.<sup>234</sup>

Careless representations can cause actual harm, he suggests:

Restrictions inherent in Indigenous storytelling are sometimes deemed a form of censorship but should not be viewed negatively as they reinforce social cohesion and cultural and environmental sustainability.<sup>235</sup>

A. Frances Johnson offers a viewpoint on voice that opens it up to more creative uses: rather than ask “who really spoke” in a text, she suggests using Foucault’s question: “what are the modes of existence of this discourse?”<sup>236</sup> This perspective does not remove the obligation on the writer to behave ethically – not, for instance, abusing the assumed position to make spurious historical arguments, or to offend or unthinkingly appropriate another culture – but does seem to “permit” a greater range of points of view in fiction – possibly applying Tony Birch’s test of “mutual respect and recognition” would be useful here.<sup>237</sup>

Jeanine Leane has written that writers need to be aware of why they wish to represent particular groups, and whether they have the understanding to do so.<sup>238</sup> She is one of many academic writers who have identified tropes that position particular groups (in this case Indigenous people) as “other”. She warns that in Australian fiction, Indigenous people are often “identified essentially by the basic commodities of sex, violence, morality, mysticism and the prehistoric,” suggesting that fiction should be interrogated as to whether it supports or disrupts the “settler discourse”.<sup>239</sup>

I’d argue that Grenville’s work shows that fiction that doesn’t directly represent the point of view of historically (and historiographically) marginalised groups can still open up debate about the relationship between those groups and the dominant majority (and the story told by that majority) by rehearsing it in a way that opens it to questioning. This is not what Leane has called (writing about Patrick White’s work) “(positioning) the (historical) Aboriginal subject for the consumption of the non-Aboriginal reader in an attempt to create a sense of belonging in contemporary Australia”; rather, it is framing the settler story in a new set of questions.<sup>240</sup>

In a 2018 discussion, historian Bain Attwood suggested that non-Indigenous audiences needed to learn to identify not only with marginalised Indigenous people, but also with their own settler forebears, in order to avoid the trap of attributing the problems of the past to abstract “bad” forces – that is, for settler society to better “own” the

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<sup>234</sup> Thomas, 2014.

<sup>235</sup> Thomas, 2014.

<sup>236</sup> Johnson, 2016, p. 86.

<sup>237</sup> Birch, 2015.

<sup>238</sup> Leane, 2018.

<sup>239</sup> Leane, 2014, p. 258.

<sup>240</sup> Leane, 2014, p. 262.

consequences of its actions.<sup>241</sup> Work like Grenville's, while still largely from the settler point of view, serves to question that perspective.

But historical fiction can go further than simply (fictionally) reanimating the voices of the past. It can directly address and re-enact uncertainty and multiple points of view about what actually happened in the past, by representing multiple versions and viewpoints.<sup>242</sup> Where the traditional study of history has continued to apply tests of objectivity and testability to events inferred from the archives, people who are affected by historical events may have other measures of what stories can be told. For many, and certainly in the case of Australian frontier history, the stories they want told are not represented in traditional history, which they experience as a silence about their own history. Scott's direct responses to the archives and their gaps exemplifies how fiction can tell these "missing" stories.

When Henry Reynolds began writing about historical events as part of what became the history wars, his readers responded with metaphors of voice: "Reynolds's readers almost always write of having discovered or confronted a past that was previously unknown to them. They write of a silence shattered," according to one interviewer who discussed readers' correspondence with Reynolds himself.<sup>243</sup>

The work of Reynolds and other historians, however, is limited to what could be reasonably inferred from the archive. And given the archive is almost entirely created by the non-Indigenous participants in events, a certain degree of bias was clearly inevitable. Kim Scott puts this this way:

Researching the archives to understand the perceptions of historical Aboriginal (specifically, Noongar) people can be frustrating, since they are not the ones doing the recording and their voices are rarely heard.<sup>244</sup>

In *Benang*, Scott's interpositions of archival material substituted for the non-existent Indigenous voice in the archives. Scott went further; he incorporated the actual voices, or at least the language, of the Noongar people of Western Australia in his writing. This practice reflects Scott's wider concerns as a member of the Noongar community about preserving and revivifying the Noongar language, but also his belief that certain concepts might inhere in non-English languages, and so their use becomes a crucial path to understanding:

I wondered if Noongar language could help us see as Noongars did way back then, if it might help us appreciate different perspectives of history and its passage as anything but "inevitable"<sup>245</sup>

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<sup>241</sup> Attwood, 2018.

<sup>242</sup> An example of this is Matthew Kneale's 2000 novel *English Passengers*, which uses multiple narrators, including colonists, "explorers" and an Indigenous character.

<sup>243</sup> Reynolds, 2009.

<sup>244</sup> Scott, 2008.

<sup>245</sup> Scott, 2008, p. 103.

Taken as a group of works, rather than singly, the novels under discussion here offer multi-vocal and multiple-perspective stories that, rather than insist on a single underlying reality, to allow for even “mutually exclusive versions” of a story to exist in the same text.<sup>246</sup> Ursula Heise notes that:

(P)ostmodern repetition strategies seem designed precisely to preclude moments of epiphany and privileged insight, since each instant is submerged in a series of alternative versions none of which can claim priority over the others.<sup>247</sup>

Stories told this way – that is, focalised through a number of voices – can, in their form, reproduce the uncertainties, unknowable moments and ultimately even the fundamentally incompatible versions of history, comfortably accommodating what non-fiction history cannot.

#### 4.1: The “truth” of fiction

Throughout this essay I’ve qualified the definition of “truth”, partly in order to avoid Clendinnen’s “epistemological prickly-bushes”, as they present to any analysis that compares a non-fiction form to fiction. This essay does not have the scope or space to address the serious questions that exist around the knowability of non-fiction “truth,” but I will attempt to bring more clarity to the idea of fictional truth.

Postmodernism theorists such as Richard Rorty, as Rohan Wilson has noted, often create their own definitions of truth; definitions that become self-referential and thus allow historical fiction texts to be judged by standards other than the historiographical. Wilson writes:

Without the notion of a literal reading, without the ideal (of) a referential link to the world, without the possibility of historiographic truth, the second grand tradition that Rorty defines, the tradition of horizontal truth, would have nothing to reinterpret and nothing to ironise.<sup>248</sup>

In Wilson’s analysis, Richard Rorty’s “horizontal truth” is the internal truth of the work; he offers the concept of “vertical truth” as being the kind of truth sought after by historians and by those who rely on language to refer accurately to a real-world referent; I would suggest that this real-world referent is nearly identical to Carr’s “mountain”, which exists even if it cannot be completely seen.

So if there is a “horizontal truth” or a truth that is particular to fiction, what do we mean by that, and can it be found in the works discussed here?

The role of allegory in these works is both unique to their fictional status and, I’d argue, a strong pointer to the kind of “horizontal truth” they signify. In *Benang*, Kim Scott has Harley and others float above the ground to signify their being supposedly “uplifted” from the state of Aboriginality (and imply how undesirable that uplifting is to

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<sup>246</sup> Heise, 1997, p. 53.

<sup>247</sup> Heise, 1997, p. 58.

<sup>248</sup> Wilson, 2014, p. xviii.

them); in Flanagan's *Gould's Book of Fish* the protagonist "becomes a fish", but the change is clearly an analogy for the state of his life.

Writing about historical movies in Australia, Felicity Collins suggests that the fictional technique of allegory is allowing a conceptual shift to take place in audiences, a point that could as easily apply to written fiction:

It is possible to argue that, in the recent constellation of films that re-figure the ongoing catastrophe of indigenous-settler relations in Australia, historical allegory is performing the paradoxical feat of aligning history's victors with the point-of-view of the defeated, producing a new, ethical form of subjectivity with a bicultural sense of 'nationhood' as *one among several* horizons of identity.<sup>249</sup>

And novelist Lucy Treloar has offered this definition of literary truth, in direct response to Clendinnen's criticisms of historical fiction:

The binding contract for writers of literary fiction (a world that crosses genres and can include historical fiction) is with their artistic vision, with the expression of the truth as they see it with relation to their subject and with the creation of a compelling narrative.<sup>250</sup>

In his analysis of Kim Scott's work, Rohan Wilson gives the position of Richard Rorty on the ability of written texts to convey the truth: "Truth cannot be out there — cannot exist independently of the human mind — because sentences cannot so exist, or be out there."<sup>251</sup>

If this is correct and the understanding of (in this case) historical fiction exists only in the mind, I'd like to ask, finally, what kind of "truth" historical fiction creates in our minds, and offer the position that it's this "truth" that is the major reason for writing and reading historical fiction at all.

Writers of historical fiction often invoke "truth" as a justification or *raison d'être* for the work they do. Alexis Wright, for instance, says she began writing fiction because "I felt literature, the work of fiction, was the best way of presenting a truth — not the real truth, but more of a truth than non-fiction, which is not really the truth either".<sup>252</sup> Anita Heiss suggests that Indigenous literature "records our 'truths' about history up until the present day."<sup>253</sup>

Wright, in making the comment above, said she meant partly the greater freedom a writer, particularly an Indigenous one, felt in telling fictional stories without having to "feel constrained by cultural values (or) constrained by our own families or the communities in which we live". Here we need to consider the restrictions referred to by Jared Thomas above, where the "vertical truth" or that referred to by the practice of history, is the property of particular groups and not necessarily available to all writers: in

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<sup>249</sup> Collins, 2008, p. 64.

<sup>250</sup> Treloar, 2018.

<sup>251</sup> Rorty, Richard, quoted in Wilson, 2014, p. 17.

<sup>252</sup> Wright, 2002, p. 13.

<sup>253</sup> Heiss, 2015.

that case, a similar-but-not-identical story serves to make general points without offending the owners of particular stories.

In her *Carpentaria*, written characters enact Wright's experience of Indigenous life and history without being linked to particular "real" incidents. She writes:

They never frightened the judge or any of the Australian law because they spoke their English calmly, which they knew would not frighten the white folk, who never liked black aggressors.<sup>254</sup>

This passage expresses a truth that Indigenous people know: that they are prejudged on their behaviour according to European standards. This is a "truth" that could be expressed as a statement about social mores and prejudice, but Wright's characters show it rather than tell it. *Carpentaria* is not strongly plot-driven, but it utilises a social-realist style, describing the struggles of a cast of characters in the northern Australian town of "Desperance", most of those struggles being related to conflict between Indigenous and settler ways of life and standards.

That Wright's text is concerned about truth could not be more apparent when you consider that she names one character, a corrupt white policeman, "Truthful": "Truthful had left the room mumbling something about *reality*."<sup>255</sup>

Given Truthful's actual behaviour – corruption and sexual predation – his presence in the novel seems to point to the *untruthfulness* of the received (settler) version of events in Desperance.

James Bradley's response to Clendinnen's *Quarterly Essay* included the suggestion that history and historical fiction 'are not opposed, but complementary, one a mapping of the real, of what was, the other a mapping of the subconscious, of the way we understand the real, and of the way we understand ourselves.'<sup>256</sup> This is an internal "truth" – not one that refers to a defined external referent, but to a set of beliefs about who we are (and our history) that is, I'd argue, not only mapped but partly shaped by fiction.

In his book *Narrative Truth and Historical Truth*, psychoanalyst Donald P. Spence suggests that there are two types of truth: the truth of what happened (which may ultimately be inaccessible) and a truth that coheres for human understanding. In psychoanalysis, Spence points out, a narrative truth – a construction of events that coheres – can become "a new reality" that is a significant part of reaching a resolution of events or a "psychoanalytic cure".<sup>257</sup> The "truth" fiction writers discuss is this kind of truth.

In speaking about his own work, Kim Scott has, like Wright, frequently offered a different definition of "truth" – one that speaks to the historical record and our relationship with it. When he says "I was so bold to say about one of my novels that I was trying to be more true than the truth – the historical truth – available to me" he is

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<sup>254</sup> Wright, 2006, p. 155.

<sup>255</sup> Wright, 2006, p. 231.

<sup>256</sup> Bradley, 2016, p. 74.

<sup>257</sup> Spence, 1982, pp. 27-28, 31.

pointing not only to how historiography cannot access the whole truth, which cannot be found in any archive, but how fiction tries to provide a coherent story.<sup>258</sup>

When Scott juxtaposes the real archival reports on child removal with his characters' love for their children in *Benang*, he is offering access to a human truth about how people feel under those circumstances. Working as an historian, he could not endow those characters with emotions not revealed in the archives: that work requires the latitude of fiction.

Sarah Pinto writes that the place of emotion in the depiction of Australian history – how we feel about our past – has been under-studied, and that fiction (both written and filmic) has a constructive role in negotiating the use of emotions such as loss, grief, guilt, hope and love as they relate to the way we talk about history.<sup>259</sup>

Mark McKenna, in a lecture ostensibly defending history against fiction's truth-claims, said: that "fiction's truth is the truth of the human condition," but:

(h)istory's truth is the chance to understand human experience as it can never be lived, from above and from afar, looking back, understanding the human condition because we are not there, because we are not surrounded by the fog or immediacy of experience.<sup>260</sup>

Novelists are deeply concerned with the "immediacy of experience" and McKenna has here pointed to a kind of truth that is found in historical fiction. The "truth of the human condition" is not necessarily limited to fiction, but it is always a central concern of the novel, and is always a question for Scott's characters and for Wright's. When Wright writes that a character "carried the tide in his body" she is describing a way of being in general as experienced by her Indigenous informants; to question whether that character really existed is to miss the point.

Where McKenna sees "fog" in the sympathetic possibilities of fiction, novelists like Grenville, Wright and Scott find allegory and a way of creating a discourse that encompasses the unknowns and uncertainties of the past. Grenville's conventional yet highly effective technique of using detail and empathy to show a fictionalised version of historical events through a particular protagonist's eyes offers a different kind of understanding to that which is possible through analysis of the archives, however personal and subjective they may be.

As a science, history, even after the "linguistic turn" of White and his cohort, is unable to fully embrace ambiguity and uncertainty the way fiction can – and this, as much as any of the techniques discussed above, is what fiction can offer us in dealing with history, which despite the demands of historiography, is, "in truth" never going to be fully fixed.

In the introduction to this essay, I mentioned Bernard Smith's concept of a cultural, artistic history of the conscience of Australia in relation to Indigenous people.<sup>261</sup>

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<sup>258</sup> Leadbetter et al., 2010, p. 53.

<sup>259</sup> Pinto, 2007, p. 312.

<sup>260</sup> McKenna, 2005.

<sup>261</sup> Smith, 1980.

Since Smith's lectures in 1980, the writers discussed in this essay have contributed to the history of conscience he imagined. Their books tell a subjective truth that puts the frontier and its aftermath at the centre of that conscience, and often put the Indigenous perspective on events at the centre of the way we think about history. This work has been partly made necessary by the lack of historical material – that is, providing a fictional supplement to the archives and speaking back to them – but it also exists in its own right as a part of our shared convergent culture, in which storytelling in the form of fiction is part of what Smith predicted would be “a fruitful convergence.”

### **Section One conclusion:**

The recent Australian historical fiction examined in this thesis is concerned with stories about our past and how they can address the issues the past has handed down to us. Historian Mark McKenna has labelled this writing “reconciliation literature” – and the proposition that work of reconciliation or Makarrata, insofar as historical fiction is uniquely placed to advance it, is one subject of this essay.<sup>262</sup> But these works of fiction are also, particularly in Scott's case, a direct challenge to the underlying structures and discourse inherent in colonisation, as made visible in the structure and content of the archives on which history relies and in the narrative forms chosen by traditional historical storytelling.

For McKenna, it is important that history should prevail as the chosen mode of telling history because: “[u]nlike fiction, history is more threatening politically because it can't be pushed behind the curtain of invention or make-believe”.<sup>263</sup> However, the popularity and cultural recognition of books such as *The Secret River* and *Benang* suggests historical fiction can bring these stories to a wide readership.

Subjectivity – the experience of being an individual operating in a wider world – has been shown here to be a constructive way of investigating history. Voice and point of view, both strengths of fictional versions of history, are key to the sense of subjectivity. Grenville's William Thornhill invites empathy and sympathy through the rich fictional details throughout the book, leading readers to identify with him, and so subsequently identify with his internal struggles over his “ownership” of the land.

In this essay, I've analysed how texts written by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous “readers” of history may engage with not only the past, but with how we come to know the past. These texts are equally concerned with history and with the present – with forming an understanding of history and its effect that offers, if not full resolution (which may be impossible for both history and for fiction), at least a more honest and empathetic state of understanding. Linda Hutcheon wrote of postmodern reforms of knowledge that: “Postmodernism is careful not to make the marginal into a new centre ...”<sup>264</sup>

By unsettling the narratives of history and most importantly by offering a new, if fluid, way of thinking about how we got to where we are, the books under examination and the rest in their “constellation” can free readers up to consider new possibilities for

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<sup>262</sup> McKenna, 2018, p. 29.

<sup>263</sup> McKenna, 2005, p. 7.

<sup>264</sup> Hutcheon, 1998, p. 12.

the future. Fiction can hone the questions raised by history, as when Grenville imagines the encounters between Dawes and Patyegarang, or reshapes what she found in the archives to tell a story that re-enacts the underlying issues experienced during early colonisation. Fiction can question the very basis of history, as in *Benang*'s repositioning of the archives as only one, flawed, version of what happened, and in Flanagan writing of an archive that is "wrong in every detail" in *Gould's Book of Fish*.<sup>265</sup> It can create, instead of scientific detachment, intimacy and empathy with past figures, increasing our interest in them as when, in *Benang*, on a ship leaving his ancestral home, "Bobby Wabalanginy felt very alone."<sup>266</sup> Whether the reader carries the lessons and insights from the fiction across to life is another question, but I would support Bernard Smith's argument that artistic and cultural interventions can circumvent the dispassionate stance of historiography.

Flanagan's "full arsenal" is powerful, and unique to fiction.<sup>267</sup> Historical events raise issues still relevant for us today – in this essay I've discussed the question of where settler Australians stand in relation to the original inhabitants of the land, and how Indigenous Australians see themselves, but other historical events can and are written about in similar ways. Historiography is a searching after the truth of what happened, so we can assess events according to whatever moral framework we decide to apply. Historical fiction is another kind of thinking tool with different approaches to those of history, one that is not limited by the archive, as Scott's supplementations, interrogations and juxtapositions and Grenville's inventions, choices and confections show.

Meera Atkinson, writing on *Carpentaria*, found the novel to articulate "transgenerational trauma" – that is, the trauma passed down from history. She makes an essential point about historical fiction dealing with this kind of history: that it is recent enough to still be having felt effects: "(In *Carpentaria*) the past is not only manifest in the present; it is even more real than it was in its initial occurrence."<sup>268</sup> That past is one of extreme trauma and dispossession of every kind, yet Atkinson also quotes this passage from the novel:

"Luckily, the ghosts in the memories of the old folk were listening, and said anyone can find hope in the stories: the big stories and the little ones in between."<sup>269 270</sup>

The historical fiction discussed in this essay is based on the past, but it is written for contemporary readers, and as such forms a way to relate to events that continue to be problematic. It makes available for discussion "the big stories and the little ones in between." The "history wars" discussed above were part of a process of national self-examination; historical fiction is, as I've shown, another aspect of that process and one with its own methods, varying between writers from experimental and postmodern to

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<sup>265</sup> Flanagan, 2001, p. 313.

<sup>266</sup> Heise, 1997, p. 74.

<sup>267</sup> Flanagan, 2011, p. 173

<sup>268</sup> Atkinson, 2015.

<sup>269</sup> Atkinson, 2015.

<sup>270</sup> Wright, 2006, p. 12.

narratives that are temporally linear and appear to hew to the tropes of historiography, but are always in their intent and effects distinct from the scientific approach of history.

In coming to terms with our history, both historical facts *and* stories – including fictional ones – that make sense of history are needed. Returning to the historiographer Louis H. Mink, who prioritised the understanding of historical events over any attempt to fit them into a set of scientific laws: “(Narratives) are not imperfect substitutes for more sophisticated forms of explanation and understanding ... stories are not lived but told.”<sup>271</sup>

Kim Scott has frequently suggested that stories, and specifically Indigenous stories, are the way to anchor what he calls “a shimmering nation state” to the land.<sup>272</sup> By this, I understand him to be suggesting that the idea of a nation is in itself, in part, a story. What constitutes “Australia” or any other nation is not only its written constitution, but the relationship of its people to the events present *and* past that have occurred on its country. Larissa Behrendt notes that “the law tells our story as much as historians, prime ministers and novelists do” – suggesting that all sides contribute to “our” story.<sup>273</sup> That being so, the stories we tell ourselves through fiction (but not of course exclusively so) are more than “myths”; they have real effects in how we go forward.

The fictional stories discussed here offer effective, questioning, inclusive and unsettling ways to come to new understandings of our past. My analysis suggests it’s possible to look beyond their status as historiographical documents and to see them as interpretations, cultural critiques and as guides to efforts at understanding and resolving Australia’s troubled history. In this, they are not “historical fiction” but windows into our present situation, insofar as it was created by the events of the frontier. Behrendt hopes that “changed values and approaches and new narratives should all work towards more fundamental changes in policies, laws and structures.”<sup>274</sup> If Australia is to reach what the Uluru statement called “makarrata”, such insights may be essential.

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<sup>271</sup> Mink, 1970, p. 557.

<sup>272</sup> Brewster, 2012, and Scott, 2017.

<sup>273</sup> Behrendt, 2016, p. 190.

<sup>274</sup> Behrendt, 2016, p. 200.

## **Part Two: Reflective essay**

### **Introduction**

In this part of my thesis, I will write about three distinct but closely related subjects: what I know about Edward Oxford, how I came to know it, and how I chose to retell it. The ‘what I know’ is Oxford’s biography; the “how I know it” is my process of primary research and the archival holdings where I did that work. The “how I chose to retell it” is an exposition of the process of creating the fictional part of this thesis. That “how” was informed by both the research itself and by considerations discussed partly in the critical essay and further expanded on below. The fiction (part three) constitutes my applied investigation into the writing of Australian historical fiction; chapter three of this part examines what I found during that investigation.

Because I wish to separate the life story from the archival work, the first chapter of this section is a straightforward retelling of Oxford’s life, (*A Life of Edward Oxford*) footnoted but without internal references to the source of the material except where pertinent to the story itself (for instance when the material is part of a significant correspondence.) The biography is written this way for two reasons. First, as it is the history on which my fiction is based, I want to offer readers of this thesis the opportunity to understand the history, put as plainly as possible, without the usual historiographical caveats about sources and research methods. Those will be explored in the “how I know it” chapter (*Researching Edward Oxford*), and form a discussion of archives and methods in their own right. This approach also allows for a conventional linear account, which will be contrasted with the way the fiction approaches the material. In that chapter I will also explore how the research work prompted and guided the writing of the fiction.

Constraints of word length mean that the extract provided from the novel does not include the “third act” of Oxford’s life, i.e. his life in Australia; however, as I’ll discuss below, that third act and indeed a “sense of an ending” must be known, by the writer at least, for the first and second “acts” to make effective fiction. By offering a compressed account of Oxford’s life, I hope to supplement the partial nature of the fictional extract included here – to offer the reader some of the closure that would come from reading a complete novel.

The “how I chose to tell it” chapter (*Writing Edward Oxford*) below is the closest section this thesis contains to a traditional exegesis – it will further explore the fiction’s relationship with the history and with the archives, and the narrative, ethical and other decisions I made in the writing of the novel. These decisions were informed by the issues discussed in my critical essay, and I give several examples of those decisions with reference to the novel extract.

## **Chapter One: A Life of Edward Oxford: what I know.**

Edward Oxford's parents, Hannah Marklew and George Oxford, first met in the Hope and Anchor tavern in Birmingham. The tavern, on Caroline Street in an area dense with similar establishments, was run by Hannah's parents. Both were aged around 19 or 20 at the time of their meeting in late 1817. George Oxford was already a skilled gold chaser, employed in the busy jewellery quarter a short walk from the Hope and Anchor.<sup>275</sup>

George Oxford soon proposed marriage, but Hannah refused him several times. Each time, he threatened to harm himself if she did not accept; he threatened to cut his own throat and to "blow his brains out before my face", Hannah reported. That last threat induced her to agree to the marriage. In April 1818, the Marklew family received a bad report on George from a former employer of his and attempted to call the marriage off. According to Hannah, he then "went into a violent rage, pulled out a roll of Bank-notes and the (marriage) licence and burnt the notes."<sup>276</sup>

The couple were married on April 28, 1818 and their first child was born soon afterwards. George Oxford's erratic behaviour worsened. He was verbally and physically abusive – "dreadful, brutal," she said, and did not provide enough money to buy sufficient food for the family. During this period Hannah often fainted from lack of food, and became scarred when George threw a broken jug at her.

George Oxford himself had been abused as a child. His father was a seaman who was imprisoned for crimes and committed to insane asylums at various points of his life. He was known to smash up the contents of his house, and, according to a relative, to "behave very indecently in the street."<sup>277</sup> George Oxford drank heavily and intermittently abandoned his young family. His own father had exhibited similar behaviour.<sup>278</sup>

When Hannah was pregnant with her second child, George's abuse included making "monkey faces" at her, and when the child was born "a confirmed idiot", incapable of walking or learning to talk, she blamed that on George's monkey faces. Hannah continued to breastfeed the "idiot child" (whose name and sex is not recorded) while she was pregnant with Edward Oxford, and for some time afterwards until the child died at about two and half. During her pregnancy with Edward, George hit Hannah in the head with a drinking pot, pointed a loaded gun at her and stabbed her in the breast.

The marriage lasted 11 years, producing seven children, until George's death, although there were frequent separations; during one separation, when George was visiting Edward and his siblings, he drank laudanum in an apparent suicide attempt witnessed by children.<sup>279</sup>

George Oxford died in June 1829. From before this date and frequently afterwards, his mother reported, Edward was a difficult and moody child prone to violence. He would smash and break whatever was to hand; he was "very fond of fire-

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<sup>275</sup> Old Bailey Online, (Hannah Oxford).

<sup>276</sup> Old Bailey Online, (Hannah Oxford).

<sup>277</sup> Old Bailey Online, (Sarah Kitchen).

<sup>278</sup> Old Bailey Online, (Sophia Bartlett).

<sup>279</sup> Old Bailey Online, (Charles Marklew).

arms” and burned his face severely with a home-made “cannon” at the age of 10. At other times he would appear affectionate, but his mood would change quickly if he was frustrated in anything. Two of his younger sisters died within two years of their father’s death. While Hannah Oxford worked in shops and domestic service, Edward either lived with her or with distant relatives or in de facto boarding schools, but there were always complaints of “inattention and wildness” in Edward, and the places didn’t last long.<sup>280</sup> From the age of about 14, Edward entered full employment, moving between “live-in” jobs and his mother’s homes.<sup>281 282</sup>

His behaviour became more aggressive; he pointed a gun at a young female neighbour (who calmly brushed it off), frightened the pregnant occupant of a carriage (who called the police) and was convicted of assault after bashing an opponent with a screwdriver in a bar-yard fight.<sup>283</sup>

In January 1840 he took a job at the Hog in Pound pub in Oxford Street, London, where he worked as a barman and “pot boy” for 20 pounds a year, although he only lasted in the job until early May. On losing the job, he went to live with his mother and sister in West-Square, London; within weeks he assaulted his mother and shortly afterwards she went to Birmingham to visit family.

Since May the previous year Oxford had been working in secret on a fantasy: a clandestine society called Young England. The society employed code-names, special outfits and had contingency plans for being discovered by the authorities.<sup>284</sup> He also took a special interest in the movements of the Queen and her new husband, Prince Alfred.

After his mother left for Birmingham, he went to a shop in Blackfriars Road, where he bought two guns and a powder-flask.<sup>285</sup> They were “very handsome pistols ornamented with carved stocks, and silver about them.”<sup>286</sup> He started to see more of a childhood friend named John Linton. Oxford and Linton went to a shooting gallery one day, where Edward fired six shots and “missed the bulls eye every time,” Linton said. Edward claimed he’d been loaned the pistols, but didn’t say by whom. During these weeks, “he seemed very absent,” his friend said. His behaviour deteriorated further, shooting the guns out of the windows of his home and attacking the landlady.

Wednesday, June 10, 1840 was the eleventh anniversary of George Oxford’s death. That afternoon, Edward Oxford took his guns and walked to Green Park, just north of Buckingham Palace, a short distance from his home across the Thames.

A crowd was forming, as it often did when the Queen was expected to drive out. Victoria had been Queen for just under three years. Oxford joined the crowd; he had turned 18 that April, and was a small man, about five and a half feet tall, with fair skin, grey eyes and reddish hair. He was wearing a suit he’d been given by a family member to wear to a funeral.<sup>287</sup>

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<sup>280</sup> Old Bailey Online, (Hannah Oxford).

<sup>281</sup> Old Bailey Online, (Hannah Oxford).

<sup>282</sup> Old Bailey Online, (Benjamin Walters).

<sup>283</sup> *Times of London*, June 17, 1840, p. 6.

<sup>284</sup> Old Bailey Online, “Young England” evidence.

<sup>285</sup> Old Bailey Online, (Frederick Garrett and William Hayes).

<sup>286</sup> Old Bailey Online, (John Linton).

<sup>287</sup> Berkshire Records Office, BRO D/H14/D1/4/1.

Just after six pm, the Queen and Prince Albert came out of the Palace gates in a low, open carriage. As the carriage moved slowly out of the first group of people beside the road, Oxford kept pace with it, to the right of the carriage.<sup>288</sup> The carriage drew level with him, and he nodded briefly towards it. Then he drew his right hand out of his left breast pocket, holding a pistol, and fired in the direction of the carriage, producing smoke and a flash of light.<sup>289 290</sup> Oxford then drew out his left hand and fired a second pistol as the carriage drove on.

In the melee that followed, several other people were briefly mistaken for the gunman. Then Oxford cried out words to the effect of “It was me that did it”, “I did it,” or “It was I”.<sup>291</sup> Police seized him; he was taken to a station nearby and questioned, then various officials and members of the aristocracy came to see him. He asked the Earl of Uxbridge if the Queen was hurt and the Earl replied: “How dare you ask such a question?”<sup>292</sup> He was immediately charged with “maliciously and unlawfully discharging two pistols at the Queen and Prince Albert.” A charge of high treason would be added later.<sup>293</sup>

His rooms were searched; police found a box containing the rules of “Young England” and some of the paraphernalia he’d collected, including a sword and several disguises. Meanwhile, word of the shooting attempt spread across London; handbills were posted and a crowd descended on the scene, potentially contaminating the evidence and hindering the police search for bullets.

On June 11, Oxford was interrogated again at the Home Office in Whitehall, narrowly evading a large crowd outside. Among the officials who questioned him were the full membership of the Privy Council, who stayed for several hours. Various witnesses also came to be interviewed, and reports were that Oxford himself was calm: he showed “perfect self-possession, and an air of consequence and satisfaction, as if he felt pleased to find himself an object of so much interest.”<sup>294</sup> Oxford did not confess to trying to kill the queen, although he admitted to firing a pistol. He even appeared amused by the fuss: “None of them knew it was I that did it until I declared that I was the man, upon which two of them seized me by the collar, two more kept pulling at the skirts of my coat, and one of them grabbed me behind, which was quite unnecessary, as I had no intention to run away,” he told a visitor.<sup>295</sup> At the end of the day, he was sent to Newgate Prison.<sup>296</sup>

Between the shooting and the beginning of the trial a month later, England’s newspapers and population generally pored over every detail of the incident, including Oxford’s background and the possible implications. The possibility that it was part of a conspiracy was quickly raised.

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<sup>288</sup> *Times of London*, 11 June 1840.

<sup>289</sup> Old Bailey Online, (Samuel Perks).

<sup>290</sup> Old Bailey Online, (Elizabeth Stokeley).

<sup>291</sup> Old Bailey Online, MEPO evidence.

<sup>292</sup> The National Archives (UK): PRO MEPO 3/17.

<sup>293</sup> Old Bailey Online, charge sheet.

<sup>294</sup> *Times of London*, June 12, 1840, p. 6.

<sup>295</sup> *Times of London*, June 12, 1840, p. 6.

<sup>296</sup> *Times of London*, June 12, 1840, p. 6.

Meanwhile, Oxford's family mobilised to save him from the death penalty. High treason carried a penalty of being hung, drawn and quartered. Hannah Oxford had immediately returned from Birmingham and was reported as being distraught. She told one newspaper she was sure "that the whole was a mere boyish frolic"<sup>297</sup> and was described as being "dreadfully affected."<sup>298</sup>

On June 12 she tried to see her son, but was barred from the prison.<sup>299</sup> By the time Oxford's family secured a lawyer (he had wanted to represent himself), it was only five days before the trial date of June 22. In court the lawyer, Sidney Taylor, asked for more time: witnesses, particularly those to attest to Oxford's character, had yet to be gathered and it was the first time such a case had been tried. A court reporter wrote that Oxford "with difficulty restrained his propensity to laughter when he looked around the crowded court, and found himself the object of so much interest and attention."<sup>300</sup> The *Times* reported that Oxford said afterwards to his lawyer: "Nothing else will be talked of but me for a long time! What a great character I shall be!"<sup>301</sup>

The trial proper commenced in the Central Criminal Court of the Old Bailey at Newgate on July 9, 1840, and lasted two days before a jury. Oxford's lawyer suggested in the *Times* that it was almost impossible for his client to get a fair trial: "The public mind...is very much influenced against the said prisoner, as many reports have been printed and published perfectly untrue, and that the terms 'assassin' and 'traitor' have in various prints been applied to him."<sup>302</sup>

The prosecution's initial address, by Attorney-General John Campbell, consisted of a simple description of Oxford, the events of June 10 and an allegation that Oxford had intended to "take the life of the Sovereign". While the trappings of Young England were mentioned, they were not discussed further. Campbell also mentioned the possibility of an insanity defence, but claimed there was no evidence of Oxford's being of unsound mind.<sup>303</sup>

The only statement by Oxford himself was the one he'd signed after the Privy Council examined him:

A great many witnesses against me - some say I shot with my left, others with my right - they vary as to the distance - after I fired the first pistol, Prince Albert got up as if he would jump out of the coach, and sat down again, as if he thought better of it - then I fired the second pistol - this is all I shall Say at present -  
(Signed) EDWARD OXFORD.<sup>304</sup>

Once various attention-seekers had been winnowed out, most of the accounts by credible witnesses were consistent. The court heard no suggestion that Oxford had not been there,

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<sup>297</sup> *Times of London*, June 13, 1840, p. 6.

<sup>298</sup> *Times of London*, June 13, 1840, p. 6.

<sup>299</sup> *Times of London*, June 13, 1840, p. 6.

<sup>300</sup> *Times of London*, June 23, 1840, p. 6.

<sup>301</sup> *Times of London*, July 8, 1840, p. 7.

<sup>302</sup> *Times of London*, June 23, 1840, p. 6.

<sup>303</sup> Old Bailey Online.

<sup>304</sup> Old Bailey Online, (Fox Maule).

or even that he had not shot the guns. Instead, Taylor tried to cast doubt on whether the guns were loaded – if they were not loaded, Oxford might not have been actually trying to kill the queen – and also to establish that Oxford was insane. The question of the guns being loaded was difficult to resolve. The police had been hindered by the crowds who contaminated the crime scene, and despite extremely thorough searches, no bullets were ever found, apart from one handed in by a member of public that was not mentioned in evidence.<sup>305</sup>

“Young England” had been the subject of speculation in the press – the idea that a barely grown bar worker like Oxford could have almost killed the queen seeming unlikely to some – and the rules and Oxford’s collection of dress-ups were entered in evidence, but the idea of a conspiracy was not only clearly spurious, but politically unwelcome. In the north, the Chartists were making demands for general (male) franchise and other democratic reforms; Victoria herself had experienced a dip in popularity due to some internal court events.<sup>306</sup>

Both sides, however, seemed willing to have Oxford found insane. At the time, the insanity defence was still emerging in British law. In 1800 a man named James Hadfield had been sent to the Bethlem Royal Hospital (usually referred to as “Bedlam”) after shooting at King George III while deluded. There were questions about whether Hadfield’s fate had been legal; to clear up doubt the Criminal Lunatics Act of 1800 was passed, which Taylor in turn used as a defence for Oxford.<sup>307</sup> Taylor brought evidence from a large number of family members and people who had known the family over a long time. The behaviour of Oxford’s father George and grandfather John were investigated, in line with beliefs at the time about insanity being hereditary. Oxford’s past violence and strange behaviour were laid out in great detail.

The longest and most dramatic evidence came from Hannah Oxford. The transcript of her testimony runs to 4000 words and she would have spent hours on the stand.<sup>308</sup> She described not only George Oxford’s violence and disordered behaviour, but attested to Edward Oxford’s uncontrollable, impulsive and irrational behaviour since he was a small child. Hannah also denied that Edward’s great-grandfather had been black, as rumoured in the press. In fact, George Oxford senior (John’s father) was a black man who had come to England as a servant, possibly a freed slave, and set up as a shopkeeper in a country town in the late 1700s.<sup>309</sup>

Medical doctors who specialised in insanity gave evidence, along with Oxford’s family doctor. One of the former, Dr Thomas Hodgkin, agreed with a defence lawyer that to shoot at the Queen in broad daylight and not to try to escape could be in itself evidence of insanity. Hodgkin’s evidence was that “eccentric” people like Oxford could have sudden attacks of insanity proper; he called it a “lesion of the will” and told the court: “I

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<sup>305</sup> Old Bailey Online, (Thomas Vinn). It’s possible this bullet was simply the wrong size for the gun and so not relevant.

<sup>306</sup> Thomson, 1950, pp. 53-84.

<sup>307</sup> Brodsky, undated.

<sup>308</sup> Old Bailey Online, (Hannah Oxford).

<sup>309</sup> Charles, 2012, p. 11.

think that, committing a crime without any apparent motive, is an indication of insanity.”<sup>310</sup>

A Dr John Connolly, the physician at Hanwell Lunatic Asylum, had spent half an hour with Oxford. Connolly was in charge of 850 inmates and considered a leading light in the medicine of insanity. His notes on Oxford read, in part:

An occasional appearance of acuteness, but a total inability to reason - a singular insensibility as regards the affections - an apparent incapacity to comprehend moral obligations, to distinguish right from wrong - an absolute insensibility to the heinousness of his offence, and to the peril of his situation - a total indifference to the issue of the trial; acquittal will give him no particular pleasure, and he seems unable to comprehend the alternative of his condemnation and execution; his offence, like that of other imbeciles who set fire to buildings, &c, without motive, except a vague pleasure in mischief - appears unable to conceive any thing of future responsibility.<sup>311</sup>

Connolly’s conclusion was that Oxford was insane and therefore not responsible for his actions; other doctors concurred and Oxford’s own family doctor gave an opinion that the young man was an imbecile.<sup>312</sup> Only one doctor disagreed, suggesting that Oxford was just “a weak vain man very fond of applause,” implying that Oxford had staged his attack purely for attention.<sup>313</sup>

At the end of the second day, after some negotiation with the jury, Oxford<sup>314</sup> was found not guilty of treason on the grounds of insanity, and ordered to be detained at Her Majesty’s pleasure.<sup>315</sup>

Within days he was taken to Bethlem Hospital for indefinite incarceration. The hospital had a long and colourful history – it had only been a few years since the public could pay to stare at the inmates - and as a government-run asylum was under less outside scrutiny than the various private asylums then common in England.<sup>316</sup> Oxford was one of 250 patients, but the criminally insane inmates were kept in a separate ward. Criminal inmates were severely restricted in their movements, denied visitors and even correspondence with family members.<sup>317</sup>

In 1843 a reporter from the *Times* met Oxford and reported:

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<sup>310</sup> Old Bailey Online, (Hodgkin).

<sup>311</sup> Old Bailey Online, (Connolly).

<sup>312</sup> Old Bailey Online, (James Fernandez Clarke).

<sup>313</sup> The National Archives, TNA TS 11/10.

<sup>314</sup> A first ‘verdict’ had been that the guns were fired but not loaded, which could have been read as not reaching the level required for treason; the jury was sent back to reconsider and came back with ‘guilty, being at the time insane’ which the court amended to not guilty by reason of insanity.’ (TNA TS 11/10).

<sup>315</sup> TNA TS 11/10, pp. 368-369.

<sup>316</sup> Andrews et al., 1997.

<sup>317</sup> Gale, Colin, 2011 correspondence.

He who has visited a receptacle for the insane will speedily observe the strange state and appearance of the eyes of those whose intellects are unhinged...of (all the inmates) only one showed not the least, not the most remote symptoms of insanity. This one individual was Edward Oxford.<sup>318</sup>

Oxford told the newspaper that he was learning French and would like to practice it more, that he hoped to one day be released, and showed the reporter his drawings. He was described as “modest, civil and unassuming”.<sup>319</sup>

From the point when he entered Bethlem, the erratic behaviour previously described by those who knew Oxford apparently ceased. No Bethlem records or other public records suggest any violence or disturbance in his manner. Whether Oxford had experienced temporary insanity, perhaps a delusion that Young England was a real group, or had simply been what he later called himself – a “foolish boy” gripped by some urge to make himself notorious is hard to know, but whatever the cause, he appeared to be free of it thereafter.<sup>320</sup>

Bethlem was slowly reforming, but the biggest change came in 1852 with the appointment of a new Resident Physician-Superintendent, Dr William Charles Hood.<sup>321</sup> Hood dramatically reduced the use of physical restraints and encouraged social activities amongst inmates; he allowed festive foodstuffs and birds as pets. His methods were to work with the patients in an effort to help them change. Nevertheless, the 100 or so criminal patients Oxford lived among were “powerful, daring and dangerous criminals” Hood wrote, when asking the Lunacy Commissioners for more resources.<sup>322</sup>

Records on Oxford himself began in 1854, 14 years after he entered the asylum. They were not extensive, but the first entry described a man who had “conducted himself with great propriety at all times, make himself useful whenever an opportunity occurred and devoting all his leisure time to instructive reading and study.”<sup>323</sup> Oxford had learned French, German and Italian, as well as studying Spanish, Latin and Greek, learning the violin, knitting, playing ball games and chess and working as a painter around the hospital. The record went on: “With regard to his Crime he now laments the act which probably originated in a feeling of excessive vanity and a desire to become notorious if he could not be celebrated.”<sup>324</sup>

Hood also appointed a new steward of the hospital (responsible for facilities and similar matters), George Henry Haydon. Haydon was to become a key figure in Oxford’s life. Born in England the same year as Oxford and trained as an architect, Haydon was newly returned from the colony of Port Phillip, Australia, where he had travelled with the Protector of Aborigines, lived alone on remote French Island and helped create stock

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<sup>318</sup> Times of London, February 28, 1843, p. 6.

<sup>319</sup> Times of London, February 28, 1843, p. 6.

<sup>320</sup> Freeman, John, letters February 8, 1889.

<sup>321</sup> Andrews et al., 1997. p. 484.

<sup>322</sup> Andrews et al., 1997. p. 502.

<sup>323</sup> BRO D/H14/D1/4/1.

<sup>324</sup> BRO D/H14/D1/4/1.

routes. After five years, Haydon returned to England and wrote two books about the colony, as well as giving talks to potential emigrants.<sup>325</sup>

On arriving at Bethlem, Haydon became familiar with Oxford in a way that Oxford afterwards considered to have been a friendship.<sup>326</sup> Haydon addressed the inmates on the subject of Port Phillip and Oxford received a copy of one of Haydon's books.

Bethlem's records between 1852 and 1864 give little detail of Oxford's life: they generally simply state "no change".<sup>327</sup> Change did come in 1864 with the completion of the Broadmoor Asylum for the criminally insane: all of Bethlem's criminal inmates were moved to the new facility, Oxford being one of the last in April 1864.<sup>328</sup>



Oxford in Bethlem, 1850s, IMAGE: Bethlem Museum of the Mind: Henry Hering.

As a purpose-built facility, Broadmoor was secure and segregated by level of behaviour; Oxford was kept in Block 2, for the best-behaved inmates, who were allowed to play sport, socialise with each other and work for a small stipend.<sup>329</sup> He was allowed his own room personal possessions, linen and a desk. His hours were strictly regulated and the diet was unvaried – meat, vegetables, tea and pudding - although inmates were

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<sup>325</sup> Haydon, Katherine, 2007.

<sup>326</sup> Freeman, John, letters.

<sup>327</sup> BRO D/H14/D1/4/1

<sup>328</sup> BRO D/H14/A5/1/3.

<sup>329</sup> Stevens, 2011, p. 10.

sometimes served weak beer.<sup>330</sup> In 1865, the *Times* reported that Oxford was “a fat elderly man” who ran a group of painters and was “the most useful, and most trusted of all the inmates of Broadmoor.”<sup>331</sup>

Around this time a quiet bureaucratic campaign for Oxford’s release began. Sir William Hayter, the chair of Broadmoor’s Council of Supervision wrote to the Home Secretary asking that release be considered: “Edward Oxford is of sound mind and from his industry acquirements and ability well capable of earning an honest living for himself.”<sup>332</sup>

Charles Hood of Bethlem and now of Broadmoor’s Council of Supervision added a recommendation for release, suggesting that Oxford would “succeed in the colonies”:

He was under my daily personal observation for ten years, and I had not at any time nor have I now, the slightest doubt of his sanity...I do not remember that he committed one fault...Having watched his case very seriously and repeatedly talked both long and closely with him I lean to his sworn assurance that he never for one moment contemplated taking the life of the Queen or inflicting any injury on Her Majesty.<sup>333</sup>

The appeal failed until a new Home Secretary was appointed in 1867 and requested a report on Oxford’s condition and prospects. A swift response from Hayter included a medical certificate stating that Oxford was sane; officials on both sides then negotiated terms of release including that Oxford would immediately go to the colonies (which one was not specified) and never return.<sup>334</sup>

Melbourne was agreed on as a destination, at Oxford’s own expense and on condition that returning to England would mean life in jail.<sup>335</sup> Being “sent” to the colonies to seek a fortune, redemption or at least to not further embarrass oneself in England was a common fate for young men who were in one kind of trouble or another; Oxford was a little older than most, but the logic of a fresh start in a new place, where there was still a link to England and a chance of contributing to its fortunes, still applied.<sup>336</sup>

George Haydon’s influence can be seen in the choice of destination: Haydon wrote two books about Australia, one fiction and one aimed at prospective emigrants, gave at least one talk on the colonies to inmates at Bethlem, and also acted as a migration

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<sup>330</sup> Stevens, 2011, p. 11

<sup>331</sup> *Times of London*, January 13 1865, p. 10.

<sup>332</sup> Broadmoor Hospital Records: Chairman’s letter book, 1862-1868 (D/H14/A1/2/4/1)

<sup>333</sup> Broadmoor Hospital Records: letter from Charles Hood, October 10 1864 (D/H14/A1/2/4/1).

<sup>334</sup> Broadmoor Hospital records: book of letters from Whitehall, 1861-1868 (D/H14/A1/2/4/1, D/H14/A1/2/5/1).

<sup>335</sup> Supporters may have contributed to the cost of the passage via George Haydon.

<sup>336</sup> Other examples of men ‘sent’ to Australia to better their fortunes include Oxford’s better known literary contemporary Marcus Clarke, and Charles Dicken’s youngest son emigrated at the age of 16.

agent for a time, and Melbourne was the part of Australia best known to him.<sup>337</sup> Oxford's new name was to be John Freeman; there is no apparent reason for the choice of name apart from its literal meaning: free man.<sup>338 339</sup>

On November 27 1867, Freeman, under the escort of an official from Broadmoor, went to Plymouth, where he was allowed to buy some supplies and boarded the *Suffolk* as a steerage passenger, bound for Australia, with about 22 pounds in cash. The ship sailed on December 3. Before he left, Freeman wrote to George Haydon from Broadmoor, saying he accepted the situation – “In leaving England for ever I do what is certainly the best” – and pledging to make the most of his new life.<sup>340</sup>

He wrote one more short emotional letter from Plymouth the night before his departure:

Sir, This is the first independent act of my new existence. Last night for the first time for nearly 28 years I slept, or rather went to bed, with the key of the bedroom door on *my* side. You may fancy my feelings if you like, but you wont be able to feel ... as I then felt. Believe me ever gratefully yours, J.F.<sup>341</sup>

The *Suffolk*, a clipper ship, was a regular vessel on the journey to Australia and back from England. As on most such ships, steerage passengers were responsible for managing and preparing their own food and keeping their quarters clean. Men and single women were segregated, and single men slept in cramped bunk rooms.<sup>342</sup>

On the journey to Australia in 1867-68 the *Suffolk* sailed via the Canary Islands and around the Cape of Good Hope .It crossed the equator between Christmas and New Year. Winds were reported as “moderately favourable”, but the ship was becalmed for several days near Trinidad. The ship passed the Cape on January 24 and for about three weeks made good progress until encountering easterly winds (against its direction of progress) as it came along the south coast of the continent.<sup>343</sup> It reached Melbourne on February 20, 1868.

Of its 100 or so passengers, about 40 were in first-class; most of the steerage passengers were male, aged under 40 and listed in the ship's manifest as merchants or

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<sup>337</sup> Broadmoor Hospital records: book of letters from Whitehall, 1861-1868 (D/H14/A1/2/4/1, D/H14/A1/2/5/1) Letter from Whitehall to Broadmoor, October 18, 1867.

<sup>339</sup> For simplicity I will refer to him as John Freeman for the period when that was the name by which he was known.

<sup>340</sup> Freeman, John, letter to George Haydon, November 25, 1867, NLA MS 243.

<sup>341</sup> Freeman, John, letter to George Haydon, November 25, 1867, NLA MS 243 (In the original, ‘to feel’ is repeated, possibly inadvertently.)

<sup>342</sup> Substantial other information regarding life on this particular ship in the decade either side is available, and used in the fictional account, but the only information on this voyage outside official manifests, a short newspaper report, is the source for the paragraph that follows.

<sup>343</sup> Bendigo Advertiser, February 22, 1868.

farmers. Only one death was recorded, that of an elderly man, apparently of natural causes.<sup>344</sup> “John Freeman” was listed on the arrival records as a merchant.



Oxford around the time of leaving Broadmoor. IMAGE: NLA, photographer unknown.

After arriving, Freeman doesn't appear to be mentioned in any records until 1873. Whether the Australian authorities were aware of his presence is uncertain. Internal Home Office correspondence show that English authorities had decided they couldn't ask the Governor of Victoria to watch Edward Oxford “for he can only watch Oxford through the Police and so thru his Govt. – who cannot be trusted.”<sup>345</sup> Broadmoor's records show

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<sup>344</sup> Public Records Office of Victoria: Unassisted Inward Passenger Lists, Fiche 272/002 and 273/005.

<sup>345</sup> The National Archives (UK): CO 309/84 and CO 309/85 (Home Office Correspondence).

that a letter was ordered to be sent to Melbourne about Oxford, but no such letter is in the files of the Victorian Governor's office, or of the Police Commissioner.<sup>346</sup>

In 1873, however, John Freeman's name appeared in the *Argus* newspaper as a churchwarden of St James' Cathedral.<sup>347</sup> The cathedral was the main centre of the Anglican faith in Melbourne at the time, and still patronised by families who had been amongst the first new arrivals in the colony, such as the family of John Batman and the Hentys, who had set up a homestead in what is now Western Victoria prior to 1835.

In 1868, St James' Cathedral was the main church of the Anglican diocese in Melbourne. Construction on the building had begun in 1839, only four years after European colonisation, replacing an even earlier temporary structure. It was positioned prominently on the corner of Little Collins and William Streets<sup>348 349</sup>.

Freeman's official association with the church appears to have been mainly on the administrative side; his name does not appear in the records of guest sermonisers<sup>350</sup>, but he was very active on church committees of management. In 1881 he was honorary secretary of the vestry, taking care of applications for lay jobs at the church, a position he also held in 1894.<sup>351</sup> In several of the following years he was a churchwarden, receiving thanks for his "efficacy and zeal" in the job.<sup>352 353</sup> In 1887 he represented the cathedral's interest at the Anglican Church's annual assembly, a role he fulfilled at least seven other times.<sup>354</sup>

This work would have brought him respectability in Melbourne society, as well as contact with the upper ranks of the clergy. In 1894, when the Dean of Melbourne and St James', Hussey Burgh Maccartney, died after 42 years in the position, Freeman was one of his pallbearers. On the social side, the church ran regular bazaars, outings and other events at which Freeman would have had the opportunity to make contacts and meet respectable people.

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<sup>346</sup> Victorian Public Records Office, VPRS 1404 (1862-72 and 1873-883 Letters of the Secretary of State to the Governor of Victoria); VPRS 1411 (Index to Inwards Correspondence); VPRS 12678/0001, (1856-76 Register of Inwards Correspondence), VPRS 1084/000/6 (1865-68, Letters of the Victorian Governor to the Secretary of State), VPRS 1087/000/21 (Despatches, 1867), VPRS 97/0002 (Inwards Correspondence). VPRS 937/P000/128, 201, 134, 135, 289 (Inward registered correspondence for the Chief Commissioner and Chief Secretary of Police 1866-1870.); Berkshire Records Office, D/H14/D2/2/1/96/1-16. None of these files contain the letter referred to.

<sup>347</sup> The *Argus*, December 22, 1873, p. 4.

<sup>348</sup> National Trust of Australia.

<sup>349</sup> The building's current location is on King Street. It was moved in 1913.

<sup>350</sup> St James' Old Cathedral archives. Sermon books held in archives of St James' Old Cathedral, 1868-1900.

<sup>351</sup> The *Argus*, October 12, 1894, p 5.

<sup>352</sup> Freeman may have served in other years; these are the years for which I have found records or reports.

<sup>353</sup> The *Argus*, 31 January, 1885.

<sup>354</sup> Church of England Messenger and Church of England Messenger Yearbooks: 1873, 1883, 1885, 1889, 1890, 1891 and 1895.

In 1874 his name also appeared in the *Argus* as a member of the West Melbourne Mutual Improvement Society. The society was one of many such organisations in Melbourne at the time. It was a group of men, and occasionally women, who met regularly to discuss “improving” topics of morals and social order. Both the society and the church would have been vehicles for Oxford to improve and consolidate his standing in Melbourne.

In these two institutions that he attached himself to, it is possible to discern a thread of conscious “self-improvement” and commitment to raising his status in Melbourne society. The areas in which he worked (outside making a living as a painter) were generally socially progressive and charitable; these could be read as self-advancement, but also as a genuine commitment to “making good” and contributing to a society he thought of as part of the British Empire. That commitment was made clear in a letter to Haydon when he left England:

Whatever has occurred in the past, in the future no man shall say I am unworthy of the name of an englishman ... (I) will do as much in my humble fashion to support the character as anyone of those who have been more happily situated.<sup>355</sup>

The West Melbourne Mutual Improvement Society was linked to St James’ Cathedral through common membership and the Reverend Canon Beecher, of St James’ Cathedral was chairman of the society at one point.<sup>356</sup> The society was active from about 1871 to 1881. Freeman’s membership stretched from at least 1874 to 1877, and in 1875 and 1877 he was vice-president, as well as sometimes chairing the fortnightly meetings.<sup>357</sup> The meetings’ format appears to have been one of a formal lecture followed by discussion intended to be disseminated further via newspapers.

According to one report, the “tenets” of the society were “quite secular”<sup>358</sup>. The range of subjects discussed at meetings appears to support that. Most lectures were on topics such as the bad influence of Chinese lotteries on the youth of the city (1875), “Poets and Poetry” (1876) and, in 1876, two lectures on “Humbug” and “Shams”. The society’s topics give a sense of what was considered to be “improvement” at the time: talks were given on Shakespeare, but also at other points on “grumbling, indifference, equivocation, pride and toadyism,” “ambition”, and “courtship and marriage”.<sup>359</sup>

There is no doubt that the society would have aided Freeman’s efforts at self-improvement, offering lessons in self-education as well as in shaping the world for the better. Its social aims were expressed in papers on “Australia Past and Present”, education and on England’s foreign policy, but it also touched on many personal topics,

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<sup>355</sup> NLA MS243, letter Asylum to Henry Haydon, 25 November 1867.

<sup>356</sup> For example one G.T. Kingsland went to the Anglican assembly as a representative in 1890 and was also a regular at the Society: Church of England Messenger, July 4, 1890, p. 335.

<sup>357</sup> North Melbourne Advertiser, 27 August 1875, p. 27.

<sup>358</sup> West Melbourne Advertiser, March 12 1886, p. 3.

<sup>359</sup> West Melbourne Advertiser, May 27 1875, p. 1., June 10 1875, February 7 1876 p. 1. Argus, May 13 1873, p. 1.

such as “Ambition” and “Obedience”. In November 1876, Freeman took part in a discussion on the causes and effects of crime, with a special focus on disobedience to paternal authority. Freeman’s own contributions were as chair and deputy chair of meetings on various occasions from 1875, and in 1877 he delivered a paper on “Maternal Love”, as well as an untitled paper in 1876. His membership of the society may have led to direct advantage through closer contact with members of good social standing, and his continued and active membership suggests that he felt he personally was “improving” through his membership and most likely that he was contributing to others’ improvement as well.

It’s unknown what explanations Freeman gave his associates for his history in England; the name “Edward Oxford” was still known by some in association with the attempt on the Queen’s life (exacerbated by several subsequent attempts by others). In one of his letters to Haydon he refers to having met a mutual acquaintance: “I met Mr Robert Ker the other day and we had a chat about yourself,” he wrote to Haydon, as if the meeting wasn’t a threat to his closely guarded secret.<sup>360</sup>

His behaviour didn’t suggest that he was hiding, so much as hiding in plain sight by building up a strong persona as John Freeman. As the 1870s went on, he appeared confident enough to share his opinions through publication, both in the letters pages of newspapers and in articles, culminating in the publication of his first and only book in 1888. His letters appeared under both his own name and the pen-name “Liber”; the articles were also published as “Liber”. The first article appeared in *The Age* on April 5, 1873, and described a night spent in Bourke Street in the city of Melbourne. Four subsequent articles in the *Argus* newspaper over 1874-75 and in *The Age* over the same period purported to describe Melbourne’s street life, generally focussing on the back streets, slums, criminals and institutions for the poor, with a strong moralising streak.<sup>361</sup> Some articles were syndicated to regional newspapers.<sup>362</sup>

Their tone is a mix of descriptive, sensational and moralising, in a similar vein to writers such as Dickens and Sala in London and Marcus Clarke and J.S.James in Melbourne, with the odd classical allusion throw in. In “The Races” (1874), an article about racetrack fraud, he writes:

It is the harvest time of the sharps, and the season when the pigeons yield their feathers more readily than usual ... fast young men, who think it quite ‘the cheese’ to be seen in the company of the knowing ones, whose ‘tips’ they act upon with childish simplicity...<sup>363</sup>

Freeman’s letters to newspapers also demonstrated on a social agenda. His topics included university reform, sensational court cases as they related to “Liber’s” articles and even the price of railway tickets. During the late 1880s and into the 1890s he wrote on church-related topics, such as the fate of the cathedral and funding for a memorial for

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<sup>360</sup> Freeman, John, letter to George Haydon, March 8 1889, NLA MS 243.

<sup>361</sup> Freeman, 1873, 1874, 1875, 1876.

<sup>362</sup> For example see Freeman, *Goulburn Herald and Chronicle*, 1874 and Freeman, *Wagga Wagga Express and Murrumbidgee District Advertiser*, 1874.

<sup>363</sup> Freeman, *The Argus*, July 4 1874 p. 4.

the Dean of the church. In July 1888, Freeman and his new wife signed a public letter urging architect Walter Scott Law to stand for election in the Emerald Hill municipal elections.<sup>364 365</sup>

In the 1880s two significant developments signalled that John Freeman was well established in his new identity; he married and he published a book under his own name with a London publisher.

Freeman's wife, Jane Bowen, nee Tapping, had emigrated to Western Australia as a baby with her extended family. She married a John McKinlay in 1861 while working as a domestic servant, and had a daughter, Jenny. John McKinlay died before 1865 (cause and date unknown) and in 1865 she remarried, to James Bowen, a seaman. After spending some time in India, where a son, James William Bowen, was born in about 1867 or 1868, they arrived in Melbourne in 1870 or 1871, probably without Jane's daughter, who was in Western Australia.<sup>366</sup>

James Bowen senior worked as an accountant and the family lived in the area now known as South Melbourne, until he died in April 1874.<sup>367</sup> In 1880 Jenny McKinlay joined her mother from Western Australia. In 1881, Jane was working as a dressmaker and on March 16, 1881 she and John Freeman were married.<sup>368</sup> It's not known how they met or courted, but they were married by the Rev Michael Beecher in St James' Cathedral, with men from the Emerald Hill (South Melbourne) area as their witnesses. Both parties understated their ages; Jane by one year, John by six. Freeman gave his father's occupation as "jeweller" and his address as Roslyn (Rosslyn) Street in North Melbourne. The couple then moved to Clarendon Street in Emerald Hill and continued to be involved with the church.

In 1883, the Freemans moved to a three-story terrace house in Howe Crescent, Albert Park; one of their immediate neighbours was the mayor of Emerald Hill. The substantial nature of the house and the kind of people who lived in the street suggests that they were doing well both socially and financially; they even advertised for a servant.<sup>369</sup>  
<sup>370</sup> They stayed in the house until 1888, when they moved to their final residence, a rented two-story semi-detached house three doors down at 39 Howe Crescent.<sup>371</sup>

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<sup>364</sup> Freeman, letters, 1874, 1881, 1889, 1894.

<sup>365</sup> Freeman, *Emerald Hill Record* 1881.

<sup>366</sup> Sinclair, 2011, p. 117.

<sup>367</sup> Births Deaths and Marriages (Victoria) April 17 1874, 3917/4664.

<sup>368</sup> Births Deaths and Marriages (Victoria) March 16, 1881, 2624/206.

<sup>369</sup> No other residents are listed at the address in the Sands and MacDougall directory for Melbourne, suggesting it was not a boarding house.

<sup>370</sup> *The Argus*, February 27, 1882, p 1.

<sup>371</sup> The landlord, George Leverett, lived next door in the pair to the house.



Oxford's identity card for the 1880 Royal Exhibition, VPRS.

1888 saw the publication of Freeman's only book, *Lights and Shadows of Melbourne Life*, with the London based publisher Sampson, Low, Marston, Searle and Rivington of Fleet Street.<sup>372</sup> The book was based partly on the articles published in the 1870s, with long sections reprinted verbatim. It also included a large amount of new material, mainly descriptions of various locations such as the zoo, churches and Melbourne's major streets, and of "types" of citizens, such as beggars, costermongers and chimney sweeps. It speaks to an assumed reader who is middle-class and shares the author's stated values of opposing drunkenness, belief in hard work and a horror of the criminal element.

Interest in Melbourne was high amongst British readers at this time; the 1880 Exhibition was being followed by the 1888 Exhibition and a large number of nations had sent delegates to Melbourne, which was experiencing a land boom. In *Lights and Shadows of Melbourne Life* Freeman again uses the slice-of-life style of his earlier articles. Whether from his own impulses or from a sense of theatre, he depicts the streets of Melbourne as hotbeds of crime and sin, contrasted with amusing respectability.

In an early chapter, he invokes the French Revolution and warns of "a dangerous class in our midst, lurking in holes and corners away from the public gaze" – a gaze which he then goes on to provide – telling his respectable readers that they, by allowing slum conditions to exist, "are responsible for half the crime that darkens the page of our every-day life."<sup>373</sup> Later chapters range from the traps that existed in Melbourne's

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<sup>372</sup> Freeman, 1888.

<sup>373</sup> Freeman, 1888, pp. 14-15.

drinking houses to colourful court scenes, and set-piece description of street characters such as pie-sellers and clothesline vendors.

The publication of the book and Freeman's high standing in the church community by the late 1880s and early 1890s seem to have been the peak of his social career. By 1890, when the Melbourne land boom abruptly ceased and a depression began to take effect, Freeman was aged 68.

It's very likely that at this point, after nine years of marriage, Freeman had not told his wife of his past. Around the time *Lights and Shadows of Melbourne Life* was published, he wrote for apparently the first time to his old acquaintance, George Haydon. In the letter he told Haydon that: "Even my wife, the sharer of my joys and sorrows, is no wiser than the rest of the world" with regard to his true identity.<sup>374</sup>

In this and subsequent letters, he described some of his life in Melbourne, the land boom (which was about to bust) and expressed a wish to keep corresponding with Haydon. He mentioned that he had held "several positions of honour" – probably a reference to his work with church – and that he was "rather moved on renewing our old acquaintance" as he had "blotted out the past from my mind". In that, he gives a hint to his own tactics for dealing with his double life; he may have gone into a kind of denial, focussing on his present circumstances exclusively. Haydon responded, but those letters have apparently not been preserved.<sup>375</sup> Haydon died suddenly in 1891, ending the connection.<sup>376</sup>

After this, Oxford's circumstances appeared to suffer several setbacks. During the 1890s, economic difficulties threatened the by-then "old" St James Cathedral (a new cathedral was opened in 1891). Church administrators wanted to sell the run-down building; Freeman fought to save it. He wrote letters to the *Church of England Messenger* appealing for funds in his capacity as churchwarden<sup>377</sup>, and at the 1896 assembly, he spoke up about the financial arrangements between the St James and the diocese. The church closed for a time in 1897, but re-opened less than a year later with the apparent support of the Bishop of Melbourne.<sup>378</sup> Meanwhile, the church was attempting to support a large number of "impecunious" parishioners as well as supporting the Mission To Seaman during a serious recession.<sup>379 380</sup>

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<sup>374</sup> Freeman, NLA, 1889.

<sup>375</sup> In 1953, George Haydon's descendants donated a parcel of letters to the National Library of Australia, with Haydon's notes identifying their author, John Freeman, as Edward Oxford.<sup>375</sup> The letters are one of the main pieces of evidence that Freeman was actually Oxford; another is a pair of photographs of Oxford, one taken in Bethlem (see Museum of the Mind) and another taken of 'John Freeman' for the 1888 Exhibition in Melbourne, where he represented the church. (supplied to author by a descendant of Jane Freeman).

<sup>376</sup> Haydon, Katherine, p. 308.

<sup>377</sup> Church of England Messenger, August 1, 1896, p 109.

<sup>378</sup> Church of England Messenger, February 1, 1897 p 23.

<sup>379</sup> The bishop himself gave the first service in the reopened building. (Church of England Messenger, August 1, 1896, p 109.)

<sup>380</sup> Eg a 'Christmas Tree' charity event on December 23 1897, Church of England Messenger February 1, 1898, p 25.

His step-family also suffered the loss of Jane's daughter Jenny. She had married in 1888, but in August 1890 she died; the couple had no living children.<sup>381</sup> James Bowen Jr, however, was employed as an ironmonger and married in 1891; his wife and a daughter born in July 1892 lived with the Freemans at Howe Crescent for many years.<sup>382</sup>  
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There may also have been financial stresses. In his letters to Haydon, Freeman referred to needing to earn money– he enclosed some stories for possible sale in England, which have also not been preserved – and by 1893 he and his wife had taken in at least one paying lodger, a James Coupar.<sup>384</sup> In 1896, aged 74, Freeman was still describing himself as a working painter in official documents.<sup>385</sup>

Freeman appears to have been active and engaged until almost his death; in 1899 he was again secretary of St James' Old Cathedral as well as its lay representative at the Anglican Church's assembly.<sup>386</sup>

On April 23, 1900, Freeman died at home. The official cause was apoplexy (most likely a heart attack); he was buried in the Melbourne General Cemetery in a plot belonging to Jane's family, where her aunt and her second husband were already interred. The only published death notice came from Freeman's wife, who described him as her "beloved husband".<sup>387</sup> (She also gave his correct age, which suggests he may have come clean about at least some of the lies he told when they were married.) His death notice, headstone and the newspaper notice all read "John Freeman" and there was no indication that Mrs Freeman or any other person in Australia was aware of his true identity.<sup>388</sup>

## **Chapter Two: Researching Edward Oxford: how I know what I know.**

### **Introduction:**

This section will examine the process of writing fiction from historiographical material. It first examines some of the theory around archival material, then lays out the research process I underwent and how my use of the material changed as I researched. I came to the story of Edward Oxford as a non-fiction writer researching history, but left it as a fiction writer. I will attempt to show how the uncertainties and gaps of historical research can give rise to a fictionalising impulse. I should note that my particular topic is only peripherally related to the core concerns of the fiction discussed in the critical essay, containing as it does little of contact between colonists and Indigenous Australians, although it does address the colonial project in terms of how Australia was viewed by

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<sup>381</sup> Births Deaths and Marriages (Victoria), August 24 1890, 3373/12100.

<sup>382</sup> Births Deaths and Marriages (Victoria), September 5 1891, 3050/4765.

<sup>383</sup> Sinclair, 2011.

<sup>384</sup> VPRS 7591/P0002/331

<sup>385</sup> VPRS 7591/P0002/331

<sup>386</sup> The cathedral became the 'old' cathedral on the building of St Paul's Cathedral in Swanston Street some years earlier.

<sup>387</sup> *The Australasian*, April 28 1900, p 951.

<sup>388</sup> Melbourne General Cemetery headstone: "John Freeman died April 23<sup>rd</sup> 1900 Aged 71 Years. Section DD Row 10 Grave 25.

British authorities and potential immigrants, particularly through the figure of Henry Haydon, who was an early “colonist” and promoter of emigration. It does, however, share many of the questions of use of archives, voice, verisimilitude and dealing with what might be thought of as archaic mindsets.

The eventual novel is the outcome of my research, and, as Donna Lee Brien suggests, can be thought of as research in itself. She writes that in her work, “writing ... asserted itself as the only way to make sense of both the factual information and the imaginative reconstructions.”<sup>389</sup> Brien suggests that creative writing, insightfully described, can assist those in other fields – I would suggest in this case historiography – in developing their own practice.<sup>390</sup>

While the creative decisions I made in writing the novel are documented in the third section of this chapter (*Writing Edward Oxford*), the direction they took, and the fact that I chose to write fiction about Oxford at all, was guided by the nature of the discoveries I made in the archives and other research; therefore, this account of my sources and the research process generally is personal. Rather than proceed chronologically along the course of Oxford’s life, I will discuss the sources in the order in which I accessed them, relying on the above short biography for context. My hope is that this will give the reader an understanding of how the gaps in the record presented to me, particularly in light of the discussion of the archival issues, and how the nature of what I found prompted the writing of fiction. The historiographical research fell roughly into three types: online research using electronic databases and other remote access methods; in-person research in archives and libraries; and finally, site visits to locations relevant to Oxford’s experience.

Before I lay out my own experience, this section will also consider more generally the relationship between the archives and historical fiction, expanding on the discussion in the critical essay. Archival material forms the basis of much traditional history, but historical fiction also uses that same material; my explorations in the archives had something in common with both historiography and research for fiction. Before concluding, I will briefly visit the role of secondary material in shaping a fiction such as this.

## 2.1: Fiction writers and the archives

Australian historical novelist Roger McDonald has noted that the archives to which historians are so dedicated can be “the afternoon playthings of a novelist.”<sup>391</sup> However it’s clear that writers of historical fiction do more than play with the archive; they engage seriously with its content, form and omissions.

A. Frances Johnson defends historical fiction against accusations of distorting truth this way: “novelists, too, are working from archives of evidential historical material. That is to say: postcolonial novelists are not simply making things up”.<sup>392</sup> In Johnson’s view, the archives in themselves are the subject of historical fiction just as much as the

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<sup>389</sup> Brien, 2006, p. 56.

<sup>390</sup> Brien, 2006, p. 58.

<sup>391</sup> McDonald, Roger, quoted in Johnson, 2016, p. 132.

<sup>392</sup> Johnson, 2015, p. 105.

subject matter is. The tension between using the evidence found in the archives as a mere jumping-off place for fiction and the ethics of distorting history are almost always at play in historical fiction.

While Kate Grenville has said “history for a greedy novelist like me is just one more place to pillage. What we’re after, of course, is stories...”, she noted at the same time: “although we might use history, we also have to respect it.”<sup>393</sup>

Fellow novelist Maria Simms wrote that she “negotiated the unpredictable currents of libraries and archives (searching) for the *idea*.”<sup>394</sup> She felt that her work could not simply be fiction; that it needed to be based on the same sort of evidence as historians’ accounts of history.

However, as historians have long known, archives are not neutral repositories of knowledge. From the choices about what is recorded through to the system by which they are stored and accessed, archives express particular world views.

Historian Tom Griffiths writes: “History became professional and academic in the late nineteenth century by developing a science of the document and servicing the increasingly powerful nation-state, itself a generator and organiser of documents.”<sup>395</sup> The archival records in their many forms are at the heart of history; in more traditional histories they are relegated to the footnotes while the material mined for them forms the main narrative, but they are always there, and their availability for interrogation forms the basis of history’s claims to be a discipline that can be reviewed and checked.

More recently, historiography interrogated the role of the archives; the question of how we know what we know has moved to the foreground. So, for instance, in his non-fiction history *Van Diemen’s Land*, James Boyce muses in the text on the lack of minutes from a particular meeting about what was to be done about the indigenous Tasmanians.<sup>396</sup> In Ross Gibson’s *26 Views of a Starburst World* even the shape of the handwriting in a colonial notebook is analysed for what it might tell about the conditions under which it was written.<sup>397</sup> Camilla Nelson offers the example of Mark McKenna’s biography of Manning Clark, in which he describes the overwhelming physical mass of the archives:

These works move away from the would-be forensic approach embodied in a certain kind of historiography’s approach to the ‘bones’ of the past, (they are) acknowledging that certain ‘bones’ were not preserved, while many others were deliberately arranged for future discovery.<sup>398</sup>

Nelson has also discussed Foucault’s assertion that archives are “the means or system through which things are established”.<sup>399</sup> As discussed in the critical essay, this behaves

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<sup>393</sup> Grenville, National Library of Australia.

<sup>394</sup> Simms, 2004.

<sup>395</sup> Griffiths, 2015, p. 5.

<sup>396</sup> Boyce, 2008, pp 272-273.

<sup>397</sup> Gibson, 2012, pp. 43-44.

<sup>398</sup> Nelson, 2015, p. 5.

<sup>399</sup> Nelson, 2015, p. 3

historiography to constantly query its sources in the course of telling history. Fiction, on the other hand, has a licence to simply represent matters as given – this of course is what Inga Clendinnen sees as dangerous and likely to create a false sense of understanding. In her *Quarterly Essay*, Clendinnen goes further: for her, to diverge from the archive in any way is to have “falsified an actual human.”<sup>400</sup> Foucault’s comments on the archives also, of course, point us to the vast tracts of unrecorded information and unrecorded ways of understanding events and individual lives. It is these tracts of unrecorded information which are the “material” for historical fiction, particularly in works like *Benang*.

A. Frances Johnson sees the postcolonial novel of history as a tool with which to “interrogate those bodies of knowledge forming all aspects of the colonial archive.” The alternative views and characterisations possible in fiction, while appearing to be simply made up, are in fact a challenge to both the structure and content of archives.

Kim Scott, as discussed in the critical essay, actively works with and against what has been recorded of the Noongar people’s history, “I think novels can lead you to history; and I think they can do more than that. I think novels can help compensate for what’s not available in the historical material”, Scott has said.<sup>401</sup> In *Benang*, Scott fictionalised some archives and quoted others: “I did try to go to some trouble to distinguish where I was using real historical voices versus the speculation,” he has said.<sup>402</sup>

In my own research, layers of alteration and assigned meaning could be clearly observed in the archives. For instance, the official account of Edward Oxford’s trial on the Old Bailey website differs significantly from the account in the written records held in the National Archives.

This is an extract from Oxford’s mother’s testimony on the website:

I told him of the folly of his going to sea when he knew nothing about nautical affairs—he said he should have nothing to do but to walk about the deck and give orders—I said, ‘But you must first learn navigation’—he said he would allow me half his pay, and how proud I should be of my son when I saw his name in the papers, Admiral Sir Edward Oxford—<sup>403</sup>.

The online version most notably omits the questions Hannah Oxford was answering, which guided her speech. This is the handwritten trial transcript:

I said it was folly for him to talk of going to sea when he knew nothing of nautical nautical (sic) affairs – he must learn nautical matters and he said he should have no thing to do but to go upon the deck and give orders – I said he must go and learn before he could give orders – he said he would allow me half his pay – and how proud I should be of my son when I saw his name in the papers, ‘Admiral Sir Edward Oxford.’<sup>404</sup>

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<sup>400</sup> Clendinnen, 1996.

<sup>401</sup> Leadbetter et al., 2010, p. 53.

<sup>402</sup> Leadbetter et al., 2010, p. 68.

<sup>403</sup> Old Bailey online (Hannah Oxford).

<sup>404</sup> TNA TS 36/25.

The trial transcript, held in a leather-bound book dating from 1840, is itself a transcript of shorthand notes taken during the trial. It purports to be an exact record of what was said, but lacks any of the usual hesitations and interpositions of speech that might be expected of a working-class woman giving evidence in the Old Bailey courtroom when her son was on trial for his life; it also lacks tone, rate of speech and any non-verbal communications occurring between Hannah Oxford and others in the courtroom.

While of course fiction is similarly composed only of written text, it has the freedom to add in such elements descriptively and give more of a sense of the people involved, rather than rendering the “pure information” that the trial transcript purports to be. Linda Hutcheon points out how the textual aspect of the archive opens the history it purports to represent to reframing through textual intervention.

The ‘real’ referent of their language once existed; but it is only accessible to use today in textualized form: documents, eye-witness accounts, archives.<sup>405</sup>

French historian Arlette Farge warns historians against taking documents at face value, or “identifying” with the voices a reader finds in them; the alternative approach of fiction not only allows identification, but thrives on it.<sup>406</sup>

Also preserved in the archives I used for my research were photographs, handwritten letters and even the pen nibs with which Oxford wrote his correspondence; these physical traces of the historical subject offer a sense of the reality of their existence which seems to demand a more rounded representation than the official record could offer. The physical manifestation of the archives – the actual pages and books – is another aspect of history that historical fiction writers often find themselves working with. The way these documents are treated as a “stand-in for the past” as Hutcheon put it, brings to the fore questions about how we know the past at all.<sup>407</sup>

Some writers, such as historian Antoinette Burton, have begun to offer up not only alternative sources, but alternative ways of using those sources. So, she suggests, interpretations of the past can not only use material such as family histories and oral tradition, but also objects and the places where events occurred as legitimate sources. Alternative approaches to history have not always managed this, she writes:

“Feminist historians have not succeeded in fully interrogating the supremacy of a male-patterned archive, in large part because they need certain kinds of archival grounding for their own legitimacy.”<sup>408</sup>

Admitting “memory” – by which she means all kinds of recollections – to the status of history also means “interrogating the dreams of mastery and total knowledge –

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<sup>405</sup> Hutcheon, 1998, p. 93.

<sup>406</sup> Farge, 2013, p. 70.

<sup>407</sup> Hutcheon, 1998, p. 93.

<sup>408</sup> Burton, 2003, p. 27.

“truth telling” – that have been at the heart of History’s history as a discipline”, she writes.<sup>409</sup>

Fiction, of course, does not need to seek after the peer-reviewed legitimacy of academic, archival-grounded practice. Burton urges a practice that is comfortable with uncertainty.

...we must commit ourselves to acknowledging that *all* archives are provisional, interested, and calcified in both deliberate and unintentional ways; that all archives are, in the end, fundamentally unreliable.<sup>410</sup>

The uncertainties of the archive have long been an issue for history, in that that uncertainty can bring into question the “findings” of historiography. A fictional account, however, can – quite consciously and without pretending to conceal it – simultaneously render that question moot and address it head-on. Kim Scott’s use of direct quotes (real and fictional), Kate Grenville’s “smash and grab raid on history” and Maria Simms’s search for a jumping-off point into history are all, in fictional practice, valid ways of both questioning the archives and honouring the knowledge they offer.<sup>411</sup>

Burton writes that even after Foucault’s work on the archives made it impossible to take them at face value, “even the most sophisticated work on archives has not gone far enough in addressing head-on the lingering presumptions about, and attachments to, the claims to objectivity with which archives have historically been synonymous.” In her introduction to a book of “archive stories”, she writes that historians more often talk about their interactions with archives informally than they do explicitly in their published work.<sup>412</sup>

Fiction writers who have used archives in their work, or who are directly dealing with histories that depend on archives often put the questions of how they used archives to the fore. As discussed in the critical essay, Scott fictionalises material to fill in gaps, and I’ve shown how Flanagan depicts the archive itself in *Gould’s Book of Fish*.

In my own research, I discovered how the archive first guides research, and then how the gaps, surprises and clearly ideological structures of the archive give rise to questions that I found best answered through the medium of fiction. In writing up my research as fiction, I kept in mind Eva Sallis’s definition of research fiction as being fiction that “expresses the outcomes of a body of research” – not only in terms of facts discovered but of the research process itself.<sup>413</sup>

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<sup>409</sup> Burton, 2003, pp. 28-29.

<sup>410</sup> Burton, 2003, p. 26.

<sup>411</sup> Grenville, National Library of Australia, undated, Simms, 2004.

<sup>412</sup> Burton, 2005, p. 7.

<sup>413</sup> Sallis, 1999, p. 1.

## 2.1: Early research and online resources

Until late in 2009, I was unaware of either Edward Oxford of London or “John Freeman” of Melbourne, or indeed that anyone had ever made an attempt on Queen Victoria’s life. I had just completed a non-fiction book on the topic of representations of the city of Melbourne.<sup>414</sup> In my attempts to brainstorm a title, I entered the phrase “shadows of Melbourne” into the Google search engine. This search brought up the National Library of Australia’s (NLA) entry for Freeman’s *Lights and Shadows of Melbourne Life*.<sup>415</sup> The book itself was not described in detail, but under ‘Biography’, the library website read: “Letter dated 2 October 2009. Reverend Robert Wilson confirmed John Freeman was born Edward Oxford, 1822. Oxford was convicted in 1840 of high treason for his attempt to shoot Queen Victoria. Oxford was incarcerated in Broadmore (sic) Asylum”.<sup>416</sup>

What I perceived to be the unlikelihood of a person who’d shot at Queen Victoria living, let alone living as a published author in Melbourne under a false identity, intrigued me. I began to research Oxford’s life in depth.

Because his alleged crime – high treason, of which he was technically not found guilty because of his insanity – affected the highest levels of the British state, and because of legal record-keeping generally, there was a large amount of archival material available about the shooting, the trial, and, to a much lesser degree, his time in Bethlem and Broadmoor.

A number of key resources were available online or remotely. I was living in Melbourne, with no opportunity to personally visit the British archives, but the Old Bailey website carried a partial transcript of the trial record.<sup>417</sup> Oxford’s book, *Lights and Shadows of Melbourne Life*, is rare, but the full text is available online through open source repositories including archive.org, from which I was able to download and print up a copy of the book.<sup>418</sup> A further search through academic databases revealed a key article, one which guided my early thinking about Oxford, F.B. Smith’s “Lights and Shadows in the Life of John Freeman”, in which Smith identifies the link between Oxford and Freeman as being made via a set of letters held by the NLA.<sup>419</sup> There were also numerous online holdings of contemporary newspaper reports, particularly detailed in the case of the *Times* newspaper, to which I subscribed in order to gain access.

With these documents, I believed I could ascertain the shape of the significant events of Oxford’s life, of which the shooting appeared to be the most important. But from the outset it became apparent that the documents were not as transparent a record of what actually occurred as they purported to be.

In the case of the trial record, the online version is not complete. As discussed above, the online (and printed) records do not record the questions asked by the

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<sup>414</sup> Sinclair, 2010.

<sup>415</sup> <https://trove.nla.gov.au/work/10766225?q&versionId=44995453> accessed 18/7/2018

<sup>417</sup> Old Bailey Online.

<sup>418</sup> Archive.org. <https://archive.org/details/lightshadowsofm00free> accessed 18/7/2018

<sup>419</sup> Smith, 1987.

interrogating lawyer, instead reporting the witness's speech as a flow of words interrupted by dashes, making it appear the witness is spontaneously giving information. This disparity begged the question: what really happened? For example, this is how the online version, drawn directly from a typeset copy, renders an exchange about Hannah Oxford's second child:

that child was barely born alive—it was a confirmed idiot, and its countenance was precisely as the father looked when he made those grimaces—it put its tongue out like he did—it lived about between two years and four months, not quite two years and a half.<sup>420</sup>

In the handwritten court record held in the British National Archives (itself presumably written up from a shorthand version), the above exchange appears like this (my interpositions in brackets, questions from Mr Bodkin, Oxford's barrister):

Q: Was that second child born alive?

A: Barely alive. The doctor was afraid it would not be.

Q: Was it a confirmed idiot?

A: Decidedly – and my father said if I died he would have him tried for his life. (meaning George Oxford.)

Q: What sort of countenance had the child?

A: Precisely such ('such' is superimposed between two words) as the father had made when he acted the baboon, and put his tongue out as he did.

Q: How long did it live?

A: Between two years and two years and a half (the second 'two years and' is superimposed) – not quite two years and a half.<sup>421</sup>

From this example, which is fairly typical of the changes between versions, it can be seen how questions were rendered as statements. This was perhaps insignificant from a legal point of view, when the court was seeking after truth, but very significant from a storytelling point of view, where the source of the information, the style in which it was delivered, and the personal priorities revealed by what individuals chose to say, is much more germane. Such variations made me interested in the way the court system had processed the lived experience of individuals such as Hannah, categorising and flattening out her experience and speech. Arlette Farge notes that police interrogation records; "...consist of questions whose answers are incomplete and imprecise, quick snippets of life whose connecting thread is difficult to make out."<sup>422</sup>

This was true of the trial record. I found that the effect of individual points of view on disjointed events invited me to develop my own set of connections, sometimes fictional.

It should be noted, too, that the comment about George Oxford's threat and his concern for Hannah's life was dropped from the later record of her testimony; this alerted

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<sup>420</sup> Old Bailey Online, (Hannah Oxford).

<sup>421</sup> TNA, TS 11/10, p. 340.

<sup>422</sup> Farge, 2013, p. 79.

me to the way Hannah was represented in this and other documents, particularly newspaper accounts, as a figure of pathos interesting mainly for how she related to her son – her responsibility for him and her distress at the prospect of his execution. (Oxford himself stood mute at the trial, apart from a short statement given soon after the shooting.)

Such inconsistencies also alerted me further to what I already knew from contemporary experience; that official records (which become archives) are not to be considered strictly accurate; that they are created by individuals to a particular template and, apart from the usual mistakes made by humans, also represent the terms of their creation.

I was able to observe such inconsistencies early in my research by obtaining photographic copies of the trial books and other documents. Unable at that stage to travel to the archives in London, I paid a local researcher to locate and to take photos of key documents. This process gave me only partial access and the material remained, in a sense, digital, accessed via the computer screen rather than in person; a section below explores the difference between this and working with the same material in physical archives later in my research. Apart from the trial data, I was able to obtain photos of police files such as letters between officers, letters from witnesses (or putative witnesses) and correspondence from Oxford to friends.

I was also able to read Oxford's medical records from his time in Bethlem.<sup>423</sup> Some Broadmoor records were available, but medical data remains sealed. The available records, in conforming to a template of narrow concerns – the patients' behaviour, attitude to his crime and health – characterised Oxford as a subject of the institution. Having already read his published work and letters, I was struck by the gap between this "official" view and the person implied by his distinctive written voice. This, along with the gaps between the trial record and the way participants actually spoke, seemed to me to open up possibilities for filling in those gaps, or in fact countering them with a version of Oxford and his contemporaries extrapolated from what was known about their "unofficial" selves – the aspects of the individuals neglected or dismissed by the creators of archival material.

Two other digital resources I used extensively in this phase of the research were the Victorian registry of births, deaths and marriages, and newspaper archives. The former was most useful for genealogical research – establishing the dates of key events in individuals' lives.

Online newspapers were available through two main channels. The first was through direct subscription – such as the *Times of London*'s archive, where I was able to read extensive coverage of the shooting, its aftermath and trial, including reporters' accounts of interviews with family members, various public theories about the reasons for the shooting and so on. These contemporary, though again unreliable, accounts gave me a sense of the "story" of the shooting as it related to the wider political and social scene at the time. For instance, the theory that Oxford was backed by some sort of revolutionary group told me as much about the political environment at the time as it did about Oxford himself. They also contained family links not included in the court or police, for instance interviews with Oxford's family in Birmingham.

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<sup>423</sup> Berkshire Records Office.

The Trove website of the National Library of Australia gives searchable access to a large archive of Australian newspapers, and by entering names, addresses and other keywords, I was able to find a large number of small details about Oxford's life in Melbourne, particularly with reference to his church and his membership of the West Melbourne Mutual Improvement Society, both of which published public notices.

Freeman's letters to George Haydon, referenced in the Smith article, at first proved elusive. The reference given in the Smith article was apparently correct, but the NLA's online catalogue did not include the letters, or an accompanying photograph of Oxford. It took some correspondence with library staff to uncover the location of the letters, which had apparently not been accessed since Smith's article.<sup>424</sup>

Throughout my research, I treated newspaper reports not as completely reliable sources, but rather as either guides as to what to look for, or as indications of what was being said and thought about Oxford in the community. Trove allows searches by keywords, date and publication; each time I found a new name or place connected to Oxford, I would enter it into the database and often find further information – for instance, his South Melbourne address, as given in the letters to Haydon, linked to several other individuals Oxford would have known. Later in my research Trove enabled me to find several previously unknown pieces of published writing by "John Freeman".

Despite their shortcomings, these initial resources were sufficient to build up a picture of Oxford's life; the trial record and Oxford's letters in particular had the immediacy of, respectively, reported speech and private correspondence between intimate friends.

I had come to the trial record looking for the details of the shooting, insight into Oxford's motivations and the reasons why he was not convicted and executed. While those were certainly available and useful, the testimony of Oxford's mother surprised me with its frankness and depth of emotion, evoking sympathy for both her and for her son.

The printed trial record had Hannah making this odd statement: "I continued to suckle that child after the birth of the prisoner". Even though this statement struck a false note (I could not believe that a mother would refer to her 18-year-old son as "the prisoner" and the original record reveals that the phrase "the prisoner" came from the questioning lawyer), the focus on how Oxford was breastfed alongside a disabled older sibling, and on the abuse his mother suffered, seemed to me to be surprisingly open and modern for 1840.<sup>425</sup> Oxford's lawyers may have been trying to evoke sympathy for both mother and son; due to this approach, I found that the archive contained sympathetic characters about whom I wanted to know more.

Kate Grenville describes similar archival experiences in her book-length exegesis of *The Secret River*, published as *Searching for the Secret River*. Having uncovered intriguing information about an ancestor, she complained, "my curiosity had nothing to work on".<sup>426</sup> Her solution, as mine was, was to provide the missing information from her own imagination.

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<sup>424</sup> (I initially saw the material only as copies; the NLA is in Canberra and travelling there was not practical at that stage of my research.)

<sup>425</sup> TNA, TS 11/10, p.341

<sup>426</sup> Grenville, 2006, p. 79.

In this first stage of my research, I was focussed on establishing details of Oxford's life for a non-fiction account (later published as *A Walking Shadow*), but as I became interested in the fictional possibilities, the way I approached my research changed. Archival material on Oxford is widely dispersed, and the following section discusses how my archival work interacted with the eventual use to which I put my research.<sup>427</sup>

### 2.3: Further research and physical archives

In *The Allure of the Archives*, Arlette Farge urges historians to be transparent about the way “you questioned the archives” in order to be clear about how conclusions are reached, and to avoid twisting material to suit current ends.<sup>428</sup> I found that the questions I asked of the archive certainly changed, and that when researching for fiction I took more interest in what might be called subjective information – witnesses' opinions and manners of speaking, even errors in texts – than in the more factual matters ostensibly under discussion.

The initial stage of research in physical archives, when I was still aiming to “write up” the material as non-fiction, took place in Victoria, supplemented by the digital resources mentioned above.

The State Library of Victoria holds street directories giving residents' names and occupations; I used these to locate Oxford and his wife in Melbourne.<sup>429</sup> It quickly became clear that definitive answers would not be found there. Some records were ambiguous; “John Freeman” was a common name and there was no way of establishing if a painter of that name who appeared in Melbourne soon after Oxford arrived was the same man. In fiction, of course, that doubt can be elided, and I came to think of the address given for the painter as being Oxford's workplace; another example of how gaps invite fictional solutions.

Victoria's Public Record Office (PROV) holds trial records of local trials, correspondence between the British Home Office and local colonial authorities, records of ships' passengers and probates of wills. Having gathered a list of some of Oxford's associates through Trove, I was able to find further information on those individuals – for instance, the will of William Coupar, who lodged with Oxford and his wife and who died at their house.<sup>430</sup>

Shipping records confirmed the class of cabin in which Oxford travelled to Australia (the cheapest), and provided me with a list of fellow passengers and their ages and occupations. However, as Grenville wrote, this information was only enough to spark curiosity which could not be satisfied by the available material. I could not find any mention of Oxford in the Victorian government records of the time held in the PROV – this omission possibly explained by a note in the UK archives to the effect that the

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<sup>427</sup> Sinclair, 2012.

<sup>428</sup> Farge, 2013, pp. 97-98.

<sup>429</sup> *Sands and MacDougall Directory*, various.

<sup>430</sup> Coupar, VPRS.

authorities in Victoria would not be pleased to have an ex-criminal sent to them. That is, it seemed Oxford had arrived with not even the government knowing who he was.

I also, of course, could use the book Oxford published in 1888, *Lights and Shadows of Melbourne Life*.<sup>431</sup> This book purports to be a non-fiction account of the author's personal observations in Melbourne, and as such offered a rich source of biographical material. However, the immediate question became how reliable John Freeman – whose very name was a fabrication – was as a witness to his own and others' lives. Later investigation supported these doubts, as it became apparent Freeman had recycled and rewritten newspaper articles to help construct the book. In a biographical treatment of Oxford, *Lights and Shadows of Melbourne Life* could not be taken at face value as a source; in a fictional account, however, I felt that the incidents in the book could be used freely.

Freeman's involvement with St James's Cathedral and the Church of England produced a number of records, mostly in the form of reports in the church newspaper. The cathedral itself (now St James's Old Cathedral) has its own archive and I was able to gain access to these on site. The archives were held in a single oversized safe in a corner of an administrator's office in the church building. I worked through the records of lay sermons and pew rents for the period Freeman was associated with the church, and gained a sense of the church's day to day workings and the social status of the people who were in the congregation – for instance, surveyor Robert Hoddle, considered a founder of Melbourne, appeared in the pew rent books for earlier decades. The church archive includes an original copy of Freeman's marriage certificate, signed by him and his wife. The document was the first object I was sure Freeman had held, and gave me a strong sense of his presence in the church.<sup>432</sup>

By the time I travelled to England to visit the archives that held Oxford's trial record and medical records (as he was never officially imprisoned, rather kept in secure prison-like hospitals), I was generally familiar with the information in most of the documents I was going to see through my earlier online work. However I had not seen every document – and I hoped to gain insight by meeting archivists and by going to several key sites. (Location visits are discussed further below.) At this stage I had already finished writing my non-fiction account of Oxford's life, and the questions I was asking of the archive and the locations were first factual but also very much oriented towards the writing of fiction; I was seeking a sense of events, places and people that would translate into a narrative tone I could use in the novel. In the archives, I was more alert to what might be thought of as the texture and subtext of the material; its physical properties, but also the implications of the way the information was presented.

Antoinette Farge has written about the apparent "limitlessness" of the archive and the illusion this creates of being able to know everything about the past. She goes on to point out that there are in fact endless gaps in the archives, and that those gaps must be found in order to come up with questions.<sup>433</sup> These two observations very much sum up

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<sup>431</sup> Freeman, 1888.

<sup>432</sup> The sense of the church itself is complicated by the fact that while the building is considered original, it has been moved from the site where it stood during Freeman's time.

<sup>433</sup> Farge, 2013, p. 55.

my experience. The gaps not only prompted questions, but offered opportunities to provide answers in the form of fiction.

The files on Oxford held at the UK National Archive in London comprise mainly police and court records. The court record has been discussed above, and because I had seen almost all the relevant sections as photographs, did not develop my thinking much further. It was an impressive leather bound volume, 10-15cm thick, which had included the trial records of several other men who had attacked Queen Victoria. In that, it showed that Oxford's crime was viewed by the state as very much about the Queen, not about Oxford himself.

Farge urges her readers to "never stop asking how and why these words came to wash ashore on the manuscript page."<sup>434</sup> If you take that to mean that not only the conditions of the archives' production, but the particular speech or writing that it contains, are subject to question, a set of documents like the police files on this case investigation raises many questions about the experience of the people caught up in the shooting and its aftermath. In the police records I gained a much greater impression of what happened outside the court process: there were multiple letters between officers and even members of the public about the investigation – for instance trying to find the bullets supposed to have been in Oxford's guns, and notes about visits to his former employers. They contained numerous spontaneous reports from people who claimed to have been at the scene of the shooting, and many more with theories about Oxford's motivations and alleged co-conspirators. They also included depositions from Oxford's friends and relatives, talking about his character; some of those were from people not called in the trial and so gave me new information about Oxford.

These reports, written on numerous pieces of different paper in a variety of hands, seemed to me to represent the multiple voices and lines of discussion in London at the time, which previously I had only known through newspaper reports.

They showed me how Oxford's act had tapped into public anxieties; about the monarchy, about a female monarch, about political unrest in working towns like Birmingham and in Ireland, and also how ordinary people sought to somehow attach themselves to what they perceived as a great event. They did this, for instance, by claiming to have been present when they were not, or by reporting overhead conversations that they suggested showed conspiracies<sup>435 436</sup> They also showed me that despite later dismissal of the idea, Oxford's "Young England" was taken seriously by the police. The multiplicity of voices and trains of thought present in the police files stood in contrast to the clear and simple accusations at the trial, and contributed to my sense that the shooting was a turning point that could have had very different outcomes: not only in terms of whether Victoria was killed, but in terms of how Oxford was viewed and therefore how he was treated by the public and the state.

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<sup>434</sup> Farge, 2013, p. 75.

<sup>435</sup> TNA: MEPO 3/17.

<sup>436</sup> There were so many of these kinds of letters, reminding me so strongly of the kind of comments one now finds on some Internet news sites, that I made a note in my notebook: "lots of letters with reports of activity that might be relevant but isn't – conspiracy theories – nutters."

I also found copies of Oxford's own letters, and somewhat touchingly, the pen nibs confiscated from his writing desk (the supposed 'records' of Young England that were created by Oxford, unfortunately, appear not to be in this or other archives.) In a letter written to a young woman (which may have been sent and returned to police, or may not have been delivered at all), Oxford described his arrest as "a bit of a scrape."<sup>437</sup> This and other letters reminded me that Oxford's act had ramifications at multiple levels; not only shattering his own life and causing public scandal, but also upending the lives of his mother, sister and family. Even his own lawyer was later forced to appeal to the government for payment for his work because "the (Oxford's) relatives are all poor."<sup>438</sup>

Farge (and most writers who discuss archives) also writes about the seductiveness of the physical nature of the archives. Their immediacy – being documents produced by the people under study – lend them a sense of authority and of direct access to a lost reality. Farge urges a "watchful lucidity" to counter this sense, and the sense of identification with the subject that can result from reading so much material about them.<sup>439</sup> For a historian, this means maintaining a historiographical stance; for me as a writer, it meant a constant process of comparing the information to the fictional story I had in mind and deciding whether to incorporate it in the story, to omit it, or – and this last is the option not available to historians – to "repurpose it." This could mean attributing actions of one person to another; making decisions about whether a reported event reported actually happened; moving it in time or simply using it to inspire a different, fictional event. I'll discuss examples of this in section four, 'Writing Edward Oxford'.

Farge writes that the slow process of working through an archive and re-ordering the information in notes creates "a new 'archive'".<sup>440</sup> I came to the archives, particularly the archives which dealt with Oxford's arrest and trial, with two sets of questions. Some were around the sequence of events and the matters with which the archives were ostensibly concerned: politics, Queen Victoria or even the legal process around a defence of insanity. The others, however, were about the relations between people in Oxford's family, his own reactions to becoming the centre of attention, the dynamics of how ordinary people responded to an attack on the Queen. In asking those questions, I re-ordered the archive into a set of documents that formed sources for my novel.

Jacques Derrida notes that archives show a "privileged topology" – that is, that they take a shape that is informed by the conditions of their creation, where "law and singularity intersect".<sup>441</sup> I take this to mean that the government archive reflects the shape and assumptions of the legal system – but that it also allows the singularity of the events discussed and persons represented to show through. It was in these preserved letters and reported speeches that I found the best indications of the character of individuals involved in Oxford's life and trial, and of what might be going on in their minds.

I certainly felt more connected to Oxford and his milieu after reading and touching documents he and the people who dealt with him produced – this may have been an illusion of access to the past, but as a fiction writer, it gave me a clearer picture

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<sup>437</sup> MEPO 3/17

<sup>438</sup> HO 44/36, Letter from Jabez Pelham.

<sup>439</sup> Farge, 2013, p. 72.

<sup>440</sup> Farge, 2013, p. 62.

<sup>441</sup> Derrida, 1995, p. 10.

of who I was writing about, and a stronger sense of them as individuals who had actually existed. Farge finds, in the judicial archives of France, individuals who employ a range of strategies to survive the world; I saw those kinds of strategies in the way Oxford's family and lawyers sought to save him, and in the way unconnected strangers interpreted his crime according to their personal concerns, whether with revolution, women in power, insanity or conspiracy.<sup>442</sup> For Farge, the real point of the archives is not the raw information they reveal, but the voices they contain, and by the time I read the archives in person, this was true of my research, as the underlying information was mostly familiar to me.

A. Frances Johnson has suggested that fiction writers employ a strategy of first "raiding" archives and then deconstructing them to "make them strange" in the writing process, and it was this freedom to repurpose and implicitly interrogate the archives that made fiction an attractive form in which to work with what I'd discovered.<sup>443</sup> Carolyn Steedman claims that "history cannot work as either cognition or narrative without the assumption on the part of the writer and the reader of it that there is somewhere the great story, that contains everything there is and ever has been"; she goes on to argue that the nature of narrative means that "all stories, no matter what their content, take part in the art of fiction."<sup>444</sup> In this case, I found that the fictional impulse increasingly offered a way to render the results of my research as a story.

As well, I found that Steedman's suggestion that fiction offered a sense of closure and completion of the story that history (by virtue of its status as a science) cannot, to be borne out by my experience in writing Oxford's story in both forms.

#### 2.4: Site visits and writing fiction set in historical place

Antoinette Burton's assertion that sites are important to history – "house and home (are) archives that produce histories" – is part of her project of introducing a greater range of sources into history, the better to tell stories not preserved in official archives.<sup>445</sup> For a fiction writer, the intangibles of place are significant because of the way they are produced by subjective experience.

In researching Oxford's life as history, location was of course important – to establish where something happened is as much a part of factual research as are other aspects of events. But when it came to writing fiction about Oxford's life, a sense of place was essential; not simply for verisimilitude, but to strengthen the sense of an inner life for the characters through which the story would be told.

Meg Mundell has written of the need to investigate the "off-page" activities of creative writers that are essential to literary-place making: "what we might call the *how* of literary *wheres* remains something of a mystery."<sup>446</sup> In this section I will attempt to show how my reading of other writers informed my own practice of place-making.

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<sup>442</sup> Farge, 2013, p. 93

<sup>443</sup> Johnson, 2016, p. 115

<sup>444</sup> Steedman, 2001, pp. 146-147.

<sup>445</sup> Burton, 2003, p. 26

<sup>446</sup> Mundell, 2018, p. 2.

As I became more interested in the fictional possibilities of Oxford's life, site visits became necessary if I was to form idea of the places he lived and, as Mundell points out is key to literature, make them into deeply felt places rather than simple "settings".<sup>447</sup> For historical fiction, a sense of place can be difficult to capture, the places having changed so much, but I was able to find models for doing so.

In *Searching for the Secret River*, Kate Grenville explores how the two main settings for *The Secret River* – London and the Hawkesbury River – informed her research and writing and gave her a setting for her characters.

For example, she writes that after a day in the archives of the Mitchell Library in Sydney, during which it dawned on her how violent and inevitably confrontational the "settlement" of New South Wales had been, she walked out into Sydney to a point where she had a view of the harbour around Circular Quay. Although that area is highly urbanised, she wrote:

It laid itself out before me, detail by detail. There'd have been a little beach there in the corner where the creek (the Tank Stream) met the bay, fine yellow sand with a rim of water-smoothed sticks and tiny star-shaped shells at the high-tide mark.<sup>448</sup>

Grenville referred back to a childhood spent exploring the harbour in order to re-imagine the city as it was before Europeans came. She went through a similar process in London, where after a fruitless day in the National Archives, she decided to stop looking for her ancestor on paper: "Instead I'd look for him in the places where the past had happened: the lanes and streets, the churches, and above all the river."<sup>449</sup> She used street names, "the fall of the land", churches, a fragment of a Roman bridge and most particularly the Thames: her ancestor, Solomon Wiseman had worked on the river. She visited surviving 18<sup>th</sup> century locations, like the Watermen's Guildhall. The hall appears in the novel like this:

The bench they had to sit on was hard, and too narrow for a bottom, and the cold from the flagstones froze his feet in their wooden pattens, but he felt that on this day his life might lunge forward out of its rotten past.<sup>450</sup>

The knowledge Grenville gained in the archives influenced her physical excursions and late in her research she wrote that she saw the Hawkesbury river differently: it was "the river I'd seen before, plus this new one," where the "new one" was the river of the past, in the time when Wiseman helped displace the indigenous Darug people. In *Searching for the Secret River*, she described her sense of awe at being in a place where a key event happened "*It was here*, I told myself, trying to whip up a frisson. *He was right here, sweating with fear. Right here.*"<sup>451</sup>

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<sup>447</sup> Mundell, 2018, p. 3.

<sup>448</sup> Grenville, 2006.

<sup>449</sup> Grenville, 2006, p. 47.

<sup>450</sup> Grenville, 2006, p. 25.

<sup>451</sup> Grenville, 2006, p. 54.

In my own research, I tried to approach sites with a dual sensibility; first, to establish useful facts about the location and second, to “see” it through Oxford’s eyes.

Available sites included Birmingham, where Oxford grew up, parts of London where he lived, the shooting site, part of the old Bethlem Asylum and, in Melbourne, the areas where he lived. I was attempting to trigger what Mundell has termed “a direct immersion in place” given her assertion that “site visits can yield unexpected narrative treasures: story ideas, sensory impressions, spatial scenarios, emotional cues.”<sup>452</sup> I first used a combination of older maps, guidebooks and Google Maps to identify where Oxford and other members of his circle had lived and worked, what routes he probably would have walked. For both my purposes – history and fiction – I needed to walk in Oxford’s footsteps. I hoped to develop a sense of not only the spaces he moved through, but how they might have felt to him as places. I was seeking what Mundell calls “vicarious emplacement” – a sense not just of place, but of *Oxford’s* place.<sup>453</sup>

I needed not just to rediscover or confirm what was in the records, but also to make new discoveries for myself, about materials, streetscapes and the aspect and outlook from locations – things like the slope of the streets and the angle of the light at certain times, what landmarks present themselves as you stand in a place. As I explored locations, that sense of place lifted the events off the page and strengthened my sense that the historical figures were real individuals. Michel de Certeau wrote about the act of walking in a city as being analogous to the speaking of a language – both are activating the potential of a structure. Each person’s particular way of being in a place is one of many “singularities”, he writes, in which they “give their shape to spaces. They weave places together.”<sup>454</sup>

In order to reconstruct the places Oxford lived as he *might* have experienced them, I felt I needed to physically go there particularly the scene of the shooting and the places where he was incarcerated. In doing so I hoped not just to rediscover or confirm what was in the records, but also to make new discoveries for myself, about materials, streetscapes and the aspect and outlook from locations – intangibles like the slope of the streets and the angle of the light at certain times. I found that I could then use that sense of place to go back to the records and read them with a stronger sense of where events occurred, and how they might have unfolded. That sense of place lifted the events off the page and strengthened my sense that the historical figures were real individuals.

For example, in fiction, the events of June 10, 1840 would require detailed description beyond what would be required or possible in a historical account. I retraced Oxford’s likely path on that day. The shooting location has not changed significantly in almost 180 years; it is still a road beside the high wall of Buckingham Palace with a park on one side and trees lining the pathways, although the park fence has been removed. On site, I was better able to understand the discussion in the trial record of what had happened and where the bullets might have gone, but more importantly for the purposes of fiction, I was able to come up with plausible events and observations Oxford might have made.

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<sup>452</sup> Mundell, 2018, p. 4.

<sup>453</sup> Mundell, 2018, p. 7.

<sup>454</sup> De Certeau, p. 97.

In walking from his London house to the shooting site, I found not only that the walk was longer than I'd expected – prompting me to observe that he would have had plenty of time to think about what he was setting out to do – but that it provided a strong metaphorical progression, as he would have literally crossed a river (a convenient metaphor for an irreversible decision), and turned his back on first the law and then the church (the Houses of Parliament and Westminster Abbey) before arriving at Buckingham Palace to strike at the head of the empire, Queen Victoria.

The walls of the asylum where Oxford was kept are still there. The walls themselves are daunting brick structures that would have done more than prevent escape; they would have represented hopelessness of his situation. (On site, I also discovered that the house his mother moved to after his trial was about 25 metres from that wall, even though she could not visit him, giving me a sense that she attempted to retain a connection.) Part of the building is still there, although the area Oxford lived in has been demolished.

I gained access to the house Oxford had lived in at the time of the shooting, but the interior had been completely refinished; all that was left was the windows and the dimensions of the rooms, which gave me a sense of how crowded-in he was living with his family.

In Birmingham, the hotel where his father and mother met has been demolished, as have the houses where he grew up, but a large part of the “Jewellery Quarter” has been preserved as a heritage area, so similar buildings of that era could be visited. A local museum contained the kind of workshop and materials Oxford's father would have worked in and with, and useful background information on the industry.<sup>455</sup> In a local museum I examined materials of the nature Oxford's father would have worked with. I found a church at the centre of this area that would have existed in Oxford's time, and photographed and took notes about the distances from one place to another, views along streets and so on, trying to get a sense of what it might have been like to be a child growing up in the area.

In Melbourne, many locations are similarly preserved, including houses he lived in, and the parks around his places of residence. St James' Old Cathedral is largely intact and easily accessible, and I spent time not only in the archives there, but in the church itself, where Oxford would have spent many hours as a churchgoer and churchwarden. The building is atmospheric, being built of dark bluestone with smaller windows and a double aisle. The religious and moral messages preserved in the stained glass windows offered evocative settings for scenes in the novel. The church is also physically located roughly a kilometre from where it stood in Oxford's time, which reverses the usual pattern of a space (physical location) being consistent but the place (sense of being in the space) changing. This sense of the place being the same but entirely different underlines the somewhat arbitrary nature of “reconstructing” any past place.

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<sup>455</sup> Birmingham Museums.

## 2.6: Background and secondary sources

The secondary and background sources I used in researching the novel were useful in two main ways. First, they gave me context about events and social situations that allowed me to better understand the context of Oxford's life, just as they would in writing a biography. Second, and most relevantly at this point, they offered details I could use in the fiction.

The inclusion of incidental details consistent with the historical period is a hallmark of the genre; the sense of "being there" is often cited as a reason for reading historical fiction. Margaret Atwood has described her research including "how to clean a chamber pot, what footgear would have been worn in winter, the origins of quilt pattern names, and how to store parsnips"<sup>456</sup> This effect of realism is sought by readers, but Nelson warns against taking it at face value. Too much of an emphasis on accurate reconstruction runs that risk that "mimesis ... becomes the measure of the text."<sup>457</sup> Highly realistic depiction of a period is often seen as conventional and therefore signalling an unquestioning acceptance of history, she writes, citing a seminar panel that concluded that as long as the "period details" were correct, the major story could diverge from the historical record.

While I was not setting out to write a fiction that simply provided an aesthetic experience, I was aware of the expectation that a historical novel should not contain anachronisms. Historical novelists report being "taken to task" by readers over details as small as their character's clothing, and such inaccuracies could also distract from the story.<sup>458</sup> To some extent, too, gaining an appreciation of the likely circumstances of Oxford's life helped me build his character.

As the sources are numerous and listed in the bibliography of this thesis, I'll refer to only two examples; I also discuss some secondary material further in the next section, on the writing of the novel. My examples are at two ends of the spectrum between public and private life; the political situation in England and the intimate daily details of life on board a migrant ship.

Although there were no proven links between Oxford and the Chartist movement or any other political movement in England, newspaper reporting implied the strong possibility that he had not acted alone; that he was the front man for a wider conspiracy. In a historical sense, this was easily dismissed, but the "Young England" fantasy suggested to me that Oxford himself was influenced by the unrest around him. Reading such books as David Thompson's *England in the Nineteenth Century* showed me an empire full of, if not revolutionary, at least dissatisfied, feeling. The Irish leader Daniel O'Connell was agitating for reform and the Chartists were making demands for general (male) franchise. Oxford's home town of Birmingham was a centre of the movement; in the 1830s, Birmingham unionists had been jailed for alleged conspiracy; public condemnation led to their release.<sup>459</sup> In 1839, a petition bearing a million signatures

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<sup>456</sup> Atwood, 1998, p. 1514. , Margaret 1998 'In search of *Alias Grace*: On writing Canadian historical fiction,' *American History Review*, Dec, p 1514

<sup>457</sup> Nelson, 2007.

<sup>458</sup> Gregory, 2015.

<sup>459</sup> Thomson, 1950, pp. 53-84.

calling for reform was rejected by the House of Commons. In *The Early Victorians* I found evocative descriptions of crowds of sweat-stained labourers in Birmingham forming torchlight processions in mid-winter – scenes that Oxford could conceivably have witnessed.<sup>460</sup>

Queen Victoria herself had been becoming less popular personally with her subjects, due in part to her involvement in what was known as the affair of Lady Flora Hastings, in which a lady-in-waiting was falsely accused of pregnancy out of wedlock.<sup>461</sup> Politically, she also offended a new prime minister by refusing to make changes in her court ladies.<sup>462</sup>

None of these details appear in the record directly associated with Oxford, but they were highly likely to have affected his thinking, and provided material I could use to construct the sort of conversations a bar-worker might have with his friends. In combination with the novels Oxford had been reading before the shooting (according to his sister), they offered a basis for a convincing fantasy life around sparking a revolution, providing the motivation that Oxford himself never supplied in his police interviews or letters.

At the other end of the historical scale, the details of Oxford's life on board ship seemed to me to be important to provide. The sea journey to Australia, in biographical and narrative terms, was a turning point in his life. It was the point at which Oxford was released, took on a new name and was thrown into wider society after 27 years in institutions. I found a number of "shipboard diaries" kept by passengers and crew aboard the ship on which Oxford travelled, the *Suffolk*. While none of these diaries were from the exact journey he took (1867-1868), they provided close details of shipboard life on that particular vessel, and even the character of the ship's captain (i.e., fond of sailing very fast). The diaries were kept at the State Library of Victoria, where I was able to access them in person, with one at the Australian Maritime in NSW, which was able to provide me with a copy.<sup>463</sup> Such diaries were often edited for consumption back in England, but still gave a keen sense of what life onboard was like. For instance, these entries are from one passenger in 1863:

I am lying on the deck in the evening with my face turned up to the sky, watching the myriads of bright stars, when a sailor begs me to cover my face, or else I should suffer severely from the effects of the moon's rays.<sup>464</sup>

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<sup>460</sup> Harrison, p. 129. J.F.C, *The Early Victorians 1832-1851*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1971, p 159.

<sup>461</sup> *Launceston Advertiser*, 5 September 1839, p 4.

<sup>462</sup> Known as "the bedchamber crisis", see Rappaport.

<sup>463</sup> Suffolk diaries: Edward Charlwood, 1863; Joseph Kemp, 1868; Isaac Nutman, 1870; all in the State Library of Victoria. William Cannon, 1865, Australian National Maritime Museum.

<sup>464</sup> Charlwood, 27 July 1863.

Oh! That something would occur to break this dreadful monotony, a mutiny on board, the plague breaking out, going up against a ship in the night or some little excitement that sort would be a relief but alas! I fear there is no hope.<sup>465</sup>

Andrew Hassam's books *No Privacy for Writing* and *Sailing to Australia* offered an analysis of these kinds of journals, and samples of writing from other voyages, that convinced me that in writing a cohesive narrative of Oxford's life, the sea journey had to be included. The combination of high drama and daily tedium they documented came at a turning point in the lives of not only Oxford, but all migrants to Australia in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, offering a chance for contemplation, reflection and, most crucially for Oxford, personal reinvention. Fiction, however, was the only way to render it.

Such details, in a traditional history, could only form a kind of background or context because they are not about Oxford personally. In moving to fiction, I saw the opportunity to pick out the eyes, as it were, of the experiences described in the journals I read.

#### Chapter two conclusion:

During the course of the research described above, I moved from a historiographical focus to viewing Oxford's life as the basis for a novel. AS Byatt has termed the writing of a historical novel as being the way "these particular ideas form themselves into fictions", implying an inevitability about the use of fiction to work with particular material, and that is a good description of what happened over the course of my research.<sup>466</sup> The gaps and incomplete pieces of information about Oxford and his family – inevitable in any biographical project, but particularly intriguing in this case – seemed to me to offer the opportunity for a meaningful reconstruction of Oxford's life as a fictional character. I found precedent for this in the works of Australian historical novelists, along with examples of how the record could be extended, amended and altered in order to serve the story rather than historiographical concerns. Available material in archives and public records, along with secondary and background reading, was sufficient to establish the main facts of his life and some likely details of its texture.

Like Kate Grenville and Margaret Atwood, I felt that the fiction needed a high degree of faithfulness to the record in order for my depiction of Oxford's character to be realistic and connected to the times he actually lived in. At the same time, once I began working on the project as a fiction, I felt able to apply the focus of my own interests and to select particular themes that emerged from Oxford's life (to the exclusion of others) in a way that would be unacceptable in non-fiction.

The final section of this essay will show how the archival material discussed above, and the particular themes I chose combined with a mostly realistic style to produce the novel *Lights and Shadows of Melbourne Life*.

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<sup>465</sup> Charlwood, 11 August 1863.

<sup>466</sup> Byatt, 2000, p 92.

### **Chapter Three: Writing Edward Oxford**

#### **Introduction:**

In writing *Lights and Shadows of Melbourne Life*, I dealt with a tension that is particular to the genre of historical fiction; how to make the novel a fully realised fictional story at the same time as grounding it in what I knew from my research. That tension is articulated well by Rohan Wilson when he writes:

On the one hand, the (historical) novel asserts its fictionality at every turn, its desire to exist in a space of pure imagination, generally free of the kinds of referential claims that historiography must make: but on the other hand, the novel has increasingly become a form of de facto historiography, making claims to historical veracity both implicitly and explicitly.<sup>467</sup>

Later in in this chapter I'll attempt to show some of the decisions I made around both of those questions, with examples. The previous chapter, on research, has already outlined how research and archival material prompted the writing of the fiction; this chapter will look at the process from the point of view of the work of fiction; how it can use historical material to creative ends. Wilson goes on to ask if language really can “represent” anything, whether in fiction or history: “whether language is only representation, a surface image, that cannot connote with certainty anything other than itself.”<sup>468</sup>

It is this question - what the novel says *about itself*, how it stands up as a self-contained work of art – that I hope to examine in this section, alongside the simpler issues of how the tension between historiography and fictionality played out in the writing of *Lights and Shadows*. These questions, of what makes a work a fiction, are related to the question of what fiction is at all, and therefore what makes a work “historical fiction” rather than history.

Before moving on to that, I would like to address the nature of this particular historical novel, that is, its close focus on a single historical figure. The novel is written in the style of an autobiography or journal, which is a separate fictional genre in itself. To come to the decision to write it that way, I first explored the fact that I was working from an actual life and that therefore I needed to consider how fiction could deal specifically with biographical issues. My consideration and the resulting approach to the writing of the novel make up the first section of this chapter, followed by a reflection on the novel as a self-contained text that, as Wilson writes, “cannot connote with certainty anything other than itself,” and finishing with exploration of some practical creative decisions that shaped the final work.

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<sup>467</sup> Wilson, 2014, p. 11.

<sup>468</sup> Wilson, 2014, p. 61.

### 3.1: Biographical historical fiction

In considering Oxford as a person who was very much a creature of his times and very much at the mercy of the authorities for a third of his life, I was interested in how a fictional account of his life could address the interaction between a person and his milieu. I also wanted to investigate the effects of writing his story as a whole life, rather than accounts of disparate events. If, as David Carr suggests, narrative structure is inherent to events as we experience them, then it seems reasonable to present a historical life in a narrative form.<sup>469</sup>

But to create a life narrative, a certain degree of completeness is needed, and that is not always achievable with what can be found in the archives, and certainly is not in this case. The question then became: what was valid and useful when it came to filling in the gaps? Rather than simply making up details and events, I used the writing of the novel to investigate how historical fiction could address the nature of the gaps in the record: why they mattered, in what respects they mattered, and what questions they raised about this person, about his times and, not least, how those gaps were read by me as a researcher and writer.

My aim was to create a fiction that was not, of course, a biography of Oxford. However, I wanted to write a text that, by drawing on the social forces and structures that shaped him, would still be a valid account of the times.

The popularity of historical biography shows how using narrative technique and characters that readers can identify with makes history more palatable to non-historians; could rendering a biography as fiction – which allows a more complete life story to be told – make Oxford a more comprehensible character? This kind of work has been termed “biofiction” by writers such as Michael Lackey.<sup>470</sup> James Vicars defines it as “using fiction as the primary means of exploring the life of an actual, historical person” and urges that discussion around it “focus on the capacity of the biographical novel or fictional biography to write a life.”<sup>471</sup> By this definition, Vicars rules out the criticism offered by Georg Lukács and Paul Murray Kendall (discussed in Lackey) that biofiction is an inadequate way of writing history; that is, in my interpretation, “writing *a* life” (my italics) is not the same as writing *the* life of the subject.

In this section I will address what I found it meant to “write a life”, particularly of a historical figure. Like other historical figures, Oxford lived his life sequentially. Writing on Ricouer’s theory of narrative, Lisa Jones suggests that we understand our lives as stories, that is in terms of narrative.<sup>472</sup> David Carr, too, suggests that narrative structure inheres in the way we experience events.<sup>473</sup> If life is a narrative, and if narrative is built into the human understanding of what life is, then a complete narrative seems a desirable way in which to render an account of a person’s life in narrative form. The alternative, where there are significant gaps in the archival record, is to write more of a series of disconnected vignettes with at most speculative connections between them; of

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<sup>469</sup> Carr, 1986, pp. 117- 31.

<sup>470</sup> Lackey, 2017, p 1.

<sup>471</sup> Vicars, 2016.

<sup>472</sup> Jones, Lisa, 2012, pp 49-68.

<sup>473</sup> Carr, 1986.

course this would be historically accurate but would fail as a biographical project in that the resulting document wouldn't be readable as a "life" running from beginning to end. As Vicars notes, "without story, there is no biography."<sup>474</sup>

In her essay "Fathers", A.S. Byatt notes that just as "the Self" is the "great theme of the modernist novel, historical figures offer an "occluded quality" in terms of their identity, which writers and readers find attractive. In this, she suggests, they are like ourselves – "a series of disjunct sense impressions, remembered incidents, shifting bits of knowledge..." – that is, in my reading, the project of making sense of a historical figure through fiction is an allegory for making sense of our own modern lives.<sup>475</sup>

I also hoped that in filling in and rounding out the details of Oxford's life, I could also gain insights into the lives of his contemporaries. In its particulars – the shooting, his incarceration and the new life in Australia – Oxford's case was extreme, but others of his time sat in a similar relationship to their surroundings. David Carr points out that individuals exist socially; that their identity and their stories are bound up with their social setting and the story of the wider group – its members and its existence as a whole.<sup>476</sup> This concept can further justify inclusion of general detail about Bethlem or late 19<sup>th</sup> century Melbourne in the novel. Oxford was a member of several formal and informal groups (such as the church, the mutual improvement society and a painting group at Bethlem); his relationship to them was as much a part of his story as what he did personally, widening the potential narrative scope. A fictional account of a subject's life can, particularly in cases like Oxford's, anchor them to their surroundings in a way that emphasises that connection between the "actor" and his or her world. It does away with the fiction that where no documents exist, nothing at all can be known.

However, given the gaps in the record on Oxford, a good deal of speculation was required. I hoped that such speculation – which to a large part constitutes what is 'fictional' about a work like this – could anchor Oxford (or any similar biographical subject) more deeply in his (or her) milieu. I set out to draw on what was known by historiography about the times and places Oxford lived in, and what was likely such a person in such a situation would experience. By doing so, I hoped the fiction could help the biographical project expand outwards from the person to his world. In other words, I attempted to fill in the gaps with an eye to what the gaps meant to the strictly historical biography. I sought to enhance and build on, rather than detract from, or arbitrarily alter, the known facts.

Speculation is what raises historical questions in the first place; questions arise when a researcher looks at the record and sees a gap or something requiring an answer or explanation. Speculation is what then helps the researcher find documents and evidence in archives – speculation based on prior knowledge of course, but all the same applying an understanding of human behaviour to predict where information might be found.<sup>477</sup> In

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<sup>474</sup> Vicars, 2016.

<sup>475</sup> Byatt, p. 31.

<sup>476</sup> Carr, 1986.

<sup>477</sup> For example, I knew that Oxford's wife in Australia had originally come from Western Australia, and after failing to find her death records in Victoria, I speculated that she might have returned to her family after he died: I searched in WA and succeeding in finding not only her will but several descendants.

writing fiction, I was applying speculation in a third way: to deepen my understanding of the final shape of what I had “found” in the documentary evidence. This was my way of assigning meaning to the gaps in the evidence. Rather than remaining as gaps – blank spaces in a life – they became sites of possibility.

This speculation and process of choosing what to include has two elements: plausibility and relevance. The first simply requires that the filling-in stays within the bounds of what might have been expected of that time and place. The second goes to the questions and tropes of that particular person’s life – what details are relevant to Oxford as a working-class, Birmingham-born bar worker are very different to those that would apply to a biography of Queen Victoria.

In choosing to write Oxford’s life as fiction, I hoped to also put aside the question of how much the research should “show” that is problematic in traditional biography.<sup>478</sup> Hermione Lee raises questions about the writer’s place in biography, such as whether writers should ignore some aspects of their subject or conflate events, and how biographers might be seen as “predatory” on subjects.<sup>479</sup> Lee’s questions seem to make it nearly impossible to write a non-fiction biography that purports to be a full and unbiased account of a historical life. In a similar vein, Penny Russell asks how analysis should be introduced to a biography – overtly or “by stealth”.<sup>480</sup> Russell quotes Sheila Kineke in seeking “a methodology of contrast, of contradiction” in dealing with the various possible views of a person’s life – I wanted to explore whether a fictional account could be that methodology. In fiction, Russell’s “stealth” is not required; rather, a writer can choose to focus on the issues and themes she is interested in without the risk of misrepresentation, exploiting fiction’s looser claims on representing the real.

The issues and themes I chose were informed by my current, 21<sup>st</sup> century biases and by my view of the 19<sup>th</sup> century world Oxford lived in. Of all the unavailable information, only some interested me; I didn’t care what Oxford ate for dinner on a given date, but I did care whether he relapsed after determining to live a good life in Australia. Using fiction, these unanswerable but germane questions became rich veins of inquiry into the person as he related to his society. They did of course, reflect on me and on the wider concept of what ‘a life’ is; the questions we ask of people’s lives are based on our understanding of what a life is and what is important in it.

I hoped to achieve several goals with this fictional account. One was to provide an account that could transform the partial, known version of Oxford’s life into an integrated, if fictional, whole. The aim was to provide a more coherent narrative, recognising that narrative is the way we understand lives. A related goal was to expand the story to include Oxford’s physical, social and cultural environment. This inclusion recognises the extent to which Oxford was a manifestation of the social and political world around him, and allows him to be used to further explore that world. Finally, I wanted to bring my point of view as a researcher/writer into the story in a deep way rather than simply through overt discussion of research methods and possible biases.

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<sup>478</sup> It’s worth mentioning here that I had already published a short traditional biography of Oxford’s life, (Sinclair, 2012).

<sup>479</sup> Lee, 2006, pp. 6-27.

<sup>480</sup> Russell, 2009, pp. 152-158.

I recognise that these goals involve crossover into the goals of historiography: in his analysis of biofiction, James Vicars rejects “the reductive *either* fiction *or* biography” dichotomy often demanded of such work. He adds that “writing fiction does not require abandoning historical perspectives or evidence but employs a different method of working with them.”<sup>481</sup> Fiction and history, as I argue in the critical essay component of this thesis, can co-exist and be complementary.

### 3.2: Developing themes

Putting the character of Oxford in a realistic setting, like a figure in a children’s diorama book, was not enough. Retelling the story with gaps filled in arbitrarily, if realistically, would technically be creating historical fiction, but it would not offer the reader anything a non-fiction account did not, apart from the aesthetic pleasure of an unbroken story arc. Rather, I wanted to follow the thinking of Ross Gibson on his creative non-fiction approach in *26 Views of the Starburst world*: that the text should take a form that “*works with* rather than *works away* the estrangement” of the incomplete archives.<sup>482</sup>

I decided that my fictionalisations needed to be both responsive to the nature of the gaps and informed by a set of themes and tropes that would carry the story and, I hoped, make the novel “about” something more than the life of a single historical character. Before I started writing, I had to consider the gaps in the record, and what they meant for this particular life. For instance, the question about whether Oxford relapsed took on extra significance when I asked myself why it mattered. The answer was that it mattered because if he didn’t relapse, then he had achieved his stated goal of reforming and living a life he could be proud of; this in turn showed me that one of the themes of both the biography and the fiction was reform. In seeking to understand how individuals (historical or otherwise) function in their setting and social group and how they see themselves as coherent over their lifetimes, I again found a need to construct a context around the central character. Alasdair MacIntyre describes how cleaving to a tradition – a set of socially prescribed values – is part of how a person constructs their identity, and it seemed to me that Oxford seems to have gone about creating his new identity in just this way.<sup>483</sup>

I needed to consider how the “Oxford” character would serve as a focal point for the story. From that consideration I came to several key creative decisions around voice, themes and what material to fictionalise, particularly archival material.

First, I had to decide how to depict Oxford himself. Unless I wrote in the voice of an omniscient narrator, first person was the only way to express the character’s inner feelings and doubts. Give the level of concealment the real Oxford practiced, those doubts had to be fictionalised if they were to be portrayed at all, and the simplest way of showing them was to put them in Oxford’s own voice. First person did present drawbacks in terms of the difficulty of giving other points of view and showing his unreliability; this led to a decision to incorporate both real and faux archival material. I hoped to be able to communicate that he was unreliable by incorporating telling material that showed how

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<sup>481</sup> Vicars 2019.

<sup>482</sup> Gibson, Ross, quoted in Griffiths, 2015, p. 16.

<sup>483</sup> MacIntyre, Alasdair, 2001 pp 241-263.

others might have viewed the narrator, such as trial evidence and interactions with others that could be read differently to the way Oxford interpreted them. His character in the early years could be developed more deeply by referring to third-party descriptions of him, with of course the caveat that many of those were given in very particular circumstances; in the trial and other reports of the shooting, it was in his relatives' interest to exaggerate his eccentricity in the hoping of his being found insane and his therefore not being executed. Newspaper reports had different motives for similar exaggerations.

Then, I had the man as revealed through his actions – first his attempt to shoot Queen Victoria in 1840, then the simple fact of his survival in the criminal wing of a notorious 19<sup>th</sup> century madhouse, then his membership of respectable social institutions in Australia, along with his reported actions as a child described in the trial.

Another factor in choosing first person was Oxford's unique voice; in his letters to Haydon and in his book and articles, a clear tone emerged. It was observant and friendly, but also noticeably self-conscious in the way it foregrounded his knowledge of the supposed audience and of wider matters. In *Lights and Shadows of Melbourne Life*, Oxford incorporated numerous classical allusions and a tone that could be described as preachy; this created a faintly pompous yet diffident effect, as if he was both promoting his own knowledge and simultaneously relying on it for his authority, lacking it in his own right. In order to tell the story sequentially and with a sense of perspective, I decided to have my character tell it as an old man looking back – this was also a plausible decision given Oxford's lifelong repression of his past combined with his writerly nature.

Choosing to write in the character's voice has wide precedent in Australian historical fiction; probably the best known example is Peter Carey's *True History of the Kelly Gang*, written in Ned Kelly's voice. I hoped that formally speaking, using such a voice would give the novel linguistic interest and distinguish it from traditional non-fiction narrative and by doing so, signal the gap between "what really happened" and a novel about the past; that is, because the text is so clearly "made up", the reader could comfortably read it as a fiction rather than as a faithful history.

At this point, I had the voice and I had the theme of reform. An examination of *how* Oxford reformed gave me a second theme, of memory. I was influenced by Richard Terdiman's writing on Freud, particularly the idea that what matters most is not the event that caused the memory, but how the memory is experienced.<sup>484</sup> In Oxford's case, where a single event (the assassination attempt) so radically changed the course of his life, the story he told himself about that event was critical, yet I had only a few scraps of his own writing and reported quotes to guide me in knowing how he thought about it. This suggested to me that the novel should explore how "Oxford" saw his actions through the device of multiple retellings, or re-rememberings, of the shooting, each given at a different stage of his life.

From the idea of Oxford's multiple versions of himself, the themes of the story expanded laterally to the possibility of multiple versions of the character "Edward Oxford". At various stages of his life Oxford faced dramatically different paths. His life would have been very different if he had not shot at the Queen, or if he'd been sentenced to prison instead of an asylum, for instance. Furthermore it presented numerous examples

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<sup>484</sup> Terdiman, 2010.

of possible other lives a person born in England around the same time as him could have lived, from his “idiot” sibling to his contemporary George Haydon. His life, too, was split into two parts: England and Australia. These examples of doubling, or shadowing, seemed to me to be an avenue through which to explore the historiographical nature of the story; that is, to question how things came to be as they were and not some other outcome.

Another theme in Oxford’s life, somewhat related to the idea of multiple versions of the man, was that of an inherent flaw that had to be concealed from the world and/or strictly controlled. At his trial, the idea that he suffered hereditary insanity was clearly articulated; less clear, but present, was the suggestion that his black ancestor was the source of this flaw in his blood. In his later writing, Oxford himself didn’t allude to the possibility of his having a propensity to madness, but I wanted to explore further what the impact might have been of being publicly told, at a very young age, by everyone he knew and loved, that he was essentially fated to madness and weakness.

Oxford’s ancestor – a freed slave – bequeathed him a connection to the situation he would encounter in Australia, where being “of colour” was a severe disadvantage. It’s possible to interpret his act of shooting at Queen Victoria as one consequence of colonial slavery practices. He would have been somewhat aware of Indigenous Australians through his reading of Haydon’s books, the display of Indigenous artefacts at Bethlem and whatever else Haydon told him. While I did not seek to make Indigenous-settler contact in any way a primary theme of the novel, particularly as Oxford’s own records do not mention any such contact, I wanted the “historical” part of the historical novel to at least acknowledge that aspect of the setting Oxford found himself in.

These themes – reform, memory, multiple versions of the self and the “fatal flaw” or hidden stain – could be combined under the concept of reinvention. I was aware that numerous of Oxford’s contemporaries migrated to Australia seeking a “reinvented” life, making these themes relevant to a wider historical consideration of British-Australian immigration, with Oxford an extreme example. But as a fiction writer, I was able to select from the archive and secondary material according to those themes rather than the imperatives of historical accuracy. It was really at this point that the work diverged from historiography.

The first sentence of the novel points to these themes: “If I am to tell you my story, you need to know this: that I am a liar and a lunatic, a deceiver and a madman.” I hoped that in its recursive nature – if a narrator says they are a liar, should you believe them? – and its reference to duplicity and madness, this opening would alert the reader to evidence and counter-evidence for its assertions. Using Oxford’s own voice signals that this is a faux biography and that the reader will need to engage directly with the character and decode his version of the story, including his interpretation of the “archival” material offered.

### 3.3: Practical choices

The following and final section of this chapter discusses examples of decisions I made in order to help the novel develop the themes above. I found that factual matters could be broadly divided into two kinds; what could be thought of as historically germane, and what could be thought of as details.

The “historically germane” included dates of events, the identity of participants and exact locations. The second included matters such as the rooms where meetings were held, weather, food that was eaten and clothes worn – the kind of details that are not essential to the story but lend verisimilitude.

Known historical events generally did not need alteration or additions. For the most part they suited the purposes of the novel as they were, with a few exceptions, noted below. As well, the historical record was extensive and detailed enough to provide characters, plot etc. without fabrication. Where an account of events could not be found in the archives – most notably the first few years of Oxford’s incarceration and his first few years in Melbourne – I created a fictional account that fitted within the realms of the likely. I employed what Vicars has called “a technique of accretion”, building on known events.

For some other events I altered the account to allow the inclusion of material I was familiar with, or felt would contribute to the characterisation and story. For instance, in the novel I have his fellow inmate Richard Dadd talking about specific sites in Italy and Greece, countries I know he visited, in order to have him talk about the scope of history compared to the lives of individual men, although I don’t have details of him going to those actual sites.<sup>485</sup>

In the account of the trial, I altered some quotes in very minor ways – for instance, in questioning Oxford’s mother, Mr Bodkin is recorded as saying “I must trouble you” for details of her husband’s behaviour; in order to emphasise the courtly consideration implied here, I have Oxford reporting that Bodkin said he was “sorry to trouble her.” I gave his “idiot” older sibling a gender – the trial refers to it only as “the child”, but earlier in the narrative I had already had the mother revealing the child’s existence to Oxford, and felt it unlikely that a mother would refer to a dead sibling as “it” in discussions with a living child.

Some witness statements are given out of order for narrative purposes. For instance, the evidence of family members and witnesses to the shooting were not grouped together during the trial, but to avoid jumping back and forth between events, I’ve moved some witnesses to the first day of the trial and some family members to the second. This also has the effect of slightly changing Oxford’s subjective experience of the trial, in that the events of the shooting are foregrounded on the morning of the first day, allowing for him to harbour some feelings of importance around the infamy of the attempt. Then his mother’s evidence delivers a psychological blow that afternoon, his family and friends continue that damage on the second day, followed finally by the medical opinions on his sanity.

Similarly, some details of the period between Oxford’s arrest and the trial have been altered slightly to emphasise their effect on the character. He was believed to associate with several other prisoners in Newgate, but I’ve reduced that to one in particular to allow the story to focus on the effect of that man’s hanging on Oxford. After refusing one lawyer, that lawyer left the case and a second was appointed – that detail has been altered to make the lawyer one person, for simplicity.

One direct quote, in which Oxford appears to be enjoying the level of attention his trial is bringing, was moved from the main trial to an earlier court appearance as by the

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<sup>485</sup> Alleridge, 1974.

time of the main trial I wanted to make his attitude more serious and more affected by his time in jail (“Nothing else will be talked of but me for a long time”). These decisions were mostly aimed at signalling that the character is unreliable and motivated by vanity and self-doubt.

Because the story was written in first person, I needed a mechanism by which to insert other points of view and archival material. By giving the narrator a personal archive, I was able to incorporate real material, such as newspapers and Oxford’s letters to others, and fictional material, such as letters *to* Oxford from his family and close friends, none of which are in the real archive. The fictional locked box was based on the actual box of “Young England” documents found in Oxford’s room by police; that the contents of that box appear to have been lost seemed to me to invite fictionalising not only that box, but another that Oxford created later to conceal his secret.

The incorporation of such “evidence” and mentions of its creation, such as the “scratching of the court-reporter’s pen” allowed me to provide other perspectives on Oxford’s unreliable evidence, as well as foregrounding the archival nature of my knowledge of the historical character on which my fictional character was based. In this, I was influenced by Kim Scott, particularly in *Benang*, where the juxtaposition of real and fictional archival material with the main text suggests radically different interpretations of the archives to those apparently intended by the archive’s creators. As in *Benang*, the inclusion of real material ensured that the novel’s narrative was based in historical research, and the fictionalised material served to either fill in the gaps or to provide an alternative voice – for instance where I used a fictional diary to provide a possible set of events occurring during Oxford’s incarceration, for which records are thin.

Site visits, as discussed in the previous section, were key to giving the character a realistic experience of the world. When I visited the UK, I had drafted about half of the novella. The visit provided me not only with new archival information and direct access to the records kept of Oxford’s life, but also with information about the settings of key events. The previous chapter, on research, has outlined some of how site visits helped me form a sense of the places Oxford had inhabited; below is an example of how details were incorporated in the manuscript.

Before the visit, I had already drafted a scene in which Oxford and Hayden discuss Oxford’s move to Broadmoor. This is the scene before I went to the former Bethlehem Asylum and the square where Oxford had lived:

“I will write to Broadmoor. Dr Hood will write. Comport yourself as you have here and they will see you are no lunatic. Mercy and justice will prevail.”

“It is nearly twenty-four years I have been waiting,” I said.

“We will not forget you. I will write to those I can, and I will write to you. You will find friends, Edward, and not lose those you have already.”

He stood.

“If time permits, I will visit you. You may write to me, but most of all, you *must* behave well, not matter what the provocation. Your perfect record is your ticket out of the madhouse. Do not blemish it.”

He shook my hand with both of his and I was struck again, once more and one last time, how tall and hale and healthy he appeared standing over me, though we were of an age.

He called: the keeper came and I left him for the last time.

Redrafting it after my return, I used photographs and notes to create a stronger sense of place and of Oxford's personal reflections. The scene occurs at the time of year that I was in London, and in a room that would have been very similar to the ones I was given access to in the building, if not one of the rooms I actually inspected. I hoped to give a sense of Oxford being both condemned to life behind bars but also hopeful of eventual release.

I will write to Broadmoor. Dr Hood will write. Comport yourself as you have here and they will see you are no lunatic. Mercy and justice will prevail."

"It is nearly twenty-four years I have been waiting," I said. Over his shoulder I could see out to the Lambeth Road. The trees were new-green and did not yet block the whitish sky; carts were moving slowly towards the river crossing and the City. In West-Square, I knew, the blossoms would be bursting out around the little fenced-in garden, petals falling to the ground.

"We will not forget you. I will write to those I can, and I will write to you. You will find friends, Edward, and not lose those you have already."

He stood. Against the brightly lit window his figure was but a silhouette, pinned in place by the crossbars of the panes.

"If time permits, I will visit you. You may write to me, but most of all, you *must* behave well, not matter what the provocation. Your perfect record is your ticket out of the madhouse. Do not blemish it."

He shook my hand with both of his and I was struck again, once more and one last time, how tall and hale and healthy he appeared standing over me, though we were of an age.

He called: the keeper came; the heavy door closed quietly on his ordered room as I left him.

Of course the features of the rooms and settings that struck me the most – the arches on the asylum windows, the effect of the new leaves on the trees and the blossom trees in West-Square – may not have been particularly prominent for Oxford. In a historical treatment, I might have been able to describe these things, but I would not have been able to render them through Oxford's point of view. The choices I made in these matters were not exactly arbitrary, being informed by the kind of character I wanted my fictional Oxford to be, but they were certainly subjective; each feature had to first be noticed by me, then be judged appropriate for the character to notice and recall many years later.

To foreground the colonial nature of Oxford's life trajectory novel includes extracts from Haydon's books about the Victorian frontier period, and details drawn from his sketches to do with Indigenous Australians, as well as a fictional encounter between Oxford and Indigenous woman on the streets of Melbourne.<sup>486</sup>

The choices above are of detail and what to keep in or leave out; I also had to make structural decisions and alterations to timelines. I wanted to render the majority of

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<sup>486</sup> Haydon, George, 1846, 1854 and NLA MS 09.140.

the plot as recollection, in order to allow the character to reflect on events and themes throughout. However I also wanted to allow for different perspectives over his life and changes in his character as expressed through his own real and fictionalised writing. In beginning the telling of the story at a point late in his life, I was able to tell most of the story in past tense; to retain some narrative tension, I chose a point where his life still had several years to run, then jumped forward a few years to show how the subsequent five or so years had treated him. Those subsequent five years comprised a number of setbacks and bereavements which I wanted to have contrast with the positive achievements of the time he began to write his story (a la the “lights and shadows” of his own book).

Some of the dates of key events did not completely suit this structure – in particular, I wanted to use his relationship with his correspondent and friend, George Haydon, as a trigger for him telling his story. Haydon’s death, which in my telling would trigger Oxford to begin recording his story, occurred slightly after (1891) some of the events which occurred in the five-year break during which his fortunes fell (1890-95), so I moved the death back to the start of that period. This was probably the most significant alteration to the known facts (as distinct from filling in gaps) but given that no letters from Oxford to Haydon dated after 1889 survived (none of Haydon’s to Oxford have been found), and that the letters and the events in the five-year break were not causally relate, this seemed to be an alteration which didn’t substantially distort the course of historical events. Some of Haydon’s personal timeline has been altered to bring out issues in Oxford’s life on which Haydon may have had influence. At the time he worked at Bethlem, Haydon was no longer practicing as an emigration agent, but was still lecturing patients on emigration. I’ve suggested he was still an agent in order to highlight his ongoing interest in and promotion of emigration throughout his life.

The most important device in tying together the themes discussed above was the rendering of multiple versions of the shooting. The character reveals the shooting in the first paragraph of the novel, rather than building up to it in a conventional narrative or “thriller” fashion – “That I have pointed a gun at a young woman, - a woman who was with child, and fired it; that I did so twice. That young woman was the Queen of England – but that did not make the act better, or worse.”

From there, the character tells the story as he saw it as a young man (as a heroic act), as a man sentenced to life in an asylum (as a foolish decision), as an older, free man (as a thoughtless and harmful attack on an innocent person) and as a dying man considering the scope of his life (as a turning point that brought both good and bad to him.) It’s also rendered through the more sober focalisation of the trial evidence, which considers the event as a *legal* issue, and that to do mostly with the Queen’s importance, not Oxford’s, and through the sensational reporting of the newspapers, which treated it as spectacle. In retelling the shooting multiple times, I hoped to demonstrate the importance, a la Terdiman, of how an event is remembered, and the difference that perspective, over time, makes to events, itself a central concern of history.

## Section Two conclusion:

In this part of the thesis, I have attempted to show the evolution of the project from initial research through to a novel designed to stand alone as a piece of fiction. I've provided a conventional account of Oxford's life for context for the novel extract that follows, and to show what I was able to reconstruct from the archival evidence and other research.

By detailing the process of historical research, I have shown how gaps in the record, the nature of the available material and my own individual interests led me to write a fiction based on Oxford's life; finally, I've analysed the decisions I made in writing the novel and how I attempted to balance historical accuracy and maintaining some fidelity to what I knew about Oxford as a historical figure with the need to create a self-contained, dramatic and formally interesting work of fiction.

In discussing such work, Donna Lee Brien suggested that it could both offer further grounds for investigation, and show how creativity can be enhanced in other fields.<sup>487</sup> My analysis has attempted to offer such insights by detailing how individual pieces of archival material, information and sites combine with the powerful cohesive force of story.

I particularly found through the course of my research that fiction offered a mode that allowed personal engagement with the subject, the investigation of matters unavailable through the archive, and a final text that carried a sense of narrative closure unavailable to historiography.

The novel *Lights and Shadows of Melbourne Life* runs to approximately 80,000 words; the next and final section of the thesis compromises the first 40,000 words of the novel.

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<sup>487</sup> Brien, 2006, p. 53.

### **Section Three: novel extract: *Lights and Shadows of Melbourne Life***

#### **1: To the Reader**

If I am to tell you my story, you need to know this: that I am a liar and a lunatic, a deceiver and a madman. That I have pointed a gun at a young woman – a woman who was with child, and fired it; that I did so twice. That young woman was the Queen of England – but that did not make the act better, or worse.

Before you hear me, I must tell you that I am vain and weak and did what I did out of sheer self-regard and a desire to be Famous. Famous! When once I was Famous, or rather Infamous, I wanted nothing more in the world than to be unknown. I had to murder myself wholly and cross the globe to escape what my Famous name had made of me.

I have lived locked up with ravers, killers, screamers, with the seers of visions and the hearers of angels. My friends were the deranged, my enemies the same. There is nothing you can tell me of mankind that will surprise me because I have seen it raw, unmannered and smearing its own shit on freshly painted walls.

I am still lying. Not to you, who are only pen and paper after all, but to my wife, my stepfamily whom I love as my own, my associates in business and to the entire clergy and congregation of the Anglican Churches of Melbourne. To the entire population of that good city, for that matter. Every day at every moment this lie continues. It is for the best. They are good people.

A long time ago I wrote to a friend that to be known as a criminal was to tie a stone around the neck of a man.

*“All that,” I wrote, “at a distance, and where he is unknown, is prevented. He can find his own level.”*

My true level, it appears, is that of a vestryman and business owner, a part-time scribbler and a taker of Sunday afternoon walks around the neat shores of Albert Park Lake with a dear wife, greeting neighbours and commenting on sailing-boats and puppies on leashes. That is what I am, in Melbourne.

Tomorrow I will leave my house at 7.30 a.m. and board the railroad to the city. At 8.10 I will be in my office, looking over accounts and lists of work for the day. At 8.45 the apprentice will arrive – or he will not work at all that day, the beggar – and at half past nine we will leave Queen Street with a cart laden with paints and ladders.

My apprentice thinks me rather grand, because I am from England, and so speak well. He is of course Australian and bleats like a sheep when he opens his mouth. I was taught by a member of the Royal Academy to form my vowels correctly. That man was a true gentleman; he helped me shed my Birmingham accent and taught me drawing and the mixing of pigments. He also chopped up his father with a knife and a razor, but otherwise, a good man, and an artist of no small talent.

Tomorrow evening the vestry meets at six, and at seven-thirty I will collect my wife, Jane Freeman, *Mrs* Freeman, from the new Mission building where she serves the poor with meals thrice weekly. It is early spring in Melbourne and the evenings are still chilly, so we may have a fire at tea-time and sit a while before the marbled mantelpiece (I may admire its folded hues for a moment – they are my own work). We will watch the shadows of our house lengthen, gazing out across the little park outside our house

through the tall windows of our drawing-room. I am looking through them now, out past the verandah-posts and the railing fence, and I could fancy I am in West-Square, London, fifty years ago.

Little Jenny, my step-grand-daughter, is running about upstairs and shrieking happily. Less patient men would call for quiet, but this *is* quiet, to a man who's lived in Bedlam.

Henry Haydon died last month. I have not seen him all this quarter-century, but I am very grieved. I'd hoped somehow that we might meet again, though I may never go to England - may not, can not, am forbidden evermore - I'd hoped the pull of youthful haunts, if not my friendship, might bring him here to Melbourne and we could meet at last as equals. We always were so, Henry and I, although he was free and I was not, and that equality sprang from his noble nature, which took me as I was and could be, not as I - d Fame would have me.

At least I have the consolation that we exchanged some letters at the end. But never to see him again! I surrendered long ago my mother and my sisters and even good old Linton, my childhood friend. The law forbade that they might see me and they were better off without my sort of Fame at any pass. The time I had with them was the happy dawn to match the happy twilight I now enjoy. But Haydon knew me in the madhouse in the full blaze of midday - it was not dark in there, the light was, rather, too bright and searching - he reached out his hand - showed me what a man like me could be, as much by his example as by his words - and now that I am old, nearly seven decades, I had thought to show him John Freeman of Melbourne to say: you see, you were right to put faith and trust in me. But he is dead.

When I met him, I was thirty-one years old. I was a man who walked in circles. I had found my God, but not my spirit. (By that I mean I prayed night and day to a Father in Heaven, begged a Son to intercede for me and if not deliver me from that place, at least to protect me from its worst.) I was surviving. I had long conversations with madmen about their fantastic beliefs, and understood the secrets of the Pyramids as revealed to them in dreams. I knew which doors to enter with my arms crossed in a secret sign of peace, and which men to run from when the dull shuffling of their feet turned to a warlike beat. I was a man who ate with his eyes on his plate, although the fare was always much the same.

At the arrival of Henry Haydon, I was a man who had been beaten, but who no longer was: the keepers had learned some kindness, and that I could be reasoned with besides. The lunatics who beat me had variously died, moved on to new objects of hatred, or having arrived there after me, had been impressed by my reception of them - a cocklike show of status and strength that I found regrettable to enact, but which kept me safe long after, when I passed them in the galleries.

I worked. I studied my languages when I could. I kept the walls clean and my books neat and ordered. But I was a sane man alone with madmen. I could hardly trust my own thoughts, and not at all the words of those around me (the barked orders of the keepers being merely oil in the machinery of Bedlam, hardly qualifying as speech.)

Henry Haydon was my window onto the world outside; a world of nature, of scholarly enquiry, of manners and most of all a world of conversation, where a human being could seek to understand another, and equally could express his thoughts and

understandings and hope to be truly apprehended. I left him behind, but he never left my thoughts.

Now Haydon is gone. I am sixty-eight years old and there is no one whom I may hope will ever know me. John Freeman of Melbourne cannot be Edward Oxford of Birmingham, London, Bethlem and Broadmoor. For one to live, the other had to die and if the first returns, the second will cease to be. While Haydon was alive, there was a man who knew me and would still be my friend.

So I turn to pen and paper to lay out what I have been and perhaps afterwards I'll see if I – John Freeman – might be a friend to Edward Oxford. I am already a published author and perhaps, once I am dead and my wife too, some one might read this and if not admire me, comprehend at least.

This is not for Posterity, or Fame. Fame is the basilisk gaze of the wider world and I abhor it. It cannot be controlled or channelled and very much distorts its object. This is for my self, to face, at last, the mirror.

## **2: My Beginnings**

I was born in Birmingham in April of 1822. My mother was a kind girl, a tavern-keeper's daughter with too-indulgent parents who foolishly let her believe the world was good and that every person had some redeeming grace. She was too soft, too sympathetic and too easily brought under another's will. She was small – neat – dressed in grey and white and pastel pink and blues for shawls and bonnets and her straight brown hair was limp and would never stay beneath its covers. Her eyes were grey too, like mine, but flecked with gold when tears were in them, which was often in my memory, and which I believe began the day she married my father.

He was my father. I will not speak ill of him, but I will tell the truth. My father was a black man – only a little so, the son of the son of the son of a truly dark man – but he believed others saw it in him, and was quick to take offence. He was an artist, a genius with metal, but he did not embrace his gift. He worked that gift as if it was a railroad navvy, and he himself behaved like one.

But I see I am ahead of myself, by going back so far. My father's sins, the dark stain on my family tree, my mother's faults and suffering; all these go to the point, but around that point I dance too much. To say again: I shot at a woman, not once but twice. What a dreadful thing to do! The chatter at my trial – the guns were loaded, the guns were not – hardly seems to me now to matter. The roaring in my ears still sounds and I still wake at night sometimes thinking if-if-if! If I had scared the horses. If she had fallen. If she had lost her child. And I wonder again that I was not run down, or shot, and that I have lived this long to see her Empire in her old age, and to so regret my actions.

To put it plainly: In June of 1840, I walked to Buckingham Palace. I waited outside for the Queen and her consort to come, in their carriage. When they did, I stepped out from the crowd and fired not one gun, but two. I was aged eighteen: she, twenty-one years old.

As I grow old, I peer back in my quiet moments at that boy and wonder: why? I look around me at my fellow men, none of whom are without sin, but all of whom have kept their sins private, or at least small. They are as different from the lunatics of Bethlem

as a lapdog is from a Tiger from Tasmania; they have the same basic attributes, but so differently expressed that they are different beasts entirely.

And I wonder what I might have been, had things been different when I was young. For what good example did I have before me? I had my mother's love, for certain, and her great patience, but of how to be a man? Nothing but a few milksop teachers and uninterested uncles and so on. My picture of manhood came from books, from histories and novels, where heroes and villains were raised up alike as figures of life, and the news-papers, where stirring opposition to the Government and sometimes even the Throne were given notice. My ideas of Strength came from a Father who would not be crossed, and family tales of a naval Grandfather who captured Spanish Ships for King and Country.

To be dressed well, in black mourning like a gentleman; to be linked in destiny with the Queen of Empire; to be regarded by Lords and Dukes if not win their high regard; to be spoken of all over London: all that seemed manly, and who was there to stop me? My father cared for me, but he also beat my mother often. I could not see her as a guide in life, not after what I saw her mutely bear. Many times, too, he was cold and indifferent in my presence and *his* regard was all I wanted. What upbringing for a child of sensitivity and intelligence is that? Where was the light showing the path I should have taken? Is it any wonder I chose to step into false limelight, into that moment's silence of the crowd produced by the firing of my guns?

I do not excuse that boy. But I pity him. To be without a father.

He died when I was seven years old. A boy of such tender years, you might think, a father gone so soon. But seven years old is not all that young if the boy is sharp. Was I sharp? My schoolmasters would tell you yes, and no. They despaired of having me learn my lessons and I will confess to tormenting my classmates with flights of fancy when I would have been much better perfecting my penmanship. Even today I can't swear to the right date of Napoleon's return to Paris, though my ears were cuffed on the subject more than twice. I would *not* sit still and the beams of light shining on my desk and the clouds outside the window were more fascinating than my arithmetic, it's true.

The other boys disliked me, or I them, for my not wanting to play their games, or for my seeing that their games were foolish. Laughing has always been my weakness, and many persons do not enjoy the sound of laughter if they suspect they are themselves the joke.

But I could recite Macbeth's soliloquy on the death of his Lady without a single error, and I once answered every question on a Latin examination paper in the same way. When a subject took my interest, no boy could learn it faster. Who, though, was there to care?

My father was my god. This is a blasphemy, I know, but I was only seven years old and rarely went to church. Father did not like it anyway. Mother cared for me and fed me and was ever constant and familiar. If she ever left me, it was because she must. She had five mouths to feed beside her own and only Sophia was a help to her. My mother gave me everything, but it was my father whom I wanted.

He beat her and she would cry and I thought she ought not cry because at least he was not again away. He was away too often and when he did return he was always poor. But he would pick me up and hold me at his height and look into my face with his large brown eyes and I always felt he was seeing me afresh, as if he had created me himself

from nowhere, and where Mother had worry and care and kisses and stale bread, Father had a kind of fierceness in his love that caused me to want to please him. I would stare back and try not to tremble until he laughed and dropped me down onto my feet.

When he returned Mother would cook a meal of bones and vegetables and broth, which he would slurp and sop at with a piece of bread. That day, or the next, he would walk out and down to Vyse Street to look for work. If I was dressed and shod and moved quick, I could follow him outdoors.

The workshops were forbidden to me. Small boys were not permitted in the dark rooms with the gold and silver bars and the fumes of smelting in the air. There were men at the door whose job it was to see small boys did not get in, though small boys may I admit not have been their main charge – it may have been the gold. So I would wait outside the goldsmiths' shops, press myself into a corner and peer in at the plate, the tiny figures impressed upon the cups and knives and forks; the boxes worked with twined metals and inlaid stone, until Father came out with money in his hands. Then mother would be happy and the soup was of meat too.

But after a time Father would stop working and take to drink again. Mother knew this and would buy as much flour and corn and stuff for sewing as she could while the money was still there. I saw her take banknotes from his coat pocket once, while he slept at the table, and hide it in the mattress. That night I lay in bed with the baby while they quarrelled, and I heard him strike her, but I did not look out or cry or tell a tale. She ought not have taken the money, but if I gave it back to him, I knew we would go hungry.

For myself, I was not afraid. He would not strike me, not hard enough to injure. A little slap, a strap to the behind; he was not harsh with me. He called me Teddy, Sonny and best of all My Boy. He gave me pencils and a book to draw in and assigned me tasks and subjects: a Sunset, a Potato on the Table, a Jug, and when I'd done my poor attempt, he'd draw himself a perfect cloud or Sunflower and show me how the parts of the Thing were assembled and how the pencil on the page could do the same. I thought he saw in me an Artist and I loved him.

Besides, when he died, things were no better. Mother was less bruised and fearful but we were hungrier and no one else could help us. There were no times of Plenty only bread and water and a stew of beef on Sunday more fat than flesh and the baby she had last died quickly and I had to wrap it in a shawl for mother would not cease crying and though I danced and smiled for her it was as if I did not matter at all beside a mere Baby that was dead and could not be brought back and even the Priest said it was not Godly to grieve so.

Still that did not last long. My Grandfather came and spoke to Mother and my Sister and then to me and it was decided: I must go to school And though I knew it was costly and a Privilege I was bereft, because my drawing things must be left behind and my Father would not be back again to lift me up in strong brown arms and call me Little Man and I would never make a Horse and Carriage out of Gold with precious stones for eyes as he had promised.

And I did not want to leave her. I helped my mother in her work. I woke early with her and minded children and mixed the breads and decorated cakes. When she opened a Refreshment Room, I took coffee to the customers and wiped up their spills and dribbles without complaint. I worked hard, but no one seemed to like my ways and would frown at me for laughing at a bird I saw, or push me aside if I lingered to hear their

conversation (hungry as I was for knowledge of the World). So I would become angry – I was only a boy – and I would find plates smashed at my feet or coffee on a customer's dress coat and Mother would chase me up the stairs and I would sit and rock myself until I saw how very stupid it all was and then laugh again until my sister came to hush me with a finger to her lips. I had been baptised then, with little Jane who died and Abigail who always laughed with me but died while we were in Birmingham with Mother's cousin. I wondered then, was that a punishment, as Father had no time for the Church and had forbade our heads to be wet with water? That fancy I see now was not even blasphemy but the foolish superstition of a boy who could not see the world in right proportion – that my Father's anger from the grave would overturn God's pleasure in a new soul brought to Him? You see how wrongly set my mind could be.

I worked. I was sure soon Mother would see how hard I worked and reward me with the right to stay.

But she did not. Mother sent me off to school and took Susannah with her to a house where they kept the parlour clean for a widower who never received visitors. They were together while I went to live with Mr Sandon, the husband of my aunt.

I did not like the children there. They would not play with me, and called me stupid. They threw stones and when I caught the oldest in a corner and rubbed nettles on his skin, he cried and ran to Sandon instead of taking what was due him. Every afternoon at three Sandon gathered his own children and the two boys from next door – odd twins, quite alike and like no other – and taught us letters, numbers and sayings from the Bible until dinner, and called it School. I was quick in learning, but still the children called me stupid because I did not know their games and they would not teach me. So I sat and laughed at them to show how little I cared and Sandon would come to the door of his work-room and gaze at me as if I were a piece of cloth that would not quite fit the pattern he was making.

Mother wrote. Sandon wrote back. And on a Saturday at four, just as I was reciting the Lord's Prayer like a good boy, she came to the house and took me from my lesson, and the house, and Sandon.

We took the train to London on the Monday. Mother had Susannah with her, trotting behind like a foal at foot. I sat beside the window and looked out at the countryside; white houses, harvested sheaves piled up on carts and here and there a copse of autumnal oaks. Once, half a mile away, I saw the red coats and flashing harness of a hunt. The line of men and horses flowed over the sharp-edged fences and the field-edges and plunged into a valley; the train went on, but I thought I heard a horn blow.

Mother of course, was talking. She told me of her widower employer, how kind he was to let her live-in and how I must be quiet in the mornings; how Susannah was helping her so much and how she hoped that I would be a good boy in London, all until I fell asleep with my forehead against the glass and woke coughing with a headache from the smoking of the engine and the shaking of the carriage.

Darkness met us in London: darkness and cold mist and a hundred boys and men bothering Mother to engage them for the luggage, which she could not afford and anyway was only my two bags and her hold-all. So we arrived at the house in darkness, lit just one candle and ate the bread and gruel Susannah put out in the kitchen. I was put to bed on a blanket on the floor of our one room. Mother and Susannah lay awake, talking, and I heard my name in their whispers, but did not know or care what they were saying.

There was nothing for me in that house. I was sent to a school and then another and always the children teased me and I had to go away again. For a time, mother ran a cook-shop, but she would not let me work there. I bothered people, she said.

It's true I was not normal. I would not respect my elders. I spoke out of turn. I laughed too often. Mother told me a tale one day, after the doors were closed and we were washing down the floors together.

Father, she said – and she rarely spoke of father – father had been less than kind to her.

“You were my third child, Edward,” she said, slapping the mop along the flagstones. I evinced surprise: Susannah was my elder and there were none between.

“It died?”

“It died. That was a blessing, Edward.” This from a woman who wept herself near to death over a mere Baby.

“It was almost four years old. You were more than two.”

I could not recall this child.

“It was an imbecile. He mistreated me when I was expecting it. He cursed it, Edward, with monkey noises and monkey faces, and the baby was no more than a monkey. It suffered greatly.”

Why she chose to tell me this fact now I did not understand.

“Edward. Edward.” I did not like this, when she put her hands on my shoulders and gazed into my eyes. It made me want to twist away and run, to hack perhaps at some piece of wood, to move in some quick way. “Edward, do not be like him. Your father provided well, but he allowed himself to follow all his basest urges. He had something in him - ”

Something dark, I thought. I knew my father's black grandfather was a reason my mother's family had not treated him as they should have. And that darkness was in me, though my skin was fair and my hair nearly red. I could only laugh at the thought of my own blood damning me, and mother dropped her pail and ran outside to bang at the rugs, leaving me to finish cleaning.

So though Mother tried her best, she and Susannah were like persons outside the window of a pet-shop, calling out to the creature inside – that was me – and their words carried to me with neither clarity nor sense.

I found work doing those tasks I knew, being the cleaning and running generally of drinking-houses. My aunt Clarinda took me on a while at the King's Head, which house belonged to her husband. It was a road-side pub, that is to say open to all comers and with very little in the way of regular clientele. There I learned what little I did not already know about running a bar; I learned the right way to hold a glass to make a perfect head of foam on the beer, and the best words with which to make a drunken man believe you think him sober and quite reasonable (as few as possible, that is.) In this time I lost the little habit I'd had of church and contemplation; without my mother and Susannah I was free to stay up late talking with men of travels and others who were going no place whatsoever. One time – and this was later much discussed – I became embroiled in a scene of violence.

I was sixteen and charged with running the establishment while my uncle was in London on some errand. The stable boys next door had always been insolent to me, on account of my habit of reading, I thought. There was one, known as Wink, who delighted

to pelt me with substances unpleasant when my back was turned. So when my business took me to the stables and he repeated the offence, I felt it was time to deal with him conclusively. His fellows – three urchins, really, who inhabited the horses' stalls in exchange for their labour when they could be roused to it – joined in and I found myself surrounded.

Seeing that I must assert my role as master of the public-house, I took a boxing stance – this only made them laugh, until I bloodied two of four noses. Then *their* master, the stable man, came out and bid me off, to which I objected; he added force to his persuasion, and I unwisely defended myself with a weapon, in the form of a chisel I found handy. I may have used strong words and threats, in order merely to make myself more fearsome and bring the matter to a close. As I saw it, I had simply stood my ground, and the matter was all inside the King's Head's business, as the stable made its money from our patrons, but when the stable-man's blood began to fall, some fool called for the police and I was charged. A fine, and conviction for assault, and the man did not even lose his position!

I moved on, of course, out of my aunt's protection but also away from the stable-boys and their equine excrement.

Working in bars seemed to me both inevitable and intolerable; the Hat and Feathers, the Shepherd and Flock and like establishments. My mother took no interest, as long as I was working; this, her manner seemed to say, was good enough for me. Her perfect satisfaction on the subject galled me; I wanted adventure and excitement of the kind I read about in books.

An ocean life appealed, I thought. Though my grandfather was a sailor of great note, my childhood in Birmingham acquainted me with no water greater than a canal or open drain, where I could float paper boats and sticks on rushing currents.

### **3: How I Lost My Way**

Few persons can point to a single moment in time and say, with perfect certainty, that that was the crisis; that was the hour and minute upon which all their subsequent life turned. I can. I can see before me always the backs of the gentlemen I stepped around, the trunks of the trees across the carriageway, the forequarter of the outrider's horse, and the sunlight coming from behind the carriage, casting dappled shadows on those who rode in it. In my recollection, strange to say, the Queen is not just a woman. She is quite short of stature, I believe, and I know her age then was just twenty-one years. Such a person should have taken up only a very little space.

Yet in memory she looms so large. Her cream-coloured gown and sombre shawl – grey, I think or a kind of mottled beige – seem to present a face something like a mountain's – her hair, pulled back and tied low beneath a hat or bonnet, to be so dark as to take all the light that touches it – but her face I can never quite see, perhaps only the 'O' of surprise as my shot roared out, perhaps a glimpse of profile as she turns to her husband.

I do see clearly, though, the smoke from my pistol and even feel the cool unyielding steel of the trigger beneath my finger. And all the sound and smoke and the ache in my arm from the pistols' jolt are mixed together and the second shot was just an afterthought, simply the next step in my plan, my predestined path.

There was, I fancy now, a half a second when, the pistol still concealed, I could have turned away. I had no clear view of her as yet but the carriage was approaching and the murmur in the crowd was turning to a cacophony of voices. My hand was upon the grip inside my pocket. I could have waved instead – let out a little cheer or huzzah-like sound – gone back to the Leopard Coffee House, settled my account and ordered supper. It was the work of seconds to do the thing I did instead.

No, few people can know the moment that unmade them as I do. Perhaps those more fortunate might identify a meeting with a benefactor, a stroke of fortune, that helped them on their way, but so much more goes to success. One must work hard, plan and build alliances. It is not done in an instant, whereas my fall was all at once.

Those who succeed, I suppose, have less time to consider their fortune and its sources. I have had so long alone to contemplate and read, to view myself from every angle. I know myself too well; I am the thing I cannot escape. Therefore, an observation drawn from introspection and the honesty I charge myself with no. It was not the impulse of an instant. A month at least I planned and dreamed – yes, dreamed at night abed as well as day-dreams as I wandered London – before the dreaming turned to action.

When I left the Hog in Pound, it was on good terms with Mr Robinson, or at least good enough to allow of my returning there to meet my friends. I had only a little store of money, although my mother did not ask me to pay any board and I could live well enough from what she and Susannah provided. Susannah's husband of course found ways to express his feelings about helping support a young man able to work; yet it was simple enough to avoid him by the means of rising after he departed the house and ensuring I was out in the evenings until well beyond his bed-time.

Here, in my hand, barely 18 years of age, I set down my manifesto:

I am Edward Oxford and I will be Famous. I shall be known through all the Land. I am not meant for this life. Pots and dirty rags and scrubbing benches is not for me. Mother is at me again about Money and I would like to tell her to go to Hell but she is so afraid of me it makes me even more angry and so I will not.

There is no business today and the lounge is all mine and a little draught of Beer and the best Seat as well and if Robinson comes I will catch it good but I don't care I have seen worse my Mother knows. This will be all in the Past when I am Famous I shall do a thing so Bold and Brave none will doubt that Edward Oxford is a Man of strong mind and stout Will.

I have the Guns already.

It is Summer now. The Sun dawns early and I am awake and the starlings hopping on the eaves scratch at my ears they sound so close. But far away are the sounds of the street below, outside my window though I keep the window open for the air and it is only 14 feet from the sill to the stoop below.

The horses are what I hear the most. I do not like the sound of voices so I choose not to. I hear the horses snort and stamp and

then move off with smart steps and I imagine they have no riders like the Houyhnhms in Swift and wish I could descend the stairs and speak to them of reason.

They say that melancholy is a thickening of the fluids: that a black humour overtakes the mind and body like a tide. Thus invaded, the limbs are sluggish and the eyes are dull, as if the shadow of the illness had a weight all its own. The mind is fixed on either one small point, or nothing at all – some melancholics can sit all day and not respond to food, excitement or the imprecations of their families. And yes, I have seen this.

And mania – a drying of the brain, a lack of focus or indeed an attempt to focus on all too much at once. A rushing here and there with no purpose; a babbling and a laughing, a twitching of the limbs. A man sits down; stands up; sets off with purpose and just as quickly stops, returns, begins another task. Mania is energy without a harness or a halter, a wild horse without a rider. Plenty such as this I have seen too, and not just in the madhouse – the babbling drunk, saying over and over that he must go home, he has tasks to do, or telling a story with great fervour to a room of fellow-drinkers who have long since ceased to listen. They were maniacs, but not so troublesome as to be locked away, as others I knew better were.

But what was I? Not melancholic, as I could discourse and walk and when required, pay good attention to the task at hand. I was consumed by the thought of my fame to come and the of the Deed to be done, that is true, but it did not spring from choler: rather, it excited me and made me feel that I was myself more fully, more distinguished from the crows, my friends and indeed from the very furniture I sat on. For there were black moods, slower times, but I would shake them off so quickly I hardly thought they mattered (that they did matter to those around me I discovered at my trial, where they spoke as if I sank into a deep pit where I could not be reached, when in fact I was only *thinking*.)

And mania – well I was prone to laughter but very little to the other symptoms. The laughter, to the young man I was, was only natural. There was much to laugh *at* – the foolish and pretentious manners of those who put themselves above me; the odd statements men made as if others could not discern the world for themselves – “oh, it’s a cold day” and so on – and the lies they told barefaced to explain their own failings – “I am late to work because my sister is unwell” when we all knew the man in question was drinking at Sweet Polly’s until nearly dawn the night before. Such hypocrisy and native cunning and the rather fond delusions that they could get away with it – and then the fact they often did, as no one chose to challenge them – well what was a soul to do but laugh? If I was Dickens I’d have made a Fagin or a Macawber of them – but I lacked the wit and skill so I could only laugh and never answer why as it seemed the Rule was polite people did not answer such questions truly.

There I was living amid falsehood, no one to understand me, working day and night with no hope of advancement, only fear of falling to the gutter to stir me on. Is it a wonder I just left off and sat for a while, reading and writing my notes? Yet amid the silly scurrying of London, my stillness and silence was thought odd.

It's true the *idée fixe* was there in me and growing, and for that I have no answer. Simply that I was not melancholic; I was not manic; I was perhaps a little of each but really only myself, out of place in London.

I should not, though, have struck my mother.

Then she left: to visit my aunts and uncles, so she said, but I think too to nurse her wounds, as she was ever too kind to remonstrate with me. She took Susannah, leaving me only a loaf of bread and a mother's caress on the nape of my neck. Then it was my fancies overtook me: the Plan that had forming inside my head a twelvemonth suddenly took form, complete.

How this came to be, I can only conceive, was that I was too much turned in upon myself. I must admit even now I find others a little slow for me; rarely is a conversation enough to stretch all my resources and so often is a person just exactly, on closer acquaintance, what they appeared to be at first blush that nowadays I rarely bother to inquire beyond the surface of any one. More profitable, I find, to note their particular ways of being what they are – the manner of their dress, the strange choices in their speech which reveal their particular origin and other like idiosyncrasies, which I can then use to pen an article or to refine my knowledge of their Type.

Back then, before I had developed patience and my somewhat professional interest in the divers varieties of Man, my natural quickness was something of a hindrance, for I was not entertained at all by fellows who could balance a ball upon their heads or play tricks with cards, and I was not drawn in by the ways of Ladies with their glances and giggles and like veiled invitations. It was all too clear to me how things stood and what each one's intentions were. In fact the only persons I could stand to hear with any seriousness were Linton – and he only because he lacked the jolly habits of many other young men I knew – his parents of course, because they were Quiet and sober and did not so much interact with me as allow me to exist without interference – and Miss Emily Crittenden, because when I once, bored and annoyed with most of London and seeking to shock a group of young ladies to cause them to show at least a moment of honest feeling, pointed a pistol at them, it was Emily alone who, rather than shrieking in fear real or mocking, looked above the pistol in to me eyes and said quite directly: "Edward Oxford, kindly put away that pistol," as if I'd done no more than forget to remove my hat in church.

Miss Crittenden, however, did not figure in my plans or their gestation. Rather, as I went about my business, meager as it was, I found it amusing to occupy my mind as normal human intercourse could not: with visions; of the uproar that would come if I did this deed; of the Queen laid out in her lace wedding dress while thousands wept; of my name on those thousands' lips, uttered in awe. Not just in London, too – across the Empire and beyond, the news would spread. And my single act would, I felt, shake loose the world from the dream it walked in, or, as my father's death had done, the death of the Queen would show how petty and small were the everyday concerns of all and in its wake would follow a reconsidering of what mattered most in life.

Not all my thoughts were so consequential, true. On my walks and as I sat at the window at night, and even while I worked, the details of what must be done to bring the Plan to fruition buzzed about my brain.

So when I purchased the guns, it was with a sense of the inevitable – *these* were the pistols, imbued with a special kind of Magic, a power to change the world. And when

I happened on Gray, an old school mate, in the store where I bought some powder, and saw he feigned not to recognise me, I allowed him to pretend. It was not an insult, though I could have felt it so. Rather it demonstrated how mean and ignorant was the general class of man and how apart from that I stood.

Once formed, the Plan accumulated to itself details and reasons and seemed by the day more solid and more reasonable and more simply what must be.

My uncle down from Birmingham told me the news from there. He himself was only a publican but many of my father's erstwhile colleagues still drank with him. The mood, he told me, was dark. Parliament's rejection of the Chartists' pleas for votes for all was not to be borne. A million names had called for Change and the swells who sat in Westminster had dismissed them out of hand. Some of those names had been set down by men who could barely write their names, but worked every day an honest day, and the men in Parliament, not one. Small protests rose and fell from time to time, my uncle said, but police action and the spies of London kept many in fear of declaring how they stood, or taking further action.

Listening to this – he addressed Mr Phelps more than myself – I saw how a single great event could break through the reticence of ordinary people. One sacrifice and all would be upheaval, making all possible. The Lords and nobles had thought to squash men like my father and to feel no retribution. No, it was not to be borne and though I could not punish Parliament, I could expose the weakness of the structure that supported it – that it had a single keystone, the Queen, a woman no older than Miss Crittenden. (That the Queen could be easily replaced by the next in line, and that replacement by the next, I did not much consider.)

In my idle moments, when the rain kept me from the streets, I dreamed of how the Chartists and more daring figures might be responding to the insult of rejection, and how they might be plotting to meet their goals in other, less peaceful ways than a Petition.

I made myself a game and I called it Young England.

In every novel of adventure I had read, and every report of revolution in the newspapers, there was a band of men – young men like myself most often, though sometimes a grizzled head from earlier resistances appeared, in order to dispense wisdom, or lead the charge in an inspiring act of sacrifice.

That conspiracy was the stuff of change; that it was the glowing but covered coal that could ignite the world, made perfect sense to me. How could ideas develop but in discourse among men. My education had been sufficient to introduce me to the Dialogues of Socrates, and I understood that it was in talk that great schemes were begotten and brought to fruit. I cast about me for companions. Alas, I told myself, none of *these* will do. My uncle still thought me a boy. For my lack of skills, I could not hope for entry to the underground salons of Birmingham; there, I would be a mere soldier in the ranks, I thought. And Linton, though a good chap, had never shown a single sign of political understanding. Even the question of whether the Queen ought have married a foreigner made him yawn; raise in conversation so much as taxes or the vote and he would fiddle with his shirtsleeves and blow bubbles in his beer until the talk became less abstract.

And so again my tendency to seek elevation without the required dose of perspiration prevailed. If I could not find fellows to make up the picture I required, I would paint the picture without regard to what stood before me.

In my idle hours, I dreamed up a Secret Society: “Young England”. Young England! We – my imaginary playfellows and I – were all subterfuge and business, secret codes, pomades and swords. We plotted and we schemed and slowly our collective eyes were drawn to the seat of all power, the Throne. My fellows began to whisper: something should be done, and Oxford is the man to do it.

Such was my self-belief that this fancy seemed simply a short cut. Given time, such men would certainly appear to stand beside me, so to expedite the business, why not proceed as if they *had* already. Then, action being taken, I felt a band of followers would surely spring up, acclaim the rightness of my course.

Felt, I say, for I cannot fairly undertake to say that these things were *thought*. The action of my rational mind was not uppermost. Rather, I wandered London in a kind of fugue, seeing portents and signs in all around me.

May of that year, I recall, was mild and gentle. The blossoms of spring were not whipped fiercely from the trees, but persuaded gently to descend by the warmest zephyrs. The spreading cover of light green fine-veined leaves upon the trees in Hyde Park grew apace, so that as the Sun’s heat increased, so did the shade beneath. Exotic flowers that had budded forth in April faded away and descended beneath a covering of long-bladed leaves – these irises, poppies and tulips all so bright in memory now I wonder if my mind embroiders.

An early riser from my childhood (though whether by nature or by need to complete the tasks which fell my way as son, indebted lodger or as keeper of the bar, I cannot say), I was often in Hyde Park at the rising of the sun.

The spacious grounds themselves were of course pleasant after a night indoors with Phelps’s snoring coming through the wall behind my head. But for removal of that auditory nuisance, I could just as easily step into West-Square. At Hyde Park it was possible to walk so far from any residence at all that one could fancy oneself in the country, with the accompanying sense of space – of air above, beyond and around one – and I found I walked more freely on its winding paths and green lawns than on any cobbled street, where I was beset not only with my fellow persons, but also watched on every side by windows, doors and balconies.

That May, I visited so often that I observed the changes in the plumage of cygnets fledging on Hyde Park’s lakes – I knew them by their parents and by their numbers – and I discovered foxes’ lairs, squirrels’ nests and the scratchings of rabbits in hidden corners, all regardless of the city beyond the iron fence.

One morning, when I had been abroad since “the stars had turned to flight” I wandered up beside the Row and heard a tattoo of hoofbeats approaching. Stepping back beside a tree, I felt unobserved, and indeed the riders passed by unawares, though they were close enough that a single stride would have brought me into their path.

Three mounts; a grey, a black and a bay, all splendidly muscled and dressed with shining leathers and brass that rang in the morning air like Christmas bells. Their great nostrils were breathing steam and their proud footfalls raising dust from the path. I felt I was in the presence not of horses but of emissaries from some realm beyond this one – as if they had appeared from the very night and, as they passed with a syncopated drumbeat of hooves and vanished into the dust, that they were gone into the very clouds that floated low above the misty lake across the way. One horse, the last, a dark-brown beauty with a quick, sharp action, turned its eye toward me as it passed.

The riders I did not even look at – they served as mere decoration, or excuses for these beasts to run through London town unchecked.

That eye, so large and dark and liquid, seemed to see me as no human eye ever had. It measured me; acknowledged me; knew all, and it approved – or, rather, it did not censure. As gods have their own affairs, so did these equine souls and so glorious were they that I perceived that what I did was really of no matter whatsoever. I, and all around me, existed in a dull slow way compared to these. Act or don't act, the eye seemed to say – you will never be as I.

For the remainder of that day my feelings were saddened by my comparison to such creatures – I was so mean, so small! – but also strangely lightened, that now I knew I was sanctioned to do as I would do. Such it is to be regarded by something sublime.

I stood by the tree long after they passed, until their footfalls faded. I was in deep shadow; out across the Row the sun touched golden on the few early walkers, on the longer grasslands and on the surface of the lake. When at last I turned for home, though most around me were hurrying to their work and had yet to even break their fast, I felt my day had been lived completely.

That moment I recall most often; but there were others, as when a newspaper was laid carelessly on a bar beside me, folded open to an image of the Queen, or when a sparrow fell dead at my feet on the Westminster Road and I could not tell from where it fell. These signs, along with my weak and overly excited boyish imagination, somehow locked away my capacity to reason. In short, I forgot I had a choice, and the Plan became the Real.

There are practical matters which attend any enterprise; indeed, any progress through life at all. I have heard it said that certain Eastern mystics make of these matters Life itself – that is, the business of eating, keeping clean the person and so on they conduct with such reverence and ceremony that it becomes their all. In my case the small tasks of the day, along with my daily, sometimes twice daily, walks, sufficed to fill the days. Once the plan began to form, my days were not merely filled; they had purpose.

So a visit to a shooting-gallery was not an idle afternoon's enjoyment. It was a preparation. So too, the laundering of my one white collared shirt and the brushing-down and airing of my aunt's husband's mourning-suit were done as a soldier readying his uniform ahead of battle. Each day was distinguished by some act of preparation, whether training, acquiring powder, informing myself of the Queen's movements and habits, or writing in my notebook about my reasons and my hoped-for results: not just my fame, but also the changes in society my bold act would wreak. No man could have had more to do.

Yet my mother complained I lacked employment!

#### **4: My Crime and My Capture**

How it seemed to me was this: I awoke that morning having slept deeply, but the rest had given me no clarity of thought. I was, as the Bard might say, like a player on the stage. The script was written for me; I had but to follow it.

The day was clear and June's warmth was rising so that even the stony streets of London had an air of summer. The Thames, as I crossed on Westminster Bridge, ran deep wide and steady and there was an opalescent glint on its opaque surface – reflections of the sky perhaps, or an effluent slick from the horses and gutters of the streets, it did not matter either way.

I kept to the shelter of the buildings when I could. My guns, concealed now in my breast-pockets, had a strange weight. In my hip-pocket those past few weeks, they had made me feel well-armed, defended, ready as they were to leap into my hands; but in the mourning-jacket I wore, they pulled at my chest and shoulders and made me incline towards the ground. I passed pastry-shops and coffee-houses and sellers of cooked meat and bread, but could hardly glance into their windows, much less enter, buy and eat. I had, wrapped up in paper, half a loaf that would serve me for the day.

Buckingham Palace rose up before me with the sun gleaming from every window. Behind its walls it seems as remote as a palace in a fairy-tale; only that the gates were open and cart-men and soldiers and nobles' carriages were passing through showed that this was not a magic fortress, but a real and working house, albeit the grandest in the land.

Somewhere behind those tall windows sat the Queen: at table or entertaining ladies or reading papers of state. She did not know I was there, but by the end of the day she certainly would. Here the traffic of gigs and carts, riders and hawkers on foot with baskets moved faster and with more purpose, both because of the open space before the palace and because of the sense of proximity to the seat of power and indeed the wider Empire.

I stood well back, beside a lamp-post and gazed upon that Palace. Guards and constables passed but did not notice me; then I felt protected, safe from interference in my plans, as if the director of my play had arranged safe passage through the crowds of minor players.

The sun reached higher; the windows lost their gleam and a soft breeze issued from Green-Park. If the palace could have been an enchanted fortress, the park could have been a magical wood; a canopy of broad branches decked with green spread out over sturdy trunks. I stepped inside the park gates and walked along, parallel with the walls of the Palace. The grass was plush and yielding and as I walked, I imagined Victoria walking on *her* side of the wall, under the trees which showed over the brickwork, trees just the same as those that shaded me. More gentlemen and ladies drifted in from the streets as I paced forth and back, back and forth.

I was excited then. I was on the stage: the audience was all around me. I had only to wait for my cue.

The light was softening, not evening proper but a little dimmed and golden under the spreading canopy. How many of my fellow-strollers had come on purpose to see the Queen and how many were merely taking the air was difficult to tell; certainly as the

appointed hour approached, the crowd took on a different mien. Once one or two secured themselves positions on the roadside, others gathered and stood beside them. There was no formal promise of Her appearance, naturally; only the assurance of custom and the peculiar force of the people's willing-forth of their own monarch. They expected her to come; they wanted her to come; she would surely come. Small exchanges in the crowd passed rumour back and forth – the Queen was indisposed today – the carriage was being readied – she would travel without the Prince – she would come with several ladies - she had already left – and so on and so forth.

I moved out from the park and took up a place near the railings, facing the road. I could not quite see the palace gates, but others near me could; so when it came I would have good notice of the carriage.

My time was almost come. I paced a little and could think of nothing but my guns. In my mind I felt their engraved stocks; felt then the recoil of the shot; could smell the powder-smoke and hear the roar and thunder-clap of the sound I was about to make.

There was no turning back, nor did I think of it. Here was I; there came the queen (as I knew by a rising cheer and the waving of hats and handkerchiefs further down the road); the thing would do itself. I would step forward to the kerb, draw forth my gun and as I'd practised, fire. The women would scream and while the smoke drifted around my black-clad figure, standing alone in the midst of hundreds, alone in all of London, I'd fire again to show I meant it.

The rest – my seizure, interview, the reading of my papers with their hint of revolution, the general alarm and consternation at such a great event – would unfold like a rolling panorama, predestined and dramatic.

And so it did. In my mind now it's hard to tell the difference between the events as I had planned them and as they transpired. I have little memory of the *doing* – it was as if I was outside myself, watching on as the young man dressed in the mourning-suit stepped out, fired and fired again.

I do remember the confusion afterward – how one man seized my gun and another man seized *him* and I cried out “it was not him, it was me” and I remember the departing carriage, the hair and bonnet of the Queen encircled by the arm and now-bare head of Albert, who had lost his hat by ducking. And then she was gone and I was in the hands of ruffians and constables and had to tell them to be kinder with me, I would not give them any trouble. Because although I can be moved to rage like any one, I am not a violent man and besides, they were too many.

## **5: Imprisonment and an Execution**

So I entered Newgate Prison. My cell was small, but not uncomfortable; there was a mattress and a chair and it being June, the lack of a fire posed me no difficulty. I was glad, at first, of the closed door and the perfect quiet, save for distant shouts and slamming cell-doors and the footsteps of keepers passing by. After such excitement, a peaceful moment allows a man to gather his thoughts. Even then, with stone walls on four sides, I did not see my danger. I knew I might hang, oh yes, we had passed the Newgate hanging-place as we entered. I knew I might hang, but I did not think of rotting.

I did not know it, but my mother came to the prison door that night and was turned away – after she had travelled all the way from Birmingham.

That first night, I slept well enough, though I was woken too early by the slamming of the food-grate. Then there was talk and innumerable persons of great worth: members of the Privy Council – again! – and London Aldermen in number. Then, I felt myself of great interest and enjoyed their announcement at the door and the sight of their fine silks and linens. I found their questions to no purpose, always the same – why, who helped you and was there ball in the pistols? and in my boredom offered them new versions and ideas – though I would not admit to attempted murder and laughed to think they thought that asking me an eleventh time about the bullets, after I had declined to answer on ten occasions, would somehow gain the truth.

Now, I can see they were as vain as I. Their visits were reported – they spoke to the newspapers after – they folded their gloves and looked down their noses and prated about the welfare of the Queen and it was all because the crowds of London were still flocking to the Palace. They gave me what I had wanted: Fame and the attention of those who rule our lives – and so proved me right in what I did. It did achieve its purpose.

Next day, though, it was my mother who attended. She came with the Governor and was allowed a seat while Mr Cope stood by, and when she embraced me I felt all the Fame fall from me like a dream on waking.

“Edward, who has put you to this?” Mother asked.

“Mother, I cannot say,” because the phantoms of Young England, so real for the police and aldermen, could not lie to my mother, yet the Governor was there.

“Edward, they want to hang you.”

“They will not, I’m sure.”

“They want to hang you. All London, every one, they will...” and she was weeping. “Tell me who – tell me and let *them* suffer, don’t die for *them*, think of me, I cannot be without you. They have used you, Edward.”

“I would not have hurt her, Mother. The Queen was in no danger.”

“The guns, Edward, I should have taken them. Why did you have the guns? Why did I let you keep them?”

“How is Susannah, Mother? She was distressed.”

And then my mother’s anger, that I’d never seen turned on any but herself, found me.

“Your sister is distressed? She is, she is, but I am your mother and I will die. They want to hang you Edward, but I won’t let them. You have to tell them - ” she pointed at the Governor and all he represented – who put you to this.”

“I cannot.”

“You must.”

“They will not kill me, will they?”

My mother’s fear and weakness was contagious.

“I will not let them. I will get a lawyer. Uncle Edward will help you.”

“How will you pay?”

“They want to hang you, Edward. I will steal the money if I must.” Governor Cope stood by, but showed no sign of hearing this. Still, he took a step towards her and I knew she had to leave. Other visitors were waiting.

“I will come back with a lawyer and we will save you, Edward. Only you must say whose idea this was. They have abandoned you in here.”

“They will surely come to help,” I offered. It was the best I could muster.

But she simply looked at me and wept and went quietly out when the Governor took her arm.

Then the aldermen came in, with new friends to see me, but no new questions, and I felt less inclined to humour them.

My mother found a lawyer and he came in on the Tuesday: I would not see him. I could see no reason. If they had made up their minds to hang to, then hang me they would; this was all of London, not some sober-minded judge. And I could not tell what a lawyer might do for me. I had certainly shot at the Queen, before a crowd of witnesses – and to think of it still thrilled me, to know I'd dared to carry out my plan. These questions about bullets might suggest that bullets mattered, but whether there was ball or no, I had done the act: I had stepped forward from the crowd and fired and I could not step back.

In the next cell from mine was a murderer, a real one, a European servant who had robbed and killed his master. His master was a Lord or something like one and he'd slit the man's throat at night. I had read about the case in the newspapers and it was clear to me that he was guilty, but he would call to anyone who passed him and protest in his comic accent that he was "inn'cent, quite inn'cent." He would hang, he knew he would hang, and the lack of grace with which he took it quite offended me.

I would not make such a spectacle. I would die bravely. I would step onto the gallows without a blindfold, or even a guard to force me. I would look back at the crowd come to see me die and they would see me with their ten thousand eyes. They would fall silent at the sight of me. I would step forward, dressed in my mourning-suit and call out that I was not afraid.

Afterwards, there would be pretty weeping and many would in their secret hearts admire my heroism.

Foolish Fame! I woke at midnight with a cold moon shining into my cell and saw the truth. I would hang, my neck would break and I would dangle like a side of meat and they would gasp and cheer and then they would forget me, all but my mother and sister, whose tears would flow forever.

So I let the lawyer come, and Mother with him.

He did not ask me much; of all the visitors I had, Jabez Pelham in his frilled shirt and half-down-his-nose spectacles asked least of all. He sought neither to know my guilt or what I wanted done; instead *he* told *me* what we would do. I would not speak in court unless ordered by the judges; I would brush my hair and clothes.

Mother stood by the door all the while, pulling on her sleeves and tugging at her earlobes as she did when we was worried, and after a while she could not be silent.

"Mr Pelham, are you certain this is the course to take?"

"I believe it is his best chance."

"What course?" I asked. "You have not asked me what I did, nor even told me what the plea will be, how to defend..."

Pelham took his glasses off and laid down the paper he'd been writing on, though what notes he made I cannot think as he had been speaking all the while.

"Mr Oxford. Mr Oxford, you are aware of the sanction for High Treason?"

"Of course." I thought he took me for a fool – twenty men before him had pointed out to me the severity of being disembowelled and hung in public. My mother made a little mouselike sound.

“And, Mr Oxford, you are aware of the number of witnesses against you and the general feeling of the subjects of the Queen on the – subject – of your crime?”

“I have heard them, yes.” The witnesses were not in accord, I knew, and many had seen what didn’t happen, but they all agreed on seeing me, my guns and the double flash of powder, and that would be enough I knew.

“So, Mr Oxford,” who else was in the room, I wondered, why my name so often, “do you agree that the most we can hope for in your case is to save your life?”

“I may not hope for freedom?”

“You may hope, but it is most unlikely. It stands like this. If convicted, you will require a pardon from the Queen in order to live. I am not in a position to know if she would grant it, but I do know that she was very frightened, and I am told that she expects the Court to protect her. She is a woman, and that must count in our favour, but she is the Queen. So conviction is to be avoided, do you agree?”

He did not wait for my answer.

“But to see you walk free is not what the Lords want. They have found no ball and you have not said there was any – wait, please – well, perhaps not but an absence is a hard thing to prove. Even then, you essayed to cause injury to her person with your noise and disturbance when she was in an open carriage” – was he for me or against me, I wanted to know, but he went on. I noticed a grey streak in his hair, running from the temple, and thought he’d be a better lawyer when all his curly hair had lost its red and become a more sober colour.

“Mr Oxford, you need to pay attention. I have spoken to your mother and your uncle and I believe that the best course is to show that you – as you surely were – were subject to forces out of your control.”

I thought he meant Young England and began to speak, to confess at last that there was no such association.

“There is, of course, no such association,” said Mr Pelham. “You have indeed been foolish but you are young and your life has been beset by – troubles. Yes, troubled and disturbed. Disturbed and troubled. So that is how we will defend you. We will show the jury that disturbance and you will not be held accountable for what you did.”

Still I did not understand.

“Will that bring an acquittal?”

“It will, should the jury accept our submissions on that point. You may still be detained, in an asylum, for a time.”

In an asylum. Why, when the disturbance he spoke of was held to be an outside force, beyond my own control? If the Plan that came to me and my compulsion to complete it was not of my choosing – and the guns, if the jury would believe that they were not loaded with ball –

But the Governor was at the door.

“Mr Oxford,” Pelham said. “We will send doctors to examine you. You are an unusual young man – you may let them see that – you will answer them politely and with truth and frankness, and your mother and I will see to the rest.”

An asylum. I thought of the walls of Bedlam in the street behind West-Square and the madmen in there. The prisoner in the cell beside mine began to wail again. His trial was in the morning and he was still afraid to die.

An asylum. Even with that prospect, I had hope. The visitors did not cease coming and Mother was outside my cell for most of the next day. She brought me griddle-cakes and butter and told me she had perfect trust in Pelham. She said Dr Clarke would help us and I was glad she had seen him, as she herself was most unsettled still. Sydney Taylor, who was to speak for me, came, and *his* shirt had twice as many frills as Pelham's. He would not even sit down, but paced about the cell and I saw how he would need to lower his head and shoulders to fit through the doorway. He said very little and asked even less than had Pelham, but watched me all the while as if he could understand me just by observation. He paced, looked down at me, and paced again until I saw he was like some kind of hungry rooster searching for grain and began to giggle, at which he immediately bid me good day and called the warder.

Mother came soon after, quite distressed.

"Monday, Edward, Monday is too soon." I was to go to court in three short days. But Pelham came – I wondered did he ever rest? – and allayed our fears.

"Monday is in every way too soon. The court will allow us a stay, a week or three, they cannot rush this thing. So you, good lady, must be ready for the evening train to Birmingham tonight."

This journey, I understood, was to secure members of my family and acquaintance to speak for me, and I bid her send my greetings to them all, at which she began again to cry and I became impatient.

"Go," I said. Ask for paper for me, and a better pen, this one I have is ruined." So she and Pelham went without a word.

All Saturday and Sunday I could not rest. The promise of a stay of trial, and the prospect of, as it were, a family reunion excited me. At court on Monday I would see, at least a little, what London made of what I'd done; the effects of Young England on the population. I even thought a few might come to see me, to see what man could have such bravery, could stand up to the wrong of a queen of such youthfulness ruling over all the empire.

Francis had been sentenced to hang and he took it very badly. He was not even moved to the Condemned Cells, where his noise would not have bothered others, but he cried out all night in French and English so loudly he could be heard quite clearly, and he threw his breakfast at the wall in the morning. On Sunday he refused to go to the chapel, saying he would pray alone. I thought perhaps he had lost his faith completely, but when we all returned to our cells after the sermon – a surprisingly fine one, on the parable of the mote in one's neighbour's eye – he was calling out to God and singing psalms again in French. I believe he was a Catholic.

He called to me and at first I did not answer. But there was nought to do but to count the stones in the wall, so I spoke to him.

"You! Oxford!"

"Yes," I said. "Yes, that is I."

"You tried to kill the Queen?"

Again questions. I was too tired of this to make an answer.

"You shot at her?"

"The court will hear all that tomorrow," I called back. "What difference does it make what happened, the court will decide the truth."

“Truth! Truth!” I had set his raving off, I could tell. “Truth is the only thing to save us! I will write the truth, I will set it down on paper and that will let them know.”

“Let who know?”

“The ones who need to know. Truth and contrition. I am truly sorry, Oxford, I am. He was a good master. I should not have robbed him.”

Or murdered him, I thought.

“But I was not myself. That is the truth. I will let them know.”

He began to call for pen and paper, speaking fast and low to the warders of the confession he must make. Once or twice thereafter he called out to me about truth, and his promises to be good, and I knew he hoped for commutation, but I very much doubted his chances. Lord Russell was an old man, helpless, and of a well-connected family. This French or Swiss servant had breached a sacred trust, done wrong under his own masters’ roof, behind locked doors. I would not trust him and neither would those with the power to save him. He would hang.

All that and he would hang. And I? I had shot at the Queen.

They hanged him the next day, mere feet outside the walls; of the crowds outside, the calling and the merriment, of the roar that went up as his soul ascended (or descended, it is not for me to tell), I would prefer no memory.

## **6: My Trial and the Judgement of My Peers**

I dressed with care for court. Mother had brought me a freshly laundered shirt and a comb for my hair. The old suit I had sponged down and Mr Pelham arranged my cravat for me when he visited me before breakfast.

“Remember, Edward,” he said, “You must be quiet in court. Let me take care of things.”

“Where will I sit?” I asked.

“As before, in the dock. It will be a long day” – he paused – “and quite likely there will be one or two others.”

“And if I am found guilty?”

“We will of course appeal. And there is always the mercy of the Crown to throw ourselves upon.” He clapped his two hands on my shoulders and I looked up into his eyes. “You are young. They will not like to hang you. But let *me* take care of things.”

So I was instructed to sit in silence. When I came in, escorted by my jailer and a soldier hardly my own age, the room was nearly empty.

There were a few clerks arranging boxes of paper and setting out water-jugs for lawyers; these I ignored and they me. But soon the doors were opened and the public bustled in, filling all the pews. Most seemed of middling class and Lord Marlborough was not that day present. I tried to stand up straight and appear at my best, but the gaze of so many meant I could not meet the eyes of any single one and I found myself raising my chin to look out the window at the sky, or examining the boards beneath my feet.

Then my mother, Uncle Edward and Susannah – mother in a pale-pink dress I had not seen before, her hair pinned back and her skin a little grey, as if she’d been clearing out the ashes. She had a doily-bag with tassels that her fingers would not leave off

playing with; Susannah and her husband did seem calmer, and the latter would not look at me. I never had been much pleased with him or him with me and I knew he was only there to escort my sister – still, he was there, and for that must receive some credit.

Then more lawyers and their many attendees and for wigs and powder it was hard to tell between them. Some of the public gallery were already eating and whispering and pointing at me and if perhaps I let out a small quick laugh, it would be something you could understand.

Then a great deal of rapping at the doorway and all fell silent and I knew from my last appearance that it was time to rise and look repentant.

The judges filed out onto the bench, their wigs clearly of a better type than any other, their robes blacker and more crisply pressed, their shirt-fronts fairly gleaming in the morning light and if their noses and cheeks were a little redder than my Lord the Prosecutor's or Mr Pelham's then that would have been due to their drinking a better quality of wine, I suppose.

They looked at me and they did not – that is to say they saw that I was present, but I seemed to hold no interest for them beyond that simple fact.

Mr Taylor did not quail under their gaze, but neither did he return it – he accepted their supervision, as he stacked his many papers, as a willing and confident schoolboy does his masters' watchful eye.

The beadle bade us all be seated. I sat and was quickly made to rise and once again they read the charges:

That he, being a subject of our Lady the Queen, on the 10th of June, as a false traitor, maliciously and traitorously did compass, imagine, and intend to bring and put our said Lady the Queen to death; and to fulfil and bring to effect his treason and treasonable compassing, he, as such false traitor, maliciously and traitorously did shoot off and discharge a certain pistol, loaded with gun-powder and a bullet, which pistol he held in one of his hands, at the person of our said Lady the Queen, with intent thereby maliciously and traitorously to shoot, assassinate, and put to death, our said Lady the Queen, and thereby traitorously made a direct attempt against the life of our said Lady the Queen: And further to fulfil and bring to effect his treason and treasonable compassing aforesaid, he, as such false traitor, on the 10th of June, maliciously and traitorously did shoot off and discharge a certain other pistol loaded with gunpowder and a certain bullet, which he held in one of his hands, at the person of our said Lady the Queen, with intent thereby maliciously and traitorously to shoot, assassinate, and put to death our said Lady the Queen, and thereby traitorously made a direct attempt against the life of our said Lady the Queen; against his allegiance and against the Statute

In all, a comprehensive and repetitive allegation, taking longer to read out than did the act. Then began the legal argument, and witnesses against me, thusly: "My name is Samuel Perks.

I am a builder” (a pertinent detail, no doubt, though I was not wise enough to know why that should be), & then sundry details about his morning, how he came to be outside the Palace & on and &, until: “the report of the pistol attracted my attention”, as if it were a flower-seller calling her wares – “attracted my attention” – why it attracted all of London’s – then “I had a distinct whizzing or buzzing before my eyes, between my face and the carriage,” he said. At which I saw what they meant to do – to manufacture bullets where there were none: to make a would-be murderer of me.

Man after man came forward to the stand, each quite certain in what he saw that day, no matter how fast events and how far back from them he had stood. “I was then about three yards from the carriage I should think,” said Joshua Lowe, spectacle-maker, who also heard me say “It was I, it was me that did it”, although I had said no such words, or not precisely. Nearest to the mark was his nephew Albert – who, curiously, was not required to give his occupation – who reported me as saying “It was me that did it” – something to that effect” which although still not correct, at very least admitted that his memory might not be a perfect one.

Even the women spoke against me: one Liz Stokely, of no account in her own right, but “housekeeper to Lord Bexley” claimed to have been distracted from the Queen by the very sight of me *before* I fired, and to describe my exact actions with a kind of mime she performed – first her arms crossed over her breast, then a silly show of pistol-pointing.

It was so difficult not to laugh at her.

A cabinet-maker; a policeman; an Honourable Gentleman of some kind (who was most put out by my scaring of his horse) and so on, all gave their versions of the moment I shot at the Queen, and I marvelled that so many worthies, who would not have glanced at me before, regarded me so well. So it was established – as if I had denied it – that I was at Green Park, that I had guns, that I had fired them.

After tea-break, I saw as if from a dream a mix of friends and workmates waiting in the gallery to speak. First the shop-boy who had pretended not to remember me showed his memory was in fine order by describing my purchase of the guns. Then the Honourable Fox Maule, Under Secretary of State for the Home Department, apparently between a good lunch and a better tea, condescended to confirm my statement to the Privy Council.

I was taken out for dinner, as they called it, but came back just as hungry as before – not so I think the judges for some among them needed to rest their eyes a little in the afternoon.

Eventually and in due course, the lawyers reached my mother. I tried to smile at her, but she seemed distracted and would look only at Lord Denham, as if he were a lighthouse in a stormy sea and she the navigator of a ship in much distress.

What she had to say was not what a son might like to hear.

“he would burst out crying when there was no one near him, and no one speaking to him, and he was always very troublesome,” she said.

“It was different to the mere waywardness of childhood. If he sat still or stood still, he would burst out crying. That was after he had learned to walk as well as before. All children cry, but this was when he was three or four years old, and he has continued to do so through life, to cry without any apparent cause. I have known that to be the case up to the time of my going to Birmingham, or just before that—that was in the present year. He had a great many

other very singular habits. He would get into a violent rage without any cause; he would deliberately break any thing, and willfully destroy any thing that he took in his hand. He once pointed a pistol at me, that was the first day he brought them home."

She did look at me, from time to time, but quickly, slyly, as if she did not want to be seen so doing. For nearly the whole day she continued, telling how violently my father had beaten her, how badly *his* father had behaved, how she would never have married an Oxford if she had not been frightened into it, and what an odd, bad child I'd been, and I began to feel this was not a show to save me, but a chance for her to lament her fate in bearing such a son.

I decided I must leave, go to some quiet place and rest; and it is a measure of how far I was from apprehending my situation that it was only then, overwhelmed with the urge to step down from the dock and finding myself unable to, that I began to realise what it was I had lost when I gave away my freedom. Not – although that would later come to me – the large sweep of life as it was lived by common people – their many joys and carefree pastimes – no, rather the simple small matter of not being constrained – of being able to scratch one's nose when one pleased, to eat and drink at will, to walk about as one wished.

If I had not already been committed by my lawyers to stand mute, I would say I was struck dumb by the revelation of my new state. Indeed I failed to hear much more of the testimony about me, that day.

Nor was I suffered guests that evening. I wrote a line to Mother: "Your son understands you must say what you must say," but did not sign it – a little cruelty I suppose but the strain on *me* was great – and sent it with the lawyer's boy.

Next morning my defenders continued to destroy me. A doctor who had once or twice attended my father in Birmingham described him as "a man of colour" who had attempted his own life with Laudanum poisoning, and kindly added his own opinion that I must have been mad, to shoot at the Queen in the middle of the day. John Wright, a police officer of Birmingham, called my father "wild and mad" and "a great brute to his wife". Soon the court moved on to the subject of my grandfather and his oddity, and I saw how I would be saved: by being a congenital lunatic, the son of a madman who was son of a madman, and could not be any other way.

My mother remained in the room, through evidence of beatings and of guns pointed at her when she was expecting children, of my father's sinful attempt to cut his own throat, but nothing, I felt, could humiliate her further after the tale she had been forced to tell.

Finally the lawyers turned to me: Edward Oxford, boy and man. They brought in persons whom I had never thought to see again, schoolmasters and all: old Ben Walters who most times could not tell us boys apart, affirmed "I had a great deal of trouble with him the whole time"; and George Sandon, with his pursed mouth and eyebrows like a hedgerow and his "he was a very peculiar boy", almost as if he, Sandon, had never once held a long conversation with himself about a certain young lady, while I snickered unseen on the other side of the doorframe. And if Sandon thought I was not in my right mind, not as good as other boys, he had never troubled to teach me otherwise when I was "under his care", though he claimed to have "improved" me. "I never hit him more than once or three times," said Sandon,

under oath, and I do anticipate meeting him and his hazel-switch in hell and seeing him struck by demons “not more than once or thrice” by his own count.

They say a man’s life may run before his eyes at the moment of his death, but that day in court was like some diorama scroll unfolding. Next came my aunt Clarinda, who relied on me two years to keep her business going when I was fourteen and fifteen, no more. And yet “he was in an unsound state of mind” the whole time through, she swore. All her proof? That I once turned off the gas-lights when the company, drunk and penniless, refused to leave the house. And that I retaliated when that stable-boy had so ill-used me that even a woman would have felt moved to violence.

Yet as a wall is composed of single bricks, so my little faults mounted up, blocking out the light of hope; I read too much. I laughed too much. I was slow to heed. Too quick to anger. I talked – Clarinda said – of “going to sea, of becoming very great, *and other things not very likely to take place.*” It is true, as Joe Day said, that I once took liberties with a servant-girl at the King’s Head – but he did not note as well that said servant-girl was well disposed to accept my liberties, and had rejected his, and that he had not himself seen fit to then leave off her person.

Still Day’s evidence, Clarinda’s, the teachers’ and all the others, too many to recount, some intimate with me, some of only passing knowledge, served me well, if it is served well to be found insane. Strange, what seems well, when the alternative is mortal peril.

Towards the end, as the witnesses appeared in order of my life-time, Mr Robinson took the stand, and added his little store of stones to the pile. My behaviour was “no more than mischievous laughing and foolish things,” he said, “if he let any thing fall or if I did, he would burst out laughing.”

My foolishness and laughing thus established, the court circled back around to my life such a short time ago; my situation in the house in West-Square with Susannah and my mother; my shooting the guns for sport; even a list of the books I had lately read, viz *Jack Shepperd*, *Black Pirate*, my Dickens and my Bible. Susannah, though it seemed at this stage superfluous, came to the stand to affirm: “it was my opinion, and every body’s else, that he was not right in his mind—he once held a pistol at my head as I lay in bed.” I had forgotten that, but so, I thought, had she.

Given, naturally, that the jury could not be expected to understand what they had heard, Mr Taylor then brought up the doctors Connolly and Hodgkin, who used French and Latin to express their learned views that I was barking mad. *Lesion of the Will*, said Connolly, who had spent under half-an-hour with me two before.

So fortified with knowledge, the jury was retired to decide my fate.

In the interval of their deliberation, I was aware of the public gallery’s keen interest, as I was all there was left to look at. The jury were out some time and the crowd’s formerly decorous whispers rose to fill the warm air of the courtroom, carrying a note of impatience, like an audience at some delayed performance. I found my mother’s eyes and smiled as best I could, affecting not to notice how she held her elbows in her hands and rocked a little, or how my sister patted her shoulder with a soft, limp hand, as if Mother was a kitten.

They returned, and the foreman – a man no taller than myself, but showing signs of thinking himself of better standing – spoke.

“My Lord, we find the prisoner Edward Oxford guilty...” and at this the crowd actually *cheered* though quietly “...of discharging the contents of two pistols at Her Majesty.” I stood quite still, wishing time would stop, as what came next could only be my sentencing to death.

“But whether or not they were loaded with ball, no satisfactory evidence has been laid before us, he being at the time laboring under an unsound state of mind.”

So began a confusion of lawyering and judges, in which the court could not find whether I was guilty or insane, as I could not be both under law, but the jury’s pleasure

had been to say I was so. To their simple minds, I had committed the crime – fired at the Queen – but also, I was so deranged that it was not possible to rely on what I may or may not have said about the ball.

Lord Denman, Baron Alderson, the Attorney-General and the other judges and divers lawyers commenced to read from the books and finish each other's sentences like schoolboys swotting for a test. The jury was sent out again to reconsider how they would like to phrase their verdict; Mr Taylor made a valiant effort to point out that indeed, if the existence of the ball had not been proven, then an attempt at murder was not proven either, but Baron Alderson swiftly cut across him with "because he was insane." After some minutes of this, the jury returned and the foreman repeated that I was "guilty, being at the time insane," but the judges were having no more of their inferior legal judgment, and Baron Alderson amended: "That is, not guilty, being at the time insane."

One fat jurymen who had appeared to pay no attention for the whole trial then spoke one word – "guilty" – but no one paid him any heed and I was bundled out to await transport to Bethlem. That was the pleasure of the court: to find me mad. The jury gave a gentler verdict – simply that, being mad at the time, I was unable to tell truly whether or no there was ball in the pistols. The Judges, being Judges and therefore the repositories of all fair outcomes, took this to mean that I was plain Mad and could be dealt with accordingly. So they blessed me with my life and life in Bethlem. Were I not mad, I'd have been dead.

So let me turn to madness, as if I was writing perhaps a lecture, or an article for the press. Let me consider what it is, what it has been to me.

## **7: The Madhouse and My Own Descent**

That summer's day, I was not mad. I have seen madness and it is raving, wilful lack of reason. It cannot explain itself except in terms peculiar to the madman and of no correspondence to things as they are. I have, since then, felt what it is to be detached from what is real, and I am certain that is not how I was back then.

Yet there was something. How could I have done what I did? There was a wildness and a recklessness that took me over. There was a vision: of a gun firing, of the world changing, of my existence taking on meaning, of *being* something in this world. I felt so keenly my existence, longed to have myself reflected back by the streets and the faces in them that seemed to me so heedless. London was all to me and it was intolerable that I was nothing to her. I knew what London wanted: she wanted drama and plots, dashing men in capes. She was so centered in all her talk and thoughts on the young Queen that I knew how to make London *see* me; link myself to the queen in terror and I would be seen by London.

For a young man with passions in his breast, to be ignored and even brushed-by is unbearable. It was as if I were already dying, and my blood called for Life.

I was not patient. I could not see the other way: to wait and work and learn. To find friends and a wife and build a world of my own; a small world that I would need to become small to fit to myself, in time. My mother tried to tell me, but she only told me the steps along the way – she told me to work, to be good, to find a trade, to go to church. She never told me why. The steps, but not the road...perhaps she didn't understand herself, as she had never fully walked it. She was a passive thing, in her marriage and her

mothering and even in her work after my Father died. She took the first thing to hand and simply did it – baking, housekeeping – until she it was time to end. Mother never had a plan.

I had a Plan, and it was grand, and once glimpsed, I could not leave it. Even if, then, I'd seen the other way – the slow building of a career and reputation – even if I'd believed in that – and why should I have, living in a city filled with broken men and women, working in a public house whose whole function was to soak them up and finish off their dreams in degradation? – but even with an ordinary life laid out for me like a textbook, the glory of my Plan would have seduced me. I could work my days away by lamp-light, going from youth to old man without knowing it, or I could be Famous in an instant!

Famous I became. And it was only the closing of the asylum door that made me see the whole of England turned against me; only the loss of springtime leaves and lovers and fresh-cooked bread and wine at dinner and the click of crockery in coffee shops and the ringing of shod hooves upon stone streets that made me see: the other way was better. It was not glorious, but it was free.

I was not mad. But what I did was madness. I know it well; I know its smell, the sound of its approach, its treachery.

You can't trust madness. It comes and goes and requires no admission or permission. It hides. It leaps out upon you as you pass quietly by and sinks its fangs into your throat. It sits on your shoulder whispering foul thoughts into your ear. It picks up knives, rocks, clubs – and guns, yes, guns too – and uses them, leaving you afterwards with the crime and the sin. It will fly off free into the blue sky, the blue sky you can only just see through the bars of the cell to which it's led you.

Macbeth knew. He indulged himself in madness and its poison in a cup offered him by his own wife. He danced with witches on the moor; he looked into a mirror held up by madness and saw a crown on his own brow. He formed a plan – the madness did not do that, he did, his knowing self did that – and he carried it out in fever. For it is always our rational selves that do the worst in madness.

The ones who are like dogs, or rats, or little children crawling on the floor: they do no harm. They are beyond humanity and only to be pitied, kept warm and fed and stopped from injuring to themselves and others. They lack not only sense, but reason and above all agency. (That I had been like them; that I had been confined in a straitjacket or a cell strewn with straw! In that, I might be happy.)

Some others, who are only filled with fancies – that bats fly in to them at night, that their skin is burning hot even as they roll naked in December snow – these others only harm themselves, in the main. Unless, that is, they look around and find some external cause for their travails and (naturally I think) determine to remove it, be it another person or some institution, say the church which owns the belfry from which the bats fly in. Then they may do wicked things, though being not wicked of themselves. But largely their harm is restricted to the remedies they prescribe themselves, say tearing at the burning skin, which I have seen done.

The madness I think most dangerous is of the social man – that part of man that exists in a world made by others. When this man falls victim to delusion, when the scaffold of social order falls apart, that madman is without trammels. He loses little of his will or reason – he can still think and plan and act – but to what ends? To regicide,

patricide or – as it was with Father – to a living hell and misery for those who may depend on him or simply love him. When he believes the whispers of his madness – that he is the rightful king, that his good and faithful wife is untrue, that all men save him are automata – his reason shows him the way to act and he deems it sane to conspire, even to kill.

From such false premises, alas! So it was with Macbeth, with me and with poor Richard Dadd. My madness passed the soonest of the three, but unlike Macbeth, there were no stains of blood when the madness had passed by – only my own ruin and four stone walls about me.

That first madness danced away and left me with its shadow-siblings: with despair, with tedium and with the other kinds of madness embodied in my fellow inmates. Quite sane, I live among madness of varieties endless in permutation and bottomless in depth.

So was it any wonder that I went a little mad again? Once the papers were signed and I was shut up in Bedlam, the excitement of my Fame was stripped away. The wardens did not care that I was famous. They sought only obedience and a clean cell at seven every morning. The doctors, after a scant few minutes' conversation, appeared to find me uninteresting – they asked me only why I did it and I could give no proper answer – they asked me did I hear voices, see visions, suffer episodes of amnesia or fitting – and were disappointed with the answer: no.

No treatment for the moment, I was told, I'll see you in a month, he said. And the rest was silence. Or I wish it had been. For one so sensitive as me, and so used to private living, Bedlam was a torture.

I was left alone to wander in the daytime – up and down that single corridor and past open and locked doors. In the open cells, I saw such as would shake the sanest man: one recluse sat on his bed rocking back and forth all day and I expect all night and did not so much as blink when I greeted him. Another lay face to the wall, weeping and him I did not greet at all.

I was frightened of the day-room. Such shouting and raving, and more of the same rocking and weeping from some as the man who never left his cell. The first time I stepped in there, even with a warden at my side, a fool ran up to me and grasped me with both hands and spun me about and begged of me to dance and called me pretty. So I dared not go in there, not for choice at any rate.

Living as I did in public-houses and walking so often on the streets, I had seen madness, or so I thought. The old woman who without harm sat hours in the snug corner nursing a beer long gone flat and stale; the young man whose speech at the first touch of stimulation, whether drink, coffee or tobacco, would be touched off into torrents of empty wordage whose purpose seemed only to prevent silent, or perhaps to forestall the utterance of some awful truth. The others – the too-ready to take offence, always fighting – the dimwitted – the Mongoloid beggar – the maniac – the phlegmatic – all in one degree or another had filled my places of employment beside the normal run of fold. We tavern-workers took them as they were and even when their fancies and disturbances turned to violence, did not allow them to touch us near the point. They were as children to a nursemaid – creatures to be managed, smiled at or carefully distracted – and if all else failed we'd call the stable boys out to acquaint the troublemakers with our desire that they patronize our establishment no longer.

All that, too, before the question of the drink, which releases the bonds of manners and propriety in any one who takes it and often, as I never drank when I was working, allowed me a clearer vision of what lay beneath the manners and dress of men and women both. A man will often say “it was the drink that drove me to it” but I have seen no man who’s good at heart made bad by simple beer or whisky.

I was, in short, acquainted with the face of Man that’s shown when Reason is upended. Reason and correctness are not strong enough to hold back the other forces that lie within us once a certain wall is breached.

I am not speaking here of my own troubles, although it’s clear that Reason took flight when I made my Plan – no, I speak of those souls in which the forces of emotion and imagination have broken free of their bridle, running wild forever. Such cases present a diversity of faces that as a tavern-keeper I’d simply labelled as distracted persons, and even thought to take amusement from them, not realising the storms roiling inside such men. Nor did I distinguish their many symptoms: the depth and breadth of them, the fine distinctions between one type and another.

In taverns and on the streets, you see, escape from lunatics was easy. I could walk away, or send a bar-girl to talk some calmness into a raver: in the worst cases, hide myself. In Bedlam, though, the cases were worse; the transformation from Reason to Madness complete; my confinement with them absolute, and permanent. I saw the full fruit and flower of what I had, I then understood, hitherto known as only the merest germs and seeds.

I do not know how long it took, the new and different madness coming on me. Perhaps a month, a year, two years. Bethlem had only madness and solitude to offer me and the marking-off of time shook loose from the clocks and calendar so soon. The other inmates were all, in some way, beyond reason, and as I was quite, quite sane, I was afraid to deal with them. But without them, with all visits forbidden so my family became memories and longings, and with myself beneath the notice of the wardens and the doctors, I had nothing. I was nothing and I was nowhere and I would never *be*. It was the opposite of that Fame I had craved. I felt unmoored and unable to right my listing ship. I could not read: the words swam before my eyes and even when I held them still with a finger on the page, they spoke of things like flowers and plays and women, none of which I might ever see again. They spoke of dreams.

My dreams, I think, seemed more real than my prison. Awake, all blurred into all the same, the grey walls and recurring doors and windows could not be told one from the other, nor the days and meals apart. I learned every stone and corner, every step of the corridor and every echo of the rooms, in my first few days, and my mind craved stimulation. In dreams, Birmingham’s market square, my sister’s baking, the convivial laughter and alcoholic fog of the bar-room under hissing gaslights came to me and refreshed my jaded senses. In dreams I discovered my mother’s scent and the calls of boys and the whinny of horses on the streets of London.

But wake I must, day after wasted empty day, and on one of those days that part of my mind set aside for reason and to making its way in reality saw that it was no longer needed.

It happened quietly enough. I was no trouble. I had seen beatings and harsh treatment meted out when others displeased the keepers, and that was not for me. My purpose was not to bother others, simply to escape my self where I could not myself

escape those rooms. (And if I could escape, where would I go? I was after all Famous and would be caught in moments.)

So I entered into madness. It was quiet, yes, and private, and bothered no one. I still emerged for meals and exercise and washed myself and did the work required of me. But at night I raved as madly as the worst inhabitant of the day-room: I spoke in languages not yet invented and stripped off my clothes until I nearly froze. Freezing, I watched myself with interest, wondering if the body would die or no. I stared at my naked body part by part and found it very odd: a pink and feeble thing that seemed to want to live where no life was possible. Some days, I walked up and down the corridor in perfect peace, all day, and no thought at all entered my head: I might as well have been an idiot myself. In that, I found some solace. The racing words and impetuous deeds of Edward Oxford left me: I was not him, not compelled to talk and laugh and scribble and shoot guns at my rightful ruler.

But I did not forget what I had done. It was and is always with me. They asked me to explain and I never could – I was foolish, I said, I wanted Fame, I said, I was a young man with no Purpose. But none of that explains such monstrousness, nor ever could.

I was such a coward. She was young, with child and in an open carriage, all in trust and duty towards her subjects. And a woman! Not even a chance of her fighting back, of raising a pistol or drawing a sword in her own defence.

Even the madmen there with me, men like Hadfield, attacked only fellow men. (Dadd, in mind, too on the Devil, so there I give him credit.) I thought myself so brave and daring, as if the might and wealth of all the Empire were my target. She was the Queen of England; therefore I attacked England; therefore I was a soldier of a type, with a soldier's honour. Tosh and poppycock and nonsense!

Easy, yes, to look on a fragile female form and set oneself against it. What could she do? She was only a young bride, out with her husband on a social errand on a pleasant summer eve. That hundreds gathered to wave and cheer her as she went was an accident of birth.

She keeps now, I hear, a journal, for the benefit of future generations, that they may know how a good woman rules. So did I, a while, a tatty thing close-written. My mother knew how I loved to write and provided me with pen and paper, for she could not visit me. Poor mother, she stayed so close outside the walls of Bedlam for so long, in houses all over Lambeth for years on years. Such devotion I did not deserve. Half my notebooks were dispersed, but I kept some, and they will show how weak my mind became.

If I was seven years old, on the streets of Birmingham again, this would be all right.

My companions could skip and babble as they pleased: it would not bother me. I would be, as I was then, above and apart from them.

But I am not. I am one of them. When Tappet sees demons on shoulders, he sees them on mine as well, and takes to them with whatever is to hand. My words are fuels for Landy's monomania, whether I mean them so or no, it makes no difference, he seizes on them and weaves them into his wandering tales jus

the same. And I am, under the law and in the eyes of the medical establishment, a madman.

Bedlam is my place. So I will be surrounded by other madmen, moving through their distorted fancies like a ghost.

When there are ten of us in a room, there are ten rooms – a room of demons, fairies, royal persecution, a room where every one is trying to kill the other, a room where we are all already dead. This is what I must negotiate – to play my part on each and every stage at once without despoiling any other play. I must be ten men at once, each part of a particular fantasy or hell, or I will suffer for it.

And when I am alone, what then? May I return to my self in the closeness of my cell or the depths of a book, when I can get one? It is not all so easy. Having played my parts all day and avoided being set upon as a demon or stabbed as a conspirator, how am I to find myself again so quickly – I, who was so foolish and unmoored that I pointed pistols at the Queen? What sanity was that? I still know not what I am, as I knew not what I did – and this prison is no place to discover one's true self.

For when I do have leisure, I have little to distract me. The books are few and I have read them so many times they are no longer works of art at all, just words upon a page. The news is of no concern to me, like messages from another world I can never hope to reach. so few that the connection they are supposed to help sustain is rather weakened by the lack of reciprocity – and the knowledge that every word is read by strange eyes and expurgated if deemed unfit is a hobble to any frankness of feeling in those letters. To write a letter here is to stand on an empty street, shouting to people who will pass by in some several hours' time – it only stirs up emotions and desires that cannot be satisfied (just to hold my mother's hand, embrace my sister – but this will never be allowed.)

So it is early to bed and up before dawn in the dimmest light, or no light at all. It is the same thing every day save for variations in the madness of those around me. It is trying to be unnoticed while craving human intercourse. It is dwelling at unhealthy length on my own crimes and illness – repeated images before my eyes of the park, the palace, the clearing of the smoke and the confusion afterwards. It is huddling under thin covers into a tiny patch of warmth each night. It is arranging and arranging again my few possessions as I try to occupy my days.

I suppose I was mad. If I were not mad, in June, I would not be alive. This soft flesh would be torn and the whole God-fashioned miracle of my body would be a divided thing forever – Eternity in Pieces, spread across the Queendom.

But as I was mad, I may live. I may live with Dadd mumbling of the Fairies and the Codes he finds in Scripture on the one side, and Hadfield's whine and grumble about his incarceration on the other, as if it were my fault. I may live with the scratching and keening of Tappet in one ear, and the ringing produced by the sudden blow dealt me by Fossey in the other. And Johnston, well Johnston has made a And I may not even return his compliment as *he* is Quite Mad and *I* am only mad but Well Behaved and to come to blows in here is to be without reason. There is no winning such a fight, as he is always there, in the cell across the way, and I am always here and may live so forever, and so a battle once begun would never end. A battle without reason, that would not do in such a madhouse.

From the yard, if I stand back against the wall, which is how I like to be, I can see the chimney-pots of Six West-Square. If I jump up a little, I can see a portion of the roof.

I seek the extinguishment of hope, as no hope has been offered. I am a man tied to a tumbril, rolling forward into a grey fog that constitutes my Future.

Perhaps better to go mad myself. It is with fear and a sliver of wishfulness that I contemplate this very likely outcome. For how can a man go on with this, this play-acting with madmen while no sane alternative is offered? Of course I will go mad. The contagion of the sick minds around me, or the main force of the tedium and hopelessness, the lack of stimulation and the dwelling on my evil deeds – all this surely will combine to destroy my fragile grasp of what is real and solid, of what a man should be.

And I will end a quaking pile of flesh in some damp and stony corner, forgotten by all those from whom I sought notice, forgotten by those who loved me, forgotten even by myself, lacking all those joys in which I once took refuge – my reading and my thoughts, some harmless banter with my fellow men. Lacking all those I will hardly then be human and maybe it will be the best, for to be human and in Bedlam is not pleasant, not at all, and I have no choice, I must be here.

I am afraid. I am afraid I will become like them. I can feel my faculties weakening and my good understanding of the world fading, every time I enter into their madnesses or suffer a blow to my own dignity, intelligence and soul, whether a beating from a warder or one too many sleepless nights in freezing cold air, staring into a darkness darker than the closing of my eyes.

I would talk to God but cannot find him and though I do not refute that he exists, he does not come to me. The chaplain is a poor guide and has no time for conversation. The warders – they are merely men like me, only paid to be here daily and they may

leave each night and they will not admit me their equal for fear, I think, of exchanging places in spirit if not in fact.

So my poor mind runs in circles, or an ever-tightening spiral, and I can see no escape from what I fear but madness – but madness is what I fear. And even now, at least safe in my cell, I can hear a shouting that lets me know some one, Hadfield perhaps, is passing an uneasy night and if not knocked out soon by his head coming into sudden contact with the door, or by some merciful warder applying a baton to the skull, will be a problem in the morning – my problem of course as he mistakes my passivity for interest and it's my ears he chooses as the receptacles of his wicked, disjointed thoughts.

I think, sometimes, of death. But I am not so brave as I once thought myself to be.

I see it now: now that I am myself reduced to no more than my own frail body. I see how all the clothing and titles (Oxonian! Captain! Rosettes and capes!) and all the rank in all the Empire is for nothing, at its base. I see how anyone could have done what I did, if they only abandoned decency and honour (and also any sense or reason or mindfulness of one's own preservation, but those are matters inward, not speaking to my standing as a Man.)

Now I am "Oxford," spoken as if it were, say, "Rex" or "Brutus" or some other canine appellation, and I understand how greatly I relied on show and circumstance for my measures of the world.

Even in the bar, I claimed rights of passage of and conversation with the patrons and the staff because I was employed there – I had a purpose and a title (barman) and used it as if it were my very self.

I snatched at any small preferment or advancement and clothed myself in petty, borrowed meaning. And by this way of thinking was I deluded into seeing *her* titles and elevation as *Her*. And thinking too, that by setting myself against her, I would take on an importance equal to the Throne and Crown of Empire.

But that is all my folly – that pursuit of Fame. The truly cowardly and mean aspect of my conduct is not that I sought to raise myself, a man, to the level of a Queen, but that I overlooked that that Queen was only a woman, and that all her titles and riches were only window-dressing and that to be shot at would be frightening and distressing. Once before I scared a woman so, jumping on her carriage and causing her to scream, and my mother upbraided me most tearfully – I brushed it off and left it to her to beg the woman's pardon, and did not understand that my mother's distress was not so much from having to do so, as from having a

son who did not feel it wrong to frighten women in their carriages. Oh that I'd understood!

Stripped as I am now of all pretension, I understand at last that anyone can be so stripped – that any body can be made and alone and no more than their human form allows. At base, this is all I am and all we are and it is all now that I have. I do not even own the coat I'm wearing or the cup I sip from or the wooden spoons I have to eat with. Before, I could only see the world and how it dealt with me (unfairly, in an offhand fashion, as it is wont to do with wanton boys) and how I ranked in it, and I could only think how to correct this wrong, by any means however wrong.

Now, I am here and forever after concerned only with myself – my naked skin and what is underneath it, my sorry head and what it can contain, and my broken heart and what little, perhaps, it can find of friendship and fellow-feeling in extremis and in madness.

Poor Queen – to be burdened by her birth with that Fame I sought – and to have my false example – that to breach the sanctity of her rank and person is to win a morsel of that same Fame – taken up by others who now pursue her as if she were a Quarry legitimate as a fox or applause in some great theatre. It is all my fault. I thought it first and I can never under the damage. So easy, for a young man to buy a gun or two and shoot them at a Queen. So easy, and so cowardly.

They let me read. I delve into French and Latin and try to educate myself. Schooldays no more, and nothing left for me but school.

Un, deux, trois. One two three. Le, la. Je voudrais: I want. These are simple beginnings, nursery-school phrases. Annee. Year. Une annee, one year. Deux annees, trois annees, quatre annees. And so on.

La mere. Mother. I may not see my mother. I am not permitted to see my mother, and I may never see my mother: there, there are two ways to understand that phrase "I may not see my mother." I am not permitted, and it is possible I may never. La mere.

My mother and my sister may not see me. I believe it is for the best, for them. My mother has no money left and her name is known almost as widely as mine. To be famous, I had thought. Not to be infamous, and all my family with me.

I am permitted newspapers if not mothers, when one happens to be brought. Five or six come at a time and then nothing for a month, at the whim of the housekeeper. So I am well enough kept up with affairs outside. Poor Mr Bodkin, it was bankruptcy court for him. He must have begged all he could beg and still not

paid for all he spent on saving me. Most likely he will be rescued soon, brought forth from debtor's gaol by some Lord who sees the man is not to blame for my foolishness, and only sought to serve the Law and help a poor widow, but there again for now is another reason I must suffer. My mother, my sister, Mr Bodkin, all the names now linked to mine and lives all spoiled.

Her Majesty the Queen they say is well, but she will not be thinking of me. Her Majesty has a baby Princess now and I thank God, whom I would never ask to notice me, that the princess's arrival was safe and she was whole and it seems not the least affected by my silly loud noises this past June.

Oh, I've had notice enough.

Un, deux, trois. Le chat. La mere.

### **8: I Recover Somewhat and Examine Where and Who I Am.**

Richard Dadd was a friend to me I suppose. He was born above me, but madness is levelling. A member of the Royal Academy at 20 - a man of means and opportunity and all it came to was Bedlam and cold gruel. Dadd came after I had been there three long years and seemed to have always been there; very soon he was painting and drawing all the time and at first I was pleased when he 'good morning'd' me – until he bade me see the fairies in the corner and did I not think them charming, and then grew angry when I could not, until I changed the subject to his travels and for peace was then forced to spend a full three hours between dinner and supper listening to him tell Egyptian Myths and explain to me quite seriously how they pointed to great events and terrors in the present day. At least in Dadd's work-room I felt safe.

He killed his father. It was only whispered at in Bedlam, for two reasons. One was that such a crime seemed beyond our understanding – not killing a father, many I know had thought of that at least and it was not uncommon amongst the sane as well. But a stabbing death, while shouting at the very Devil, Satan himself; the horror, and the hubris to believe a man could kill the Devil, even in human form. Dadd's father was just an ordinary man, of course, who could not believe his son could harm him and his last moments are not something I care to imagine fully.

The other reason was that Dadd, still believing he had killed the Devil, would become agitated and restless if his father's death was mentioned. My father is alive, he'd say. It was an imposter, a demon in my father's form, and I did well to kill it. My father is alive but will not visit me. And he would grip his paintbrush as if it were a knife and we would back away, just a little, even those of us who had our own delusions. Because every man's delusion is his own. Reason makes itself, and its bearer, an enemy.

When the madness left his eyes, he was a gentle man. He was patient with us less talented wielders of the brush; he would show us over and over how to trace a line, how to make an image take on depth and perspective. He sat for hours quite happily in the day-room, sketching, and those we need call master found him a work-room too, and if

they occasionally took a canvas or two to sell to some interested patron of the arts, what could any of us do?

He told me: Oxford, you cannot draw. You cannot paint worth a sixpence, but you have a steady hand and a good eye for colour. He said I should try walls instead of canvases, and the hallways needing painting just at that time, I took him up on the idea. He came with me and showed me how the finishes I must reproduce had been done and before I knew it I was apprenticed to a trade, with as many hours to perfect my craft as I might need.

That was a gift to me. Pot-boy, my records state: Station in life: pot-boy. A pot-boy is not a calling. A pot-boy can only work in pubs and low houses. And there is no call for pot-boys in the madhouse.

So a painter I became. I still went to sit with Dadd and the others and sketch and dab a little, but painted over my canvases as soon as they were finished. Dadd's works, at any rate, were fine enough to do for all of us; such fantastic scenes of fairies, goblins and other little folk, in amongst the flora of the woods, that made us feel that we were there. The stories he wove around them were of madness, of course, but charming and giving life to each tiny figure. And when he painted, he was at peace.

Meanwhile, I traversed the halls of Bethlem making the walls, and my record, spotless. I mixed paints and carried pots, set up and took down ladders, whitewashed and edged and grained and made our little madhouse at least a fresh and shining place. I worked, and in that found a grace and a passing of the days. What passing there was!

How to convey the eternal slowness of the first dozen years alone! Every stone and corner, every aspect and the view from every point in the special wing where I was confined, appear to me even now in dreams etched with daily repetition over what should have been my better years. What little distraction I got from books and newspapers was merely inward; my aesthetic sensibility had no respite from those same corridors and windowframes, apart of course from watching Dadd at work.

Of all the spaces where I walked and worked and waited, the only one I'd willingly enter again would be the chapel.

The chapel at Bethlem graced the highest point of the building; it was already a beautiful space, made sublime by the addition of a new dome, built some few years after my arrival. I had watched the great dome rise over the parapets, listened day after day to the shouts of the bricklayers while the outer walls of Bethlem rang with the sound of steel on stone as chisels shaped and sledgehammers pounded keystones into place.

In a structure so immutable as Bethlem seemed, such activity and change was of the keenest interest, and all felt moved to assist in any way we could, be it from afar, by offering to the company at large suggestions to improve the design, to ensure correct placement of the windows, and how the newly enlarged place of worship for madmen and women could best be used.

My own interest was professional as well, for once the hired-in workers had departed and the space was given over to service, I felt sure my skills would be called upon for its upkeep. When it was completed and we were ushered in for our little dose of Godliness on Sundays, I felt the eight walls enclose me, and Heaven did not so much look down on me from the tall arched windows in the new dome so much as reveal itself through the brightness and radiance entering therefrom. We all sang loudly in that space,

for the pleasure of feeling our voices echo back to us – for all its new grandeur it was not so large a space as a real church would be.

Most, though, I loved to work there alone, moving from winding staircase to iron column with a pot of near-pure white paint, covering up the smallest marks. The new mezzanine level under the dome formed a gallery from which the chapel itself could be looked down upon. A handsome black-stone tablet, taller than a man, was set into the wall of this upper gallery. Exodus XX – the Ten Commandments – were etched into it in gilt lettering, the gift, I understood, of some noble person who wished to improve us inmates with God’s message.

I: *Thou shalt have no other gods but me.* Impossible, in such a space. Whose house this was there could be no doubt. I have of course learned about the ‘other gods’ of Greek and Roman times, and the faeries and sprites of England before it converted to the true faith, but at least in that tall octagon only the One God could exist.

Then II; on the making of graven images, which I took to mean that we should not *worship* graven images – else, I thought, not only Dadd, but the publishers of the *London Illustrated News* were in for a warm time come judgement day. All very well, until: “*I the LORD thy God am a jealous God and visit the sins of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation...*”

By my counting, I was of the fourth generation. My great-grandfather’s sins must have been many. What evil my father’s father committed in gaining the glory of battle is hard to know, except by the scars he bore and the anger and fear he carried everywhere. My father – no better or worse than many a man, I suppose, but certainly there are men whose wives are treated less harshly.

But old George Oxford, who first came here as a freed slave, well, his only sin as far as I could tell was to be black. (My mother still denied it, but my aunts had been sure to let me know the truth. Their reason for doing so was dislike of my father and an unChristian inability to forgive him for marrying their sister against the family’s wishes – forgetting that by informing me of my father’s stain, they were also staining me in my own mind.) Nevertheless, though old George did not choose to be black, or indeed to be in England, having been brought as a servant, black he was and that carried with it a kind of unforgiveable offence.

In Bethlem, however, the status of octoroon passed notice, other matters being foremost, and I thought of it as a disadvantage that applied only in my former life. I only recalled it as a concrete fact of my existence when I arrived in Melbourne, and for different reasons.

Commandments III and IV, regarding blasphemy and rest on Sundays were so little observed by lunatics that regarded them as the kind of regulations that armies and police forces devise merely to show they intend discipline, without any real intention to enforce them, unless of course a subject should displease in some other, less definable regard; at which point they could be brought to serve as a stick with which to beat the unhappy subject. That much else of the proclamations in the Bible might serve the same purpose, being honoured in the breach unless it serve the purpose of some officer of God, I will not say myself.

What, though, I wondered, about V: Honour thy Father and Mother? I loved my father, but could not honour him. I loved my mother, but I had not treated her well and I had heard whispers from my keepers since I was locked away, to the effect that her

behaviour had not been good – whispers of scandalous divorce proceedings though she had been so lucky as to remarry, of flagrant behaviour with men other than her husband in houses on the Westminster-road – and I knew at heart that “honour” and my public-house-bred mother were perhaps not the closest of companions. Still I also knew that for many years she had stayed close to Lambeth and the walls that kept her from me, though direct communication was impossible, and for that I loved her more than any God could command me.

VI: *Thou shalt do no murder.* Nor would I, nor had I but, had I killed the Queen? What would I be? I wondered, then, if I would be the same man so many years later, apron on, work boots laced, paint-pot in hand? Say she had died and I was to blame and *still* not hung for it, because of my madness, my youth? What mite or molecule of my flesh would have been changed by her death? No, my body would have been untouched by the event. So was the soul so divided from the body that it could be blackened forever and the other quite unaffected? And as it was my body, after all, that formed the vehicle for my offending – my hands that aimed the pistols – how could it be so unmarked as to be indistinguishable from an innocent vessel, while my insubstantial soul was stained and damned forever?

The minister did not address this in his sermons. And with Haydon I chose not to raise such doubts and deep philosophy. He was a practical man, who would rather discuss carpentry or fishing or at most, the merits of Shakespeare as compared with Milton.

VII: *Thou shalt not commit adultery.* At last a commandment that was easy to keep to. I did see women, sometimes, from a distance, and was once graced with a brief introduction to Mrs Haydon, but otherwise: with whom? I supposed buggery and pederasty might be included in such a stricture and I knew many who found some solace in the company of other men, but it was not for me. My few memories of the kindnesses and liberties allowed me by women of my station when I was but a boy were near worn out with going-over.

Then, of course, VIII and IX, thou shalt not steal or lie. I thought of these as the short commandments – admirably simple to understand and obey, unlike II and IV, each of which consumed near a quarter of the tablet.

Hardest of all, for a man in my position, was X, the tenth: thou shalt not covet any thing thy neighbour has. My actual neighbours excited no envy, it was true, for they had just as much of nothing and generally less sense than did I. But up in the chapel, above the asylum with the open sky visible on all sides, I could hear London; laughter in the road outside, horses’ brass-ware clanking, hoofs striking and cart-wheels grinding. I could hear the cries of penny vendors and the church bells tolling all the hours and in that high, bright space I was alone with god and even more alone for hearing the sounds of freedom, and that I could not but covet.

So it went. Not long after the chapel was completed, my services began to be required elsewhere in the building; that is, I was permitted to take my paint-pots out around the wings and work where I was needed, not only

From time to time, a little drama occurred, mostly in the form of some madman doing what madmen do – most usually to some other unfortunate, but once or twice he noticed me and I was forced to cower or bluster back, according to the type of man he was, and to make some noise until a keeper came to pull him off – never, I am now proud to say, did I return blows for blows, as I would not beat a tethered dog.

A dozen years passed so; it seemed as long as I caused no difficulties and kept the walls fresh, I would not be bothered with doctoring or other unnecessary kindnesses and ministrations. The denizens of Bethlem offered enough occupation in that line to those who would bestow it, without my having to submit. Indeed, my only trouble, aside from the madmen, was finding enough to occupy me.

A journalist once came to visit and wrote of me:

I had a long talk with Edward Oxford, the so-called pot-boy who shot at the Queen and who had been in Bethlem since 1841 (there, he erred) he was quite sane *and had always been so*, the doctors aid. There also, busy at his easel was Dadd the painter-parricide. And on the women's side, at fancy needle-work, was Mrs Brough, the Queen's wet-nurse who, in an access of puerperal fever had murdered two or three of her children.

I was sent the clipping by a friend and kept it, to remind me that if I ever came the way of being a man of letters, to be at least a little accurate. Two children, or three, it makes no matter, it would seem. Unless you are Mrs Brough, stooped with care and thin of yellow hair, three children dead behind you.

At any rate he was correct about my sanity, at that point. The doctors would hardly have known so much as my name until Dr Hood arrived to sweep the old decks clean of outdated thinking, chains and beating, and soon after, of course, the arrival of Henry Haydon.

## **9: The Arrival of Henry Haydon and my Full Recovery**

For Doctor Charles Hood, we lunatics were a vocation. The insane were curable, he believed; it was only a matter of finding the way. And the way was not through the body, but the mind. So where physics and special diets and cold baths and much, much less pleasant treatments had been applied, Hood, like a nursemaid, ordered that there be tranquillity, good food, entertainment and occupation. Lunatics, I heard him say, could only be helped to save themselves. They must be helped to understand the desirability of becoming sane and, more, must be shown that it was *possible* to become so. (That the warders agreed with him at first was less than evident.)

I confess that thinking later that same night upon his words, I may have shed a tear. The next time he appeared upon the ward, I emboldened myself to speak to him directly. I knew, I said, that I deserved no special treatment. But, I said, I would have him know that I was quite well these days. I begged, I said, to be allowed to help in any way I could in improving conditions for my fellow inmates, who already looked to me for some small matters such as study of their letters and lessons in those crafts which I had mastered. Most, of course, could read and write and were in no need of amanuensis services, but even those whose social stature outshone mine had recognised my ability to point out, gently, where they strayed from sense and reason in their letters, thus sparing their relations much distress, so that I was a kind of secretary to quite a few.

“Not all of us,” I said, “will ever be cured. But some may, and although we are criminally convicted, perhaps we may hope for something better?”

He thought on this. He asked me what I might mean by better, and I felt the old urge to laugh bitterly as we stood in the hallway of the wing, with the stench of shit on the walls still discernible under the fresh paint I applied two days previous. Instead, I spoke mildly of communication with the outside world; of useful labour; of improvement of the self. I dared not mention freedom. I heard no more from him until Christmas Night, when he visited our evening meal.

Christmas had never been a time of deprivation even early in my stay, although the warders were not above abstracting at least some of the biscuits and extra bread allowed us. But this night Hood had ordered a Tree be put up in the main wing – I helped place the candles myself – and in our little section, there were holly wreaths and a platter of roast pork, the first I’d seen in two and a dozen years. We were allowed to stay up late and a young verger engaged on some sort of tour of madhouses handed out music-sheets and led us in *God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen* and *Silent Night*. There was, indeed, pudding with raisins. What touched me the most was that Hood – a married man with family at home – condescended to give audience to our singing, and afterwards himself handed out an orange to each, with permission to remove that fruit to our cells for consumption at our leisure, eating in the bed-rooms having hitherto been strictly prohibited.

I can still picture that exotic fruit; the rough colour of the globe, the soft tearing-away of its skin and the sweet juices filling my mouth as I savoured each piece after midnight, looking out of my window at the stars above.

It was soon after that Hood came to the wing with a new Steward: Henry Haydon. And that day was a bright one indeed. I noted it in my journal:

Today a new Steward strode onto the ward, looked me in the eye and shook my hand. He treated me as an equal! Said Hood had told him of me – as if my name was not in any particular way otherwise notable to him – and inquired after my health as if we were meeting with a mutual friend on Sunday afternoon in Hyde Park.

While Tappet prowled along the walls like a hungry cat, Haydon sat down with me at a table, asked my interests and inquired of my health. We traded a little French; he said he would come back in a day or two when he had fully entered on his duties, and play me at chess.

To be recognised by such a man transformed me. Matters had been somewhat improving – the doctors treating me with kindness, the warders becoming better-paid and less likely to use their sticks, though never better-looking. I had all the materials possible in such a place – books, and wool with which to knit, and newspapers – and they tolerated my over-decorating of the wards as they saw the pleasure I take in my work. But Haydon was different. Haydon was interested in my very self. Over a period of some months, he came into the habit of visiting me in the middle of the morning, after he had dealt with his correspondence. He said Hood desired reports on the general state of

matters in the criminal ward, and that he was grateful for my assistance in the matter. But as often as we spoke of this inmate or that, or how best to manage difficult situations, we spoke of his own past and current ambitions. I confess I came to see that daily half-hour as the best part of my day, and my journals are as full of reports of Haydon and his doings as of my own affairs. I was afforded all the materials possible in such a place – books and newspapers – and they provided me with wool and tolerated my zeal for painting everything, as a useful occupation. But Haydon, he was interested in me for myself.

He is of my age, but how luckier a path he has trodden! To sail to far New South Wales just as I was tried for treason! To discover virgin forests just when I was being locked in this stone cage! To commune with wild men in the open air, while I dodged Johnson's projectiles! To sleep under the southern stars with dogs and horses while I lay awake in fear of madmen! Five years in Australia at such a tender age have been the making of him, that is certain.

And now he's here, serving England by taking on the duties of a steward in this strange place. To care for lunatics and murderers when he could be building an Antipodean palace out of gold! This is a sense of duty I must admire. Still, I feel he was taken aback by just how mad the men here are – perhaps that is why he likes me, which I flatter myself he does, because I can be his guide in all this madness in a way the warders cannot. They are too fixed on discipline and order and keeping Thomas W. from eating his own waste. I can help Haydon understand what is needed – when to laugh at Pertile's antics and when not, when to go along with Dadd's delusions, indeed how instructive it can be to do so – with Quinn I have visited the Czars of Russia and German Princes and never had to stir myself from London! These are the keys to the minds of these men, not the time of rising and the order of bathing.

Haydon, I think, will be my friend and each morning when I wake I ask for no more than one small exchange of sanity in the coming day: a conversation about the tax laws, a mention of art or music; something that reminds me I am a sane man and all that's around me is not all that there is in this God's world.

I should put down my pen, perhaps fetch some pigments for tomorrow. I am thinking again of my misfortune and it will not help. It is no one's fault but mine that I am in this place and I may not hope to leave. To become angry with that boy is to become that angry boy. Regret is not a useful feeling; better I become someone else entirely, a man who could never have sprung from that boy. That way, perhaps, by some magic, grace or Royal favour, the error will be realised and I will be released. I am not that boy. I never held that gun. It was another person.

I am a man who is in a dream, beset by lunatics, and I must insist on my own dignity, intelligence and honour, for none of those are granted in this place. I must learn, write, work with my hands and remind myself with pleasant conversation and practice of my manners that I am not a madman; just a man in a madhouse.

So thank God for Henry Haydon.

Haydon's influence with Hood, or perhaps Hood's own wisdom, brought long-desired changes to my life. Chief and perhaps best came two years, perhaps three, after they arrived. Haydon and Hood arrived together and gathered a small group of patients – myself, Dadd and, inexplicably, Johnston among us – and made an offer. If we would undertake to be of excellent behaviour and not prove them to be mistaken in their opinion of us, we could be removed from the Wing and installed in apartments in the main building of the Hospital.

My thoughts were mainly of the lesser dangers I would face, thus separated from the Murderers & etc. in the criminal wing. I also comprehended, though, that the new situation would mean better treatment from the keepers and that by residing in the same building as the curables and those who might be freed, I might aspire to their condition.

The first night in the new apartments was not auspicious. I had not realised how, for all its disruptions, the criminal wing was insulated from the hubbub of the hospital more generally. We were on the second floor, in a ward formerly occupied by incurables, but now fitted out for our use. The gallery outside our wards served as a day-room and was filled with ferns, little birds in cages and comfortable places in which to sit. I had helped with its decoration and on our arrival in the evening I felt uplifted, knowing the criminal ward was far below and the sunshine would enter through the large windows on the morrow.

That night, however, I could not sleep. Incurables still resided on our level, and one of them – I never discovered which – suffered some kind of visitation near to midnight, leading to a howling, which led to running feet, slamming doors, cries from every room in the building (it seemed); and then, just as it seemed a demon was roaming the halls and might assault us next, a dreadful silence.

We all of us emerged the next morning, even Johnston, unable to meet each other's eyes, as if we had ourselves engaged in the midnight fracas and were ashamed. I had brought my books; Dadd his paints; Morgan his needlework and violin, but that day, in our new surroundings, we merely paced and shuffled and nodded to each other like the most vacant lunatics.

It is, however, the nature of men to conform themselves to their surroundings and we well-behaved criminals learned to ignore any sound that originated outside our own apartments. A month or so after the move, Haydon came to me with pen and paper and a sheaf of pamphlets from the publishers.

"I have a task for you," he said. "I need a list."

And this, much like the eating of the orange, was a moment of flowering, as I became our ward's librarian, scouring the catalogues for what was both interesting and improving, what could further my own studies (my French was good, my Italian better, but my German still lacking, as few of my current acquaintance could help me with the speaking.) Haydon came less often to our ward – while we were causing no trouble, he

was obliged to spend more time with the unfortunates who'd remained behind – but when he did, he brought little parcels full of cloth-bound books with marbled end-papers, each of which I received as a hungry man does a chunk of meat.

Proximity to the rest of the hospital increased my freedom. I still carried with me a chit stating my business and when I was expected to be in which location, but my demeanour and the familiarity of my face meant that the keepers paid me little notice. From time to time I wondered if I should attempt to leave – but I had no friends outside, and the spectre of the noose still swayed before me. I dared not implicate my mother in any further crime. Besides, the time that followed our removal was such a great improvement that I considered myself to be quite nearly happy (Johnston, of course, aside.)

In my new routine, I found a modicum of freedom; that is, I was able to choose what I did and when. Naturally I put my work first, aware that any slackening might lead to more attention from the warders. But between breakfast and the first work-bell, and in the hour reserved for the midday meal, on Saturday afternoon and on the Sabbath, I found many hours to read.

My old taste for lurid novels having led me astray, I chose to study History. For in History, I believed, I would find both entertainment – the adventures of the ancients being at least equal to any novelist's creations – and improvement – the lessons of History being well-burnished by their retelling over time. So I read of the Roman Forum and the Greek Theatres and in my imagination people them with figures in togas and laurel wreaths. In my study of England past, I could discern England present – the markets and the churchyards and how the English used them not only for their intended purposes but also as meeting-places and centres of society. Sometimes I came across lurid passages, about public executions and, in one case, the quartering of Sir William Wallace, and these I read with a cold shudder – there but for the grace of God!

But for the most part, I proceeded quietly with the expansion of my mind, honing my French and Latin and my knowledge of geography, without the slightest hope of ever being able to employ my skills.

Some evenings, our Mr Haydon favoured the patients with a lecture. This was another benefit of our new residence, as the other criminal inmates were not blessed with an invitation. As a gentleman of great experience, Mr Haydon had found time to offer what he called “some modest services to the aspiring antipodean”; that is, an emigration agency of sorts. He confided in me that he found lecturing the inmates to be the very best of training – “for what captures their attentions will just as well capture that of the ordinary audience” – and furthermore, the practice in oratory helped him, for despite his vast knowledge and authority, he was not the most confident of speakers. So when he was due to give a public address on the topic of Australia, we inmates would hear it first. And, of course, there were our little chats, in which he sometimes let slip telling details of his own experience.

Thus I learned: that in Australia a man must work hard. That in Australia a man would be rewarded for such work, in a fashion not always honoured there in England. That in Australia society was without the pretensions of English life, much of the fancier trimmings having been “knocked off” by heat, or lack of material from which to fashion them. I could not, he said, imagine such weather and such turbulences – fires, floods and hot north winds – as he had survived in Melbourne.

Yet, he said, life in Australia had its appeal, being truly “what you made it” and it being in so many respects a place where a man’s true character could shine through.

He spoke, too, of the Aboriginals, and how he had hunted kangaroo with them, and travelled through the wilderness in search of wild tribes; how, on more than one occasion, he owed his life to a black helper’s ability to feed the party when supplies were spoiled or exhausted. He had worked once, he told me, as an artist for a Black Protector, and although the man was selfish, fat and self-important, it had been an opportunity to judge the capacity of the native man in his uncontaminated state, free of the white man’s vices, and he had developed great respect for the “noble savage”, more so than many white men he encountered there.

Although his term there had extended to only five years, he seemed to have an inexhaustible store of tales about the place, and I found that to steer him onto this subject guaranteed me an extra quarter hours’ intercourse at least. So I learned of his adventures on French Island, shooting swans and battling insects of prodigious size; of his hunting in Gipps’ Land, where, he told me “five very hungry men would sometimes consider themselves fortunate in having half-a-pound of flour amongst them for a meal” and a leg of native bear was all that stood between him and true starvation. I heard, too, of the little aristocracy of Melbourne, where being related to any lord or lady, however distantly, gave one bragging rights and secured an invitation to meet the Governor, and where no one at all, no matter how native-born, was related to a convict – or so they said.

Haydon, however, was not given much to social graces, though his manners were perfect. He had, he told me, learned that a man’s true status was not given him by birth, but always earned. Indeed, some of the men he most respected in Australia Felix were those called “savages” by some. From Australia, he had brought back several curious, amongst them utensils fashioned by the Aboriginals: boomerangs and fire-sticks, which he installed in a glass case for the inmates to look upon. They were gifts, he told me, from a black man he’d travelled with, who’d as good as saved his life with his skill in hunting when the food ran short. He could even speak a few words of the native tongue, which I sadly have forgotten, except for ‘marma’ (father) and ‘barbah’ (mother).

From this, we progressed to the question of race, and slavery, and he let me understand that, in his family, slavery was considered a mortal sin, and colour no bar to honour.

He had seen slaves, he said, in Rio, on his way to Melbourne, and though they appeared well treated, he could not reconcile their chains with their masters’ luxuries. For some of the slaves were more upright and moderate than the white men, he said.

“With education and kind treatment, who knows what those men might have been?” he mused, speaking of the slaves. At this, I nearly dared to share with him that my own family tree concealed a black-skinned man, whose own parents had been slaves themselves – hoping, I suppose, to continue the theme of uplift through education and perhaps garner a compliment for myself – but old caution prevailed and I kept my secret.

Mostly our talk was of Melbourne itself, however. One night he gave a cracking lecture, laying out the vicissitudes of the sea journey, the difficulty of the work and the simplicity of the rewards available in such clear terms that afterwards, as I was working to restore the chairs to their places against the wall, I wondered aloud: would he go there again himself?

“In an instant, Edward,” he replied, “were I not obliged to remain at home.” Meaning, of course, his pretty children and his wife and his many other duties.

“I think I was happiest there of all,” he said. “The freedom of sleeping in a tent under the stars; the freshness of the air; the sense of being the first to discover some new place. These are sensations I have not felt since I returned to England.” Though, I recalled, he had made it clear he was not so much an explorer as a man who happened to be amongst the first to stumble into a place, seeking pasture or some other useful resource.

“The hospitality of the bush,” he said, “there is nothing like it here. In the bush, the first question a stranger is asked is not ‘who are you?’ but ‘what can I do for you?’. Of course civilised society does not see such questions as practical, but I wish it would.”

“I suppose,” he went on, “it was a time of beginnings for me. I was not twenty when I arrived there. The world seems so – simple, I suppose – when one is starting out. There is so much to do, and learn, and be, and it all seems to be possible.”

He seemed not to realise how this affected me, who had been shut up these fifteen years. I thanked him again for his time and went to bed, where despite his exhortations against the “romantic emigrant”, my mind’s eye rested on a little house under a towering gum-tree.

## **10: I Despair of Release**

Haydon was not my only friend, and fate had it that my other confidante had also seen much of the world.

My long companion, Richard Dadd, had travelled to the ancient sites before he so unfortunately came to reside in this other Bethlehem. Indeed all the Continent of Europe had been at his disposal and his confinement was the all the more bitter for it, while I, whose range had been merely Birmingham to London, lost less in the way of liberty. What little I lost in the right to roam – a right, after all, so little exercised and so unlikely to be further used – I made up in the experience of meeting such diverse persons – at least seven kinds of murderer and twenty types of thief – and in my reading and education, the which I would have had no opportunity to pursue had I remained “outside”. By being “inside” I was able to look somewhat further afield for the development of my mind than would otherwise have been. Or so I told myself.

Dadd, however, already had education and a range of pursuits of an intellectual kind, being born to them and his travels were, I understood, not only an employment but also a furtherance of the expansion of his mind – a kind of outdoor class-room where the Parthenon itself, by being present and most solid, would impart a better grasp of Greek grammar and politics to the young traveller. So it is often done amongst the better families of our island. In the case of Richard Dadd, the mind so exposed was already less robust than could be hoped for, and rather than increase his wisdom and develop his character, the exposure to the legends and stories of the Classical cities and the Near East corrupted his thinking, with that tragic consequence. Many days I sat to watch him paint, my book unregarded in my hand. His genius was undoubted and I drew great joy from seeing the scenes form on the canvas.

Sometimes while he worked, Dadd would describe the wonders he had seen – Pyramids like mountains in the desert sand, temples, markets packed full of foods, bright

cloths and all the stuffs of life, markets that had been bustling on those very sites a thousand years. He told me of Jerusalem – its dusty streets, donkeys, cracked mud walls – and the ancient church built where Mary lay in a stable to deliver Jesus to the World. He described streets where Caesar himself had walked, and the hills of Athens, where the blood of sacrificial bulls had flowed. Most often, though, he spoke of the great monuments, the towering fluted columns and long marble colonnades that had lasted two millennia. One afternoon, between the lunch and dinner hours, he was sketching out a tree, or vine, at any rate some things with many leaves, while discoursing on the Golden Ratio to be found in the architecture of the Greeks. I asked him why, then, did he not paint antique and classic scenes? Was it perhaps, that perfection, once built, could not benefit from further transformation by his brush?

Although Dadd was a gentleman, he tended to allow his face to say what his words might not. You, Edward Oxford, do not understand the world, his bushy eyebrows plainly said; but he was kind enough to lead me to better understand.

“The monuments are beautiful,” he told me. “The ancient temples were like nothing I had ever seen; no cathedral, however richly decorated, can compare to them. Their simplicity is their grandeur and, because they are older, they are closer to the origins of Man’s connection to his gods. In Egypt the stone gods were so well made they might have been alive.” (And here I feared he might recall that Osiris still had work for him – but he was rational that day.)

“Yet all the men who made them are now dust. The only names we know are from legend, or carved into rock with no indication who or what they were. I saw marbles with blue veins like those in my own arms” (the talk of blood unnerved me), “and those marbles are now more real than the hands that carved them. What I mean, Edward, is that the buildings and the holy sites themselves lacked life.”

He was quiet a moment while his brush traced green along a leaf-edge.

“What I paint is life itself. Not history, which few of us can shape, and in which fewer will be recalled. Life, itself, the spirit in the eyes, is what matters.”

He began to quote Shelley’s lines: “ ‘Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair’ ” and at that moment I looked up and my own eyes met, not Dadd’s, but the painted eyes of a strange character on a canvas leaning against the wall across from where I sat. Dadd had been working on the painting some time, using a young man – as young as I was when I was first shut away – draped with a sheet, as his model. But I knew the man in question tolerably well, and though the features of the face were as from life, the eyes were terrible indeed – deep brown, full of menace, sorrow, and worst of all, a kind of snakelike consideration of the viewer. I stared into them, for a moment forgetting Dadd at his easel.

“Crazy Jane,” he said, picking up another brush while holding the first between his teeth. “Mad. Driven mad by love. Wandered through the countryside.”

Indeed the lady in question was hung about with vegetation and flowers in a most disorderly fashion. Her bare arms – manly arms, after the model – were upstretched, grasping a branch. The eyes called mine back to them.

“See, Edward,” Dadd continued. “Life is far more of interest than any building, be it the oldest and most sacred temple in all Europe. History cannot be grasped. Posterity is an illusion. Even the Queen herself” – he knew his words would discomfit me, he showed it in a glance – “will not matter in the long term. Should she live or die, it is no matter to

the Empire, and even if it was, the Empire is no matter to Men, not after a century or five. Our task does not lie there, in history. It is hidden. Somewhere behind our eyes perhaps. I don't quite know as yet. I will one day."

Dadd, once he had finished with a subject, could never be induced to take it up again. So it fell to me to put his philosophy into a fitter shape. Long I thought on it that night, with the vision of Jane's eyes in Tom's face before me in the dark.

If monuments were nothing; if History itself was not to be impressed upon even by a Queen; if therefore the removal or otherwise of that Queen meant nought; then what was I, who had thrown my life away on such a gamble?

Dadd's words offered up an answer – I was a Life, like any other. *I* was the mystery, the thing that mattered. One small part of it most certainly, but any part could be as precious as the whole.

I was thirty-three years of age. I would never matter to the world (beyond its efforts to rid itself of my nuisance). Henceforth my satisfaction must be for myself and only that. I must measure myself against precepts of my own, not history, posterity or the regard of other eyes. The eyes I saw in the glass would be the only ones to judge me.

That journalist who came to see me – Sala was his name – *he* judged me, and unfairly I believe. He met Dadd, toured the wards and sat with me a while; he was a familiar of the great Dickens and was most interested to hear my tale. I played him at chess, and won, and while we played we talked of books, and art, of the doings of the Empire; yet in his report he simply wrote that he'd me "the conceited pot-boy" of twenty years ago (though adding, I admit, that I was "quite sane").

Such events were rare, though from time to time visitors were admitted, and I'd hoped for more, I suppose, from such an encounter. Twenty years later and I was still, to the world, a "pot-boy" – a curio kept in Bedlam with the other murderers and lunatics, and of no interest beyond that fact.

I showed the report to Haydon when he next visited, and asked him, would there be any circumstances under which my release might be considered?

He answered: "It has not been done before. You are at Her Majesty's pleasure, Edward. What that really means is that you are at the pleasure of Whitehall, and that is quite another matter."

I had, it seemed, by being found not guilty, offended some in high places. It should have been neither here nor there to such elevated men – among them Sir George Grey, who had sat on the bench at my trial – whether a "conceited pot-boy" was free or no. But Hood told Haydon, who told me, that I was remembered none too kindly, and while they held my keys, my prison would stay locked.

Soon after – a year maybe – news came. Hood, despairing of the criminally insane in the old wing, had prevailed up on the Government to relieve him of us all. A new hospital – a prison really – was to be built in Berkshire at Broadmoor, and we would all be sent there, along with criminal lunatics from all over Britain.

Had I been told, in my first days at Bethlem, that I would fear to leave it, I would have called the speaker a liar; but when word came round the ward that we had only a year or two remaining, I was struck with a terrible nostalgia, and a terror of what might come in some new place. I was over forty, and doubted my ability to win a fight with new opponents.

In my time at Bethlem I'd seen many deaths. I'd seen the death of James Hadfield, who like me had shot at a monarch of the realm and I'd seen in that my future. Hadfield hated me – he'd hoped for freedom in old age, but my attempted regicide had sunken all his plans. Freedom was a dream, and prisoners may not dream.

## **11: To Broadmoor**

One by one, two by two, they left. Dadd and Payne, McNaughton, Southwall, Francis and the rest.

Some went quietly and calmly, some sent songs of farewell echoing down the hallways. Some fought and wept to be taken from their safe familiar rooms. Others were simply unaware and bewildered and moved only as the keepers' hands pushed and pulled them, gently or roughly according to their mood and the history between them.

One boy, no older I believe than when I came here, but a cruel tormenter of women (it was said) must have displeased old James, though how I could not know. He was pushed into his carriage with a final blow to the skull that left him weeping, and he would not have been sorry to know he would never see James again. However they left, they left in chains, even the very old and weak and the compliant idiots. Such is the way madmen must be dealt with when they are transported past the doors of fearful citizens.

Haydon and I worked hard in this time: he with paper-work and records and the arranging of supplies and so on; myself with cleaning out the cells of those who had left and helping carry furniture and fittings to wings where those who were merely mad, not criminally so, were to be left behind, as I was trusted to do as much. I itched to apply a coat or two of paint to the walls revealed by beds and tables taken away, but there was no excuse to; the whole was to be demolished quickly, leaving no trace of the lives lived here, wasted.

On my last morning, late in April, Haydon had me to his office and dismissed my keeper.

"You must submit to chains, you understand," he said.

I acknowledged that this was so.

"It is not, Edward, that we do not trust you or that we believe you deserve the same treatment as – the others. But after you leave here, you will be a prisoner of Broadmoor, and cannot be seen to be otherwise. And if it were to be known –"

"Or if I were to escape," I teased him and was sorry straight away.

"The Press and public would be upon us in a flash and we have the patients left behind to consider."

"I will be all right. I can bear chains," I said. "But once I am in Broadmoor –"

"Life there will be no worse than here," he promised. "Of course I cannot speak for who and what may join you there. But you are strong-minded, and will manage. We will write and let them know how useful you can be, and our good opinion of you. Dr Hood too will attest that you have committed not one fault while here..."

"Only to Broadmoor?" This was the point on which I had been turning for many nights as the others left for Broadmoor. "Is that to be the end of me – that prison?"

Haydon found sudden interest in a shell he kept upon his desk, a pink-lipped cowrie from the shores of French Island in Port Phillip, kept glossy by the constant touch

of his hands. He turned its speckled casing over and examined the toothlike ridges along its underside.

“There is sympathy for you, Edward. We will not forget – ”

At which I fear I lost my gentlemanly reserve and wept a little. I begged his pardon and further begged for his assistance.

“I will go anywhere. I will go away to the end of the world. I will swear on my mother and my sister and the Lord himself to never cause offence again in any way. You know I’m useful. You have said it just now. You have seen how hard I work. In some new place I could do more than paint the walls. I could contribute to the Empire, improve myself, make use of all my learning. I could do good.”

He cut me off, sharply, as if returning to the room from some other place.

“If it was only my decision, I would,” he said. He put down the shell and looked me in the eye.

“I will write to Broadmoor. Dr Hood will write. Comport yourself as you have here and they will see you are no lunatic. Mercy and justice will prevail.”

“It is nearly twenty-four years I have been waiting,” I said. Over his shoulder I could see out to the Lambeth Road. The trees were new-green and did not yet block the whitish sky; carts were moving slowly towards the river crossing and the City. In West-Square, I knew, the blossoms would be bursting out around the little fenced-in garden, petals falling to the ground.

“We will not forget you. I will write to those I can, and I will write to you. You will find friends, Edward, and not lose those you have already.”

He stood. Against the brightly lit window his figure was but a silhouette, pinned in place by the crossbars of the panes.

“If time permits, I will visit you. You may write to me, but most of all, you *must* behave well, not matter what the provocation. Your perfect record is your way out of the madhouse. Do not blemish it.”

He shook my hand with both of his and I was struck again, once more and one last time, how tall and hale and healthy he appeared standing over me, though we were of an age.

He called: the keeper came; the heavy door closed quietly on his ordered room as I left him.

Packing one’s things for a journey is easier when you have very little. My few notebooks, paint-sets and worn volume of Shakespeare hardly filled a box. New clothing would be provided in the Broadmoor style. My letters and address-book I put in my coat-pockets against the risk of loss. Thus prepared, I made my bed from habit, sat, and waited for my escort. Through the high window I could hear the birds of April sounding their chorus and it struck me for the first time, now that the screaming and shouting and general clanking of objects was stilled, that my little room could be a safe and peaceful place. I was afraid, I think, of going out into the world, even under escort.

With Haydon’s injunction in my mind, I quietly offered up my wrists when they came for me and stepped into the carriage unbidden. I was glad the warder drew the curtains, for fear of being stared upon as a madman, but sorry I could not see the once-familiar streets of Lambeth and know how a quarter-century had changed them.

At the station, I was placed in a carriage with my keeper, along with half a dozen others – Southwell, Smith and Augustus Hudson I recall – and was hardly seated

before the whistle blew and the great mass of the train began to haul itself away from London. Now I could look out freely and as we passed out from the centre of the city, I saw some new buildings where there once were fields (and I remembered, where once I'd shot at posts). I saw new styles of carriage and larger structures. I saw cobbled roads and apple-faced children. I saw new fashions on the ladies, though I admit I was struck more by the ladies themselves, so long had I been away from women, than by any particular flounce or frill they wore.

In short, I saw prosperity and a world that had not missed me and I confessed I laughed as I once used to, with bitterness to think I had once fancied I would matter to this world. The keeper with me was a new man and looked up sharply, as the drinkers in the bar used to do at my laugh, and I feigned to be seeing an amusing scene outside, so he would not report my conduct to be odd.

It was a distance of some forty miles and the spring had not yet taken the chill out of the London air. What I saw was no doubt unremarkable, but to my eyes, which had roved over the same few walls and vistas for two dozen years, it was as if I was seeing some new country, as if I was new-born. I recall a dog, black and white of coat, rough and spiky as a hedgehog, rushing along with the carriage, yapping; I could to this day draw the markings of its coat. I saw a woman beating out a rug on the doorstep of her cottage and the plumes of dust were not dirt to me; they were fascinating illustrations of the movement of the air, bright and twisting in the April sunshine. It was all new, new new and I almost forgot I was moving towards another prison.

But arrive we must; at Reading Station we were made to wait some time, then a high-sided cart came up beside the train, and I saw we were to be transported like bags or wheat or hogs to market, two keepers from Bethlem sitting up the front. I sat hunched with my knees drawn up, clutching my little bag of personal possessions against the danger of it being jolted overboard. The countryside here was a little wilder, but still well occupied and used, with little flocks of sheep wandering between the winding stone fences.

Then Broadmoor. The stone walls were new, high and squared off, speaking of nothing else but grey confinement. The cart stopped and we proceeded to descend into a gravel forecourt. Several keepers stood around awaiting us and each took one inmate under his gracious care. A rough-necked fellow of perhaps twenty-five or thirty carefully inspected me, the carriage and for some reason the two poor horses pulling us – he nodded at the keepers, then at the driver, who gee'd up the steeds and off they went, leaving us standing in a group before the prison gates. Ahead, two tall green-painted doors set with heavy studs swung inwards. The fellow who had taken me in charge walked behind – I saw now he carried a whip, presumably in fear of me – again I had to hold in my laughter – and we passed through a wide carriageway into a courtyard of red-brick buildings. On each side were arched windows, high and handsome – but set, every one, with bars. This was Essex House, my home-to-be.

The fellow must have been half-idiot, or thought me to be one. He barked my name, 'Oxford', then "down" and pointed to a doorway. I thanked him kindly for his help, and he frowned as if I mocked him.

Inside, I found a hallway, with the tall windows down one side and on the other, cells, quite narrow and not cheerful, some closed up and others open, all occupied it seemed except the last. Here waited a new keeper, but no more friendly. He directed me

to “sit” and in hope, I held up my hands for the removal of the chains, which had begun to chafe. He laughed as I had once laughed, directed me to “stay” and left without a word.

I sat silent, attempting not to weep. The parting from Haydon and my home of many years – the chains – the journey – and now this animal-like treatment – I wondered “what fresh hell was this?” and hardly dared to greet old friends who passed the door in the long time that followed, merely nodding and holding up my wrists as if to say “look, I am in chains, I cannot shake your hand, I’ll see you later,” and they seemed, for most, to understand.

After a long while, in which I recalled I had not eating since breakfast-time and it was nearly evening, a man in a doctor’s frock-coat entered and stood before me, staring.

No moment more crucial for my hopes could be imagined. I decided to speak first.

“Good afternoon,” I said, and waited.

“You are Edward Oxford?” he asked.

“Yes, sir.”

“You came from Bethlem today?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And you are the one who shot at Her Majesty?”

“I am very sorry to say, sir, I did commit that foolish act.”

“Foolish?”

“Treasonous no doubt, sir.” With such high figures, or those who consider themselves so, a little grovel is the thing to add. “And have ever been very sorry, sir.”

“Indeed.”

Nothing for it but to carry on.

“I hope, sir, I may be permitted here to be useful. At Bethlem I was a painter – ”

“Like Dadd.”

“No sir, though I have turned out a sketch or two – a painter of walls, sir, doors and furniture. I have some little skill and I do like occupation. I would hope to work – ”

He stared at me still.

“You are not mad then?”

“No, sir. Henry Haydon promised he would write you on that point. I was once a fool, impetuous, but I am not like Dadd and Johnston or other of the men you now have here. Any opportunity you offer me – ”

He humphed and left. A minute later a third keeper entered and unclasped my chains and I was left to find the dining-hall.

That night, on an unfamiliar bed in a room with unfamiliar echoes, I lay long awake and mused on this William Orange, doctor, and on exactly what his “hmp” might mean – parsed and examined it and decided that at least it did not yet condemn me, and with that I must be satisfied.

Broadmoor, though, was not Bethlem Asylum. Though it called itself asylum, or hospital its occupants were drawn from all the kingdom’s prisons. The delicate social order that had prevailed at Bethlem, though often it collapsed, was far better than the mixed and raucous system – or lack of one – that was in place at Broadmoor.

On one side of me, John Robinson, late of Littlemore Asylum: a simple labourer, with callused hands, a ready smile and a wife who would “ne’er walk straight agin”, he cheerfully informed me, due to her lifting her skirts for every man in town, or so he had

believed. My experience in Bethlem taught me not to question his statements, but to move on to the topic of fishing in Oxfordshire (I had never fished, of course, but Haydon had, and so I was something of an expert on lures and nets and lines.)

On the other side, I found Llewellyn Edwards, a mere boy, but an amusing one: he had been an assistant in the navy and could tell tales of shipboard life for hours, so many tales, so full of monsters, mermaids and pirates that I misdoubted that every tale could possibly be true. It was not that they were not believable – for what did I know of the sea? – but that in even eight years afloat, it would have taken ten boys to collect the experience he claimed to have. But he too was convicted of murder, so I kept my peace and merely supplied him with his beloved tobacco and a willing ear. The other seamen amongst the “patients” did not give much time to him or his stories, but they were mostly older and more sane than delicate, prattling Edwards.

Being so far out of town, perhaps, or because of the new keepers, or because of the way the buildings spoke of prison and punishment rather than asylum and cure, made the place dour and heavy-feeling. At night I missed the sounds of London; in the day, the few glimpses of Berkshire’s downs, green in summer, frosted in winter, gave me no relief. I had never liked the country much. The buildings were new and freshly painted, and I could not wait for their finishes to start to peel.

Nevertheless, the small changes attendant on a new location occupied me at first; the food was different, more meat and less potatoes. Our little party of Bethlemites stuck together for the most part, sharing such luxuries as we could afford: at Christmas there was a goose with cherries, and those who smoked doled out wisps of tobacco to each other. Dadd continued painting and his connections kept him in peppermints and cocoanuts, luxuries long missed in Bethlem. In such an expanded society, we found new friends as well, and a willing trade sprang up in whatever a man might want – excepting, of course, freedom.

But as that first year passed, I began to feel that I had been in that place forever; that the deadening routines were closing in around me as they’d done at Bethlem; that change having been effected once, no more could occur; that, in short, that this place was where I would die. McNaughton himself was liberated by death one night not long after we arrived; his stay behind bars had been shorter than mine, and yet he had been imprisoned two years and twenty.

Haydon wrote, of course. He told me how the cell walls I’d stared at for so long were broken down; how the galleries I’d painted so many times were all destroyed; how the yard I’d paced and paced was now a garden, though the high wall between the world of Bethlem and London remained in place. He told me the fate of our favourites amongst the patients – who had been cured, who had ascended to the wards for the incurables. He reported on his fishing trips. He told me he was writing to those who could help me; he did not, however, tell me how they replied.

At Broadmoor, I wrote more than ever, turning over and again my misfortune. I read, and sought explanations for my story in the books.

In many novels, the hero comes of mysterious origins – at least, in the beginning. He appears on the scene clad in good but shabby clothes, or a beggar’s habit. He has limited means, but in a secret pocket there may be a purse with a few gold coins of some foreign

currency, bearing high face-value but nearly worthless in the place in which he finds himself (and we find him). He is of noble, upright bearing, or else so mean and crippled as to be beneath notice. Others either brush past him – to their later detriment – or are struck with the sight of him when he appears amongst them, gathering in corners to whisper of who, of what, he might be.

His concern seems all the present moment – to win favour with a duke, right a wrong meted out to some poor cottage, or avenge a slight given to a humble but virtuous servant-girl or seamstress. Action is his very being; contemplation of the past – even admission that he has a past – that, there is no time for.

Yet, in the denouement, that hidden past emerges from the folds of Time's cloak and reveals itself to be the *raison d'être* of the novel – not just the man himself, but of all the proceedings of which he has been a part. A hidden royal parentage – an inheritance denied – a gentleman's character destroyed without cause – a lady's honour and her whole family's reputation imperilled – an aged father's senile and mistaken banishment of a once-favoured younger son – all these can come to view with a single movement of the stage-machinery the novelist has built. A single word or action sets all that has hitherto occurred in a new and different light. The effect is like a penny illustration that shows one moment a hag, the next a comely lass, depending on the viewer's fancy.

In my delusion, I felt assured that so it would be with me. That there was some grand plan, some novelist directing my story and my actions, I felt assured. I could not of course see the final outcome, any more than a picture-puzzle piece can see the whole, or indeed any one can see his future – but that there *was* a plan, I was quite certain. I relied upon it; I was excited in anticipation to read the final page.

So little did I know myself that I truly believed there was more to Edward Oxford than Edward Oxford knew. In that conviction, I overlooked what I did know of myself (little enough though it was). I entered a state of waiting in which Young England and my vague but exalted future were more to me than the ordinary world. I had only to bide my time until I entered upon my great adventure, or until some shadowy figure should come to claim me – a hitherto unknown uncle, perhaps, wanting me for his sea voyage to the tropics in pursuit of brigands, or perhaps a customer from some years past who had been impressed with my intelligence and the quickness of my eye and had been seeking after me ever since to train me as his deputy and heir.

It was merely another aspect of my weakness, and of my attempts to deny what I truly was: a pot-boy born of a violent, dark-

faced father; a boy whose best hope ought to be a good position with a master who was not overly unkind and who paid my wages in full each Saturday.

Nothing was hidden in my childhood. There were no secrets to reveal, save the worst of Mother's suffering and perhaps my father's colour, though most knew of that and were simply too polite to mention it. To examine that time is to find only degradation, not some story-book avenue to a different world.

Even so. As a hero's drive for all his actions springs from the combination of his noble birth and some dire event that prevented him from enjoying his proper place, so my course was set by my parentage, my upbringing and the injustices that came our way because of who my father was.

The streets of Birmingham are all I have in the way of a long-lost duchy. Father's anger is the secret wrong my life was meant to right. But where a hero's noble nature prevails until all is well and as it should be, my character – my weak mind and will and my childish follies even into manhood – rather multiplied and enlarged the wickedness that came from him. His was only common anger and vile-temper, wife-beating and drunkenness. His pride and rage took root in me and flowered long after he was dust, in that assault in which I put at risk an Empire and the life of a lovely young woman and a Queen. I am, in short, a d-d inversion of the heroes I admired. My fate was indeed written for me, but not on pages wreathed with laurels; rather on dirty scraps of paper disfigured with sketches of sooty demons.

With all that, the past is all I have. In this eternally recurring present, these corridors, within the sound of those bells ringing away the hours, with the unchanging food and ever-present-faces, there is no time. For time exists to facilitate change, progress and movement. Here there are none of those.

So I must dive down into my soul and seek the past, both to entertain these drab days and to understand how I came to prove a villain rather than a hero.

Later, I understood how the machinery of state had taken three long years to turn to my release. That I was not forgotten – well, that is to Haydon's credit.

One chill autumn day, Sir William called me in to see him. He was dressed not for the prison but for society – grey trousers and vest, and his jacket was draped most artfully over his chair. He had placed himself not behind his desk as he did for most examinations, but sat in the low easy chair before the fires – most likely the only fire in all of Broadmoor as it was quite the height of summer.

He held in his hand a paper. I greeted him respectfully but he only looked at me as I stood in the centre of the room, unsure whether to approach.

"This," he said, wagging the paper so the firelight flickered on it, "this is a certificate attesting to your sanity, sir."

What to say to that? I dared not question him. I did not understand why I was there.

“In the ordinary course, Oxford, it would not be necessary for me to speak directly to an inmate.” I lowered my head a little to show my deference.

“However, in this case, much is at stake.”

A small flame of hope leapt from the fire into my heart. For anything to be at stake, there must be a wager underway.

“Doctor Hood has long spoken in your favour. Do you understand the consequence for him if you prove him a poor judge of character?”

I could only mutter “Sir” as no response seemed to be anticipated.

“Do you understand how many reputations would be blighted if you were to so much as thief an orange? Or should you be reported in the press as making trouble of any kind soever?”

He folded the paper in two, then four, and tapped it like a fan on the carved wooden arm of his chair.

“Only time, Oxford. Only the time since your offence has brought us to this. That you have been well behaved is very true. You have been tested long and thoroughly.” He paused.

“It is a question, I suppose, of justice. I myself have not known you well but men I respect have pleaded for you. I’m sure you have suffered greatly...”

A silence ensued, which I filled by bowing my head further until my shoes were all I had in view.

“...and that to spend more time in prison would be unjust. I do not know for certain if that is correct – was not the risk of execution? It was. And others who have committed the same offences...”

I felt his discourse was wandering into places that were unfriendly to my cause. Each time some fool attacked the Queen, my name was mentioned in the reports and a little of the blame accreted to it, until “Edward Oxford” and firing a pistol at Victoria Regina were linked in the public imagination forever. The flame in my heart wavered. Then Sir William sighed.

“But at any rate and perhaps well, it is not for me to decide. I have simply passed on the imprecations of others. The Board as a whole has discussed your case and we felt it wrong to do other than what Hood, who has known you longest, has suggested.”

My patience had been trained by much time with ravers and many hours in a cell, but I dearly wished to shake him and cry ‘out with it, man!’.

He stood, suddenly, and the movement sent a breeze across the fire in the grate.

“Australia, you say? It’s Australia? A notion you got from Haydon? I suppose that is as good as any. Well, the palace has agreed. But Oxford, take some advice. Find your way back here” – he indicated his comfortable room but I understood him to mean the prison – “and it will not go well for you. Very ill indeed. This is a great opportunity, and the only one.”

He sat, placing the precious certificate of my sanity on a side-table perilously close to the fire.

“I’ll send that in the morning. The correspondence will take some weeks, I suppose. But you may make your plans. Good day.”

The last night I spent in my little room was I think the longest of all the nights I spent locked up. I did not sleep; I was too much excited. I, who might have spent a night waiting for my execution, I was to be freed at last!

I wrote to Haydon – it was my duty and my pleasure, feeling as I did such gratitude for what he had done for me. I thanked him, in words as sincere as I could find but more: I made a vow to be able to make good account of myself. The words I wrote to him I think of often, for they charted my course from that night on.

*A man who has once been in the grip of the law, I wrote, stands but a poor chance among those who have not. It makes no matter what his offence, or whether he has paid the full pound of flesh ten times over - as I felt I had, and more! - the taint clings to him like a leprosy. All that, at a distance, and where he is unknown, is prevented. He can then find his own level, by putting on the bold front necessary.*

And so I determined: I would put on that bold front, and give myself every opportunity to find my level. When they came for me in the morning, I was dressed and standing ready. John Freeman was my name.

## **12: John Freeman is Born**

I could say much about the wheeled conveyance; how I dodged carts and horses' hooves in Birmingham; how the new train brought me down to London through all those bright and patchwork fields; how the turning wheels of the Queen's carriage moved on as the men grabbed at my arms and scrabbled all around me.

The most affecting of all wheeled transport I have taken, though, was the train from Reading down to Plymouth. Phelps and myself had booked a private compartment and though it was naturally a great relief to leave the walls of Broadmoor behind me, it was not until the train, its great weight slowly gaining speed, moved out of Reading Station and into open country, that I realised I was free.

Phelps was not much of a companion. He read the paper and, I felt, kept watch on me, but I had no need of his conversation at any rate. I was overwhelmed with the sensation of *moving*, of rushing along at such a speed. Out of the window I could see what might have been the whole of England. Cottages tucked into folds of the hills like babies sleeping; grand houses with windows like panes of gold in the early winter sunshine; flocks of sheep roaming as one in the shadows of great Oak-trees. As one vista came into sight, another fell behind. It was like and unlike my journey from Bedlam to Broadmoor, for the same strong impressions on the mind and eye were made by the smallest objects, like geese and bright blue handcarts, but now I was not cut off. I was not going from one prison to another. I was free.

My freedom was contingent, I knew. Even phlegmatic dusty Phelps could end it with a word. The Queen herself could change her mind and order me to return to prison. The slightest slip and twenty-seven years of good behaviour would be forgot.

At one stretch the rail-way ran along the shorefront. To the north, rows of neat cottages were like furrows on the hillside, packed together behind low stone walls and painted pleasing pastel shades. To the south, a soft-looking stretch of sand gave way to

the shallows, where fishing boats rested and gentle waves rolled. Beyond that, under banks of pearl-grey cloud, the ocean stretched, but it seemed not so much a body of water as another kind of field, flat and fallow. I tried to imagine travelling on it, but my imagination failed and I turned back to the land side, where a high-street with stores and dogs and children playing was as busy as a market day, with no one looking out to sea.

After many stops and fatiguing hours, the conductor called that Plymouth was the next stop. The journey having been long, every passenger was naturally anxious to alight, and the corridor filled in an instant with bags and boxes, women holding babies, heaps of shawls and like necessities of life. On the doors being opened, the mass of hitherto quietly seated persons took full advantage of regaining their powers of locomotion and in the press, Phelps fell back and I moved forward, not on purpose but as part of the mass.

At the step, a weedy fellow with ginger whiskers had become wedged – or his suit-case had – between the train and platform and my progress was impeded for an instant while he struggled and swore oaths. The carriage-floor was some little height above the station platform and so suspected, I looked out across a hundred-headed crows, through the station's arches and saw a sky not blue, but yellow, white and grey; a chilly sky, but beautiful to see. A terrible cry of sea-gulls pierced the hubbub. This combination of weird sky and unearthly sound took my attention for a moment until a push from behind recalled me to the business of stepping down and moving through the crowd, who seemed not to be going in any particular direction, but swirling as does water around the columns and box-piles upon the platform. I bumped up against a lady with her mother – my first touch of so much as the hem of a female garment for twenty-seven years – and such was my confusion that I backed into another, tripping her, and it was only Phelps, long experienced in handling such confusions, who helped the second lady to her feet, picked up my hat, made the requisite apologies and steered me by the elbow to a quiet corner while the first lady watched on – not annoyed with me, I think, but curious at my clumsy manner and awkward way of delivering my “pardons”.

Phelps used the moment to tell me to keep with him; he said we'd wait until the crush had cleared away and left me there – alone! – while he went to find a porter. I stood with my back to the wall and watched the families and single men drain out through the various portals and the most marvellous thing of all was when the lady whom I'd bumped first walked past me talking to her mother and took no mind of me at all.

The bags were sent ahead and Phelps and I walked out onto a broad concourse. The air was salt and moist; the gulls called more and louder, each echoing the other; but no water could be seen. We walked down between stone buildings – shops and pubs and the like – but where I thought to find the ocean, a carriage-way ran.

“This way,” Phelps said, indicating the path to the left.

“I would like to see the water,” I replied, and crossed the road and I think Phelps was so amazed he forgot to remind me that he was my care caretaker, and he followed me up the hill across the way.

The light was fading and the yellow sky was now merely grey and dull as we reached the brow of the hill. It was covered with a sort of parade-ground or open parkland, falling away on both sides. Ahead, the land seemed to disappear abruptly and over its sheer edge was the sea; a confusion of greens and blues and silver and white, all at once a single sheet of water and a thousand patches of moving colour. A craggy island squatted to the right of the bay; descending hills framed the water on either side, but

directly ahead was open water stretching out to the horizon. A dozen ships at least rode on the water's surface, masts pointing up to heaven. The wind blew from the south, but it was not warm, rather slicing through my new greatcoat and scarf and finding my bare skin beneath. I shivered.

Phelps spoke.

"And you are not even out there yet."

I gazed at the ships. One of them, I supposed, was the Suffolk. They were so small.

I wrote to Haydon that night.

*Plymouth, 27 November, 1867,*

*Sir, This is the first independent act of my new existence. Last night for the first time for nearly 28 years I slept, or rather went to bed, with the key of the bedroom door on my side. You may fancy my feelings if you like, but you won't be able to feel as I then felt.*

*Believe me every gratefully yours, E.O.*

Those few lines were all I could manage. What could I say that had not been said before? All else that boiled within my – my hopes and regrets – were not of any matter then. The future only, the future that would prove whether I deserved my freedom, or perhaps whether my time in confinement had ruined me forever, was all I thought of.

I was anxious to take ship, but the wild winds of Devon would detain me a little longer. Three whole days we waited. Every morning Phelps visited the offices of the Line to inquire the situation, and every time he returned to inform me that wait we must.

He quickly bored of minding me. For a keeper of a prison is often much constrained himself, and finding himself at liberty in a town full of entertainments such as Plymouth, Phelps found the need to investigate its offerings. I, however, feared much to be recognised or involve myself in some trouble. Each time the journey was postponed, I walked out to see Plymouth, but I was sure to be in bed by nightfall, while Phelps slept most of the days and used my return as his signal to find victuals and refreshment and places to smoke his pipe. His room was next to mine and the stars were bright and untroubled by competition from the sun whenever I heard him fumbling for his bed.

But for myself, for an old man who had been shut away since young, daylight in Plymouth was a fine sample of what the World could offer. I found interest in the smallest thing; in the crones washing down the brothel steps at daybreak (and in contemplation that most likely they had been, when young, occupants of the rooms inside, and in wondering what had become of the other nine out of ten of their erstwhile companions?); in the mossy edges and worn-down centres of the stone steps that wound up between buildings from the docks into the town; in the very colours of the houses, all either brights or pastels, as if the owners had chosen between battling the sun and sea winds or simply choosing tones that would mimic the effects of time in such a climate. The walls that had once been red, in other words, were faded pink; the walls that were

painted pink to begin with so matched their neighbours. (This interest of course was a little professional; my palette while on Her Majesty's pleasure had been necessarily drab and I took real pleasure in viewing colours more diverse.) Matching the neighbouring walls, in fact, was not a great consideration. The rows of houses presented single faces to each street, but each house was distinguished by its colour – lemon followed by light blue, then soft green, aqua, even the orange of a new piece of Christmas fruit – by a trim around a doorway, by a garden tended by some good wife, no doubt still asleep as I walked past in the dawn light.

At the docks I found the early fishermen winding their ropes or even unloading a catch before ordinary folk had had their morning wash, and I read in their ruddy faces and unkempt whiskers a carelessness of onlookers such as me. They joked amongst themselves in a language that was probably English, but so full of local terms and so strangely accented that I was unable to grasp more than a word or two.

On the fourth day, Phelps knocked on my door and asked leave to enter – a little courtesy which to this day I enjoy having extended to me, though I have yet to call out “no.”

“It seems the winds have eased enough,” he said, “though last night I'd have sworn they were twice as strong.” His face showed he would have been happy with a month's storms if they forced him to extend his sojourn in the streets of Plymouth.

“You'd better pack your things.” My “things” being one large travelling-bag and a box of books, plate, rope and other materiel I'd been advised useful for the journey, this delayed me not a moment.

“The porter'll bring them. Come on.”

Oftentimes, in Bedlam, I'd dream of a final walk to some unseen destination; so it was on leaving England; the confusion of the crowd; the flagstones underfoot; and then, at the end, a dropping-off where dock met water, and beyond that, simply fog, nothing, white clouds obscuring all my future.

### **13: To Sea at Last**

Oh yes, the ship. The good barque *Suffolk*. I'd seen ships before, of course, on the docks of London, and once I'd dreamed of a life afloat, in the footsteps of my father's father. My mother said they were only dreams and I wish I'd run away a sailor to prove her wrong. A life spent wandering the oceans and all the lands instead of wasted in a prison – how magnificent it would have been!

So went my thoughts as I sat in the skiff with my “friend” from Broadmoor, clutching my bedroll and resting my feet on my one box. Self-pity I am sure but at such a moment with the shore of England receding and a long journey ahead, a little contemplation must be forgiven.

The jolt as the boat's keel met the ship's side nearly lost me my warm blanket. Such a bustle and shouting that I was sure something, or some person would go overboard and the hands of the seamen were rough and strong as they hauled us up; but in moments we were on board, our feet slipping about on the smooth clean boards of the deck.

We were met by a bustling man with a list of our names and I answered to “Freeman” as nice as you please – he pointed me to a boy younger than I was when I last saw freedom, and one by one my messmates joined me. There were six of us and we followed the boy, grabbing at ropes and pieces of joinery for support as we went, down into the darkness of the ship’s belly. Phelps, I suppose, stayed in the boat and returned to shore but in all the commotion I had not even said farewell. Then I realised I’d stepped off England’s shore without saying farewell to *it* and that I’d likely never stand on that land again.

On first sight, with a little light coming down through the hatches, the accommodation seemed tolerable to me. The bunks were rough-hewn and smallish, but I would fit full-length in them, stretched out, and I determined to enjoy my bed. But then – where to stow our bags and boxes? They would be taken for us, we were told, and stowed away, and a great rush followed to extract needful things for the next few nights. I eyed my companions. There was an old man, bent and quiet, and I wondered why such a venerable head would take itself to sea. A father and son, it seemed, or a man and his younger self, one or the other thing surely as they were so alike in redness of hair, freckles of face and turned-up noses that I wondered if the lad even had a mother, so light was her imprint on his form. A young country man, a worker in fields by my guess, and another man, closer to my age and in a worn but respectable suit, as if he belonged in a better class of cabin but could not afford it, with a pinched look, and I thought perhaps I would trust him least; he looked a man who could profit from knowing one’s secrets.

We stood about a minute until the father, in his authority, took a bunk and motioned to his son to take the one under. Naturally that was the bunk closest to the hatch and all restraint was lost. Bags were thrown, boxes stowed and I finished with an upper bunk in the middle of the pack; at least, I thought, I could not be seen from the lower bunks if I lay down flat and might retain some small privacy.

We were to fetch supplies later in the day, but first, we sailed. A line of men formed at the hatch and one by one we swarmed up to the deck. The sailors above us in the rigging and around us on the timbers gave us not a glance; they called “Ho” and “Fast” and various commands I could not fathom and I remembered what I had said to mother of my plans to be a seafarer: “All I would have to do is walk about on the deck and give orders.”

Now, crouching with my back against a wall, watching ropes fly and vast swathes of canvas billow strain and snap, I knew I would never have made a sailor. Their easy movements and casual banter; these were Men who knew their place though it be a hard one, and who never doubted what they did, though it prove mistaken and send them to the bottom of the sea. I was merely ballast, as were all the passengers besides.

The harbour was chill and grey. A light mist floated between us and the ships around us. In it moved boats with passengers for other ships. There were distant cries, like gulls but more purposeful and compelling as crews made ready.

The tide in my affairs had come; I was never to set foot on English soil again. Already the shoreline was indistinct and seemed to be wavering, moving up and down with the pitching of the ship. The *Suffolk* was my home now and then: Australia.

It took a moment to know she was really moving but she picked up a little speed and began to pass by other vessels and the chimneys and roofs of the town receded. We passed between a high headland on the one side and a large island on the other, and all

the chatter around me was of landmarks and letters received and friends waiting at the journey's end and I had never felt so alone.

I stayed on deck until we were well out to sea and the land was a line of green and grey off to our north, which we would run along for some time. Then I went below to see about my things. Simple enough: setting up a tiny space to operate as hearth and home for months to come. It occupied me long enough to make me hungry, but I sat quietly on the bed-edge waiting for someone else to suggest we eat. Then the country lad – James – came up to see me and inquired if I had brought any containers that would serve for food? It was time to fetch our flour and other supplies and we needed to stow them well.

James and George, the suited man, were talking of London. They had both come from there a week before. George inquired if I knew the parks of London well.

"I'm a painter," I said. "I've been working in Birmingham." London was lost to me and I was afraid to be caught out by remembering some lost landmark of twenty years before.

"Painting? You will do my portrait then?" asked George and struck a pose, and I liked him even less.

"I can paint your box for you, if you have the pigments," I replied, "but any portrait I do will resemble the sitter less than a broken mirror, I have no skill that way."

"So why the pens and papers?" he asked. A keen eye, as I'd suspected.

"A diary," I lied. "I promised to keep my mother a diary and send it home." That I would do no such thing, did not even know now if my mother was alive, was not his business.

"A diary! Oh we must stay in touch in Melbourne," he opined, "and you can tell me in years to come what I did these months at sea."

I agreed aloud, dissented silently. But I did write. My little book was not, as others' were, copied and sent home to eager family to read. It has laid silent in a box for twenty years now. I open to a page.

My God the taste of vomit in my throat it seems to be there all the time and if not the taste of it the stench of it stale and crusted on my bedclothes, but it is too cold to throw them off. And if this dries, then surely F. will be retching in his bunk and there is only a thin sheet of canvas between his bed and mine and the stink of his is worse than of mine. Now – now, as I never thought I would – I wish for the orderly and his bucket of slop-water but I know I mustn't wish for any of that not one thing or part of it, no matter what, let the ship sink down to Hell I must not wish Bedlam on myself, nor Broadmoor, nor any place with doors that lock.

I will never be quite free.

I don't complain and this seems to make the other men think I do not suffer and they come to me and croak of headaches and dry throats and not enough fresh water, and I have all the same complaints but I do not speak of them. So they all ask me for advice, not only on the illness and the cramps and hunger, but on Australia

L. and R. said they were clerks, but I am sure they aren't. I can tell a lie, and Z can't read past nursery words, his own name and the labels on the boxes stored under their bunk. Not *their* boxes, not, but the property of Mrs La and Mrs Di Dah in cabin-class, who thought perhaps they were coming on a pleasure trip and would need outfits for the balls, so much luggage have they brought to store in *our* little space. But L. and R., they are good enough men. I read them passages from Haydon's book, my well-thumbed copy opening easily to the parts that promise most, and when I do, they seem to fall under a spell.

"Stations have been formed where smiling plenty and a hearty welcome greets the way-worn traveller. The whole face of nature is undergoing a steady but sure change ... there is little doubt that the few enterprising Britons who first settled on its shores, are really the germ from which ... a wealthy and powerful people will arise."

A wealthy and powerful people! These ragged creatures sitting at my feet hardly better educated than the keepers at Bedlam! Their children will be fortunate if they do not descend to Savages, but I must own that Haydon had a vision splendid.

I tell them about the Promontory and the wild Life that abounds, the Kangaroos and fishing to be had and they nod and lean t'wards each other just a little and I don't believe they are aware they do it. T. is a lopsided thing, perhaps flattened on one side, the right, at birth and his nose is too large for his face, but he is a good son to his father. Why they emigrate I can't say, and I can't ask, because they might then ask me the same. We are on this ship. We sail. Is that not sufficient?

Reading the journal brings back memories of sorts, but not so much as I'd expect. After the supplies had been got in and I suppose some one or two of our cabin had gone to cook our dinner, a few of the other men went up on deck to watch the land fall behind – to "see the back of it" as one unclean specimen, whose age I could not tell for dirt and whiskers, eloquently put it. I kept my thoughts about the reciprocal benefit of the arrangement to myself as I observed his sweat-stained back ascend the narrow ladder.

Many of the days that followed are to me as one single day. Unless some thing occurred that merited entry in my journal, they could not be told apart and certainly my memory, unaided by the written word, is not up to the task. A few occurrences, however, and that first day, stand out like colour illustrations against a background of newsprint-etchings.

That first day, with the confusion of boarding, the provisions, the greetings – most of my companions, I found, had already made acquaintance in some Plymouth bar or tavern and they wondered where *I'd* been? – that first day's strangeness and emotion gave it substance ever after. But even then, until I opened my old writing-book just now, I had forgot that once my companions returned to their bunks, declaring England well got

rid of, I myself climbed the ladder and took a place on deck to “get some air”, I said, but in fact...

A party went upstairs to farewell the land just now. I didn't go with them and made work for myself arranging my things. They made an enormous amount of noise coming back down, cheering and blaspheming and so forth and I said I needed some air.

The deck rock sand creaks and groans and I cannot see how I will grow “sea legs”. Sailors are everywhere, pulling on ropes and ascending masts and running about with no regard to the slippery and angled nature of the deck. They dodge around me without even bothering to ask me to clear the way – I suppose all new passengers are as poor at negotiating the space on deck as am I.

The wind that had finally turned – the wind that was putting the sails above me and carrying me away from England – blew my hair over my face and howled in the depths of my ears. On this journey there will be little opportunity to retreat from the elements – my bunk is merely a less buffeted space, by no means a fasthold – and I found my jaw clenching and my fists balling up as I determined to withstand the turbulent air.

I found a corner against a timber projection where the deck changed levels and looked north-east. But it was too late. Only water, waves in lines all the way to the horizon. This thing, this ocean, is big enough to swallow all of England; for it seemed to me that rather than being just over the curve of the earth, my home country had sunk beneath the waves like Atlantis; that the brine had closed over its trees and spires and mountain peaks and all were drowned.

I may never return. Everything I know is gone forever.

My journal, after that, noted mainly meals, weather and social matters such as card-games with a sailor, although from time to time it seems I was much affected by my change of scene:

Last night, I awoke in a storm. I did not know it was a storm. I had slept deeply following three nights of tossing about in my hard, damp, stinking bunk – I had decamped to the floor which at least was not wet through. A cake had been down after dinner from the married couples' cabin – a great pudding of a thing, raw in the centre but sweet with raisins – and I ate until my belly swelled for the first time since I left behind the porridge-pots of Broadmoor. So when the boots of T. came flying down the gap between the canvas and the bed-frame and struck me on the head as I slept, I did not know where I was. I fought back. I thought perhaps Johnson was upon me once again with his razor or merely his teeth and nails, and I fought for my life.

T. received one or two hard kicks amidships, so to speak, before they calmed me and put me back in my bed, but was a sporting fellow about it in the morning.

"I never thought you were so strong, Freeman," he said, when showing me his bruise. "It was as like you were fighting off a madman."

I gave him a piece of my biscuit as a penance – I have not much stomach for it any ways – and climbed up the ladder to the deck, where I sit now. Pencil and paper are not so unusual on deck.

What I most recall from the vantage point of two decades later, is the presence of the water – the omnipresence, to be correct. Waves slapping against the hull could be distinctly heard from where I lay at a night (and for much of the day. When I ventured up on deck, the salt-spray landed on my lips and tongue, as if the sea was tasting me, not the reverse. The sailors hauled up fish from time to time and all the many kinds of light – soft star- and moon-light, blazing midday and the foggy greys of low cloudy weather – appeared somehow to emanate from the sea itself.

We seemed at times to make no progress at all, and at other times, although I knew from the daily log of distance posted at the captain's cabin that we moved along, it was as if the *Suffolk* stayed still and the sea surged back around her. I could not conceive of reaching land any more than I had once been able to conceive of leaving it – that is, I could *imagine* it but could not *feel* how it would be. My present placement was all I really knew. And if it were not for the other ships passing near and far, I could have believed us alone in our timber vessel, at once a whole world and a mere walnut-shell boat adrift on the great waters.

Those ships that passed – hoisting and lowering flags in communication with our own sailors – were mostly travelling in the other direction, or crossing our path on the way to some other port. Captain Merryman of the *Suffolk*, I was informed, did not brook other ships moving faster than his own. Like a dog-fancier or grower of vegetables, he took insults to his occupation most personally, and like many geniuses, thought it reasonable to take any measures necessary to ensure success. The *Suffolk* had made this journey often, but Cpt Merryman could see no reason why she could not do better this time, and better again every time she sailed. One of his ancestors may have been a merry man but perhaps his lineage favoured the female side or some such mishap, for a less merry person I never encountered. Whether he slept at all was a subject of much conjecture among my cabin-mates, though my card-playing partner assured me he did, in that silence must reign nearby during the captain's watch of repose – the middle watch, from midnight to four am.

Ever after, it was the sea that divided me. For although I had thought, as a man of many years, I was beyond revelation, it soon became apparent that in experience of the world, I was only a youth, as young and open to impression as Haydon had been when he journeyed on the sea-road.

Hearing his tales of Australia, observing his shining eyes and the quickening of his speech, knowing his deep love of the place had its roots in his coming-of-age there, I had despaired that I had spent my own early manhood struggling for purchase in a

madhouse. I believed my character was truly set and that it had been cast against a form so distorted that it could not help but be lacking, if ever put to the test.

But some few days out of port, I awakened early one morning – if one can be said to wake at the end of a period of several wakings and fitful rest – and climbed up onto the deck to see the world born anew.

There was in fact little to see, to any objective survey. The sea was middling calm, the clouds were grey but not threatening; the dawn was breaking with no great display of colour or excitement. I was not warmly dressed and the damp chill of the sea air began to creep in around the edges of my clothing as I clung to a rope and observed the scene. It was, as always, plunging slowly with the progress of the ship, and a hundred unseen watery hands slapped at the hull below. Inside, the grumblings and clankings of the passengers and crew beginning to rouse themselves could be heard like so many cattle in a pen.

For some reason – perhaps the crew on duty were busy behind some bulkhead or bent over some sail or “sheets” – I was quite alone for several minutes. The sea stretched before, behind, around me and I had the illusion that the *Suffolk* was quite still, and it was the world that turned beneath her. Then it was, that that which had been understood, became felt in my very bones. I would never return to England. I was leaving behind me not only a place, and a family, but all that which had made me Edward Oxford. The future truly was as blank a slate as the faceless sea around me, and only those accoutrements I chose would travel with me.

The sea itself, I felt, would counsel me on this. The sea itself seemed to rise up with every wave, exhaling mists of salty air that pressed upon my mortal form, entered into my breathing lungs, and thus baptised me with my new name and character.

Thereafter, I was not ill, or anxious, on the journey. Isolated as we were from news and outside influences, there was no possibility at all that I would be revealed, and having realised this, I was of a sudden able to enter fully into my new “part” – not only to act as John Freeman would, but to act *as* him; to take a friendly interest in my neighbours’ doings, to read the books he would read aboard a ship, and even to allow him to express small dissatisfactions with matters such as dripping clothing hung over his bunk, or the careless mashing-together of meat and bread in meals. My long habits of perfect composure and complete avoidance of offence to others – a result of fear on the one hand and desire to prove myself on the other – were then abandoned. It became my great pleasure to sit on deck and watch the ocean pass, surrender to its undulatory motion, and converse inwardly on what might be, in Melbourne. And thereafter, whenever I needed strength or solace, I would find a way to be near the sea (which in Melbourne, I found, was quite a timid thing), finding in its ceaseless motion, the scent of salt and the vast expanse of waves both unique and always the same in their arrangement, some small reminder of that moment aboard the *Suffolk*.

And all that journey I kept in mind that phrase of Horace’s that Haydon loved to quote: *Caelum non animus mutant qui trans mare current* - “They change their sky but not their soul who cross the ocean”.

#

**NB: the above brings the draft to 40,000 words. The extract below is the closing scene of the novel.**

“If I were to pass on,” I asked her, “what would you do?”

“I would grieve,” she said. She knew her answer already, Jane Tapping-Bowen-Freeman-who-should-be-Oxford.

“Then,” she said, “I think I would go to Fremantle. Without Jenny - ”

Poor Jane. Not wishing to burden her son and his wife, even after caring for them and opening her home to them for so many years. Being without her girl, alone in Melbourne, which was a city as far changed from when she and I came here as it was when I arrived from when Haydon visited.

“I would be all right,” she said. “I would grieve, but - ”

And now I know I am dying. My heart is paining me in a way it has never done before – not the heart of love and sorrow, the heart with which I felt joy and regret, the heart despondent and uplifted, the heart with which I worked and waited and the heart I gave to Jane; no, the heart that pains me is a beating muscle, simply a piece of the flesh which is weak, and it is failing me. It hurts and beats unevenly and I will surely die.

If I were to tell her now, what would it profit me, or her? What benefits would flow from such a revelation from an aged and dying husband? I could confess – what? That I was a foolish boy in London sixty years ago? That I was subject to madness – oh, how I was. That I lived with villains and assassins more competent than me; that I pretended to see fairies to placate Richard Dadd and save my heathen skin? Is that what she should know? Will it matter once I’m going, or only serve to distress a grieving, blameless wife?

Or is it the lies I should confess? The ignorance I feigned of English prisons and their hangings, when the subject was touched on in conversation? My vague pretences to years spent working in the pubs of London and then apprenticed to a painter when in actuality my apprenticeship was something quite different?

I lied, but not with malice and never further from the truth than I needed to protect her (though I may, I think, soon confess my age – I think that she may have already guessed). If I was ever to tell her about Edward Oxford, it ought to have been twenty years ago before we married – so to tell her now would not expiate the lies, but merely made a sham of all she believed.

I have been John Freeman for thirty-three years. I shall remain so a little longer. I shall die John Freeman and the shade of Edward Oxford may haunt my grave if he likes. I will sleep easy.

The leaves of the plane trees in the park outside the house are turning yellow, one by one amongst the green. The mornings are turning chilly. I will seal my box of secrets now and send it for destruction in the morning.

It is April. Back in England, the buds are springing forth; the early crocuses and daffodils are showing in Green Park. But I will not see another spring. The Queen sits in the Palace, wearing widow’s weeds, surrounded by her children and their children. She will outlive me and *her* fame will be long and radiant. My happiness is that I have none: no fame or infamy or anything else of note but a small good name and a loving wife to leave it to. That is, should always have been, enough. #

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