

Bob Mainwaring: *Escape to Van Diemen's Land*. Hartwell, Victoria: Temple House, 2006, 388 pp. \$29.95, ISBN 1921206268. **Reviewed by Paula Kreiner** (University of Klagenfurt)

Bob Mainwaring's *Escape to Van Diemen's Land* is unapologetically a convict-cum-pioneering success story set in the new colony of Australia. Four words on book's back cover say it all really: "Fortune favours the brave". Say no more.

Set in the mid-19th century *Escape to Van Diemen's Land* tells the story of Martin Maynard born into a yeoman's family on the Ashburton Estate in England. His childhood on the estate is nothing short of idyllic, living "in a comfortable cottage with a secure life within the tight little clan of the estate community" (4). His father, bailiff to the enlightened landowner, Sir Reginald Palliser, teaches him about farming and love of the land. From the estate's steward, Petala Smith, he learns about breaking in, training and managing horses. Also an expert wrestler, Petala finds in Martin a keen student, to whom he can pass on his expertise. Martin's formal schooling is taken care of in the estate's school established by Lady Palliser but his love of reading is fostered by his parents who read with their children every evening. Working at times as a pageboy in the manor house finely tunes Martin's social skills. In short, Mainwaring presents the reader in the opening pages of the book with a paragon. An honest hardworking well liked young man with a range of skills and abilities that will ensure success later in life. Unfortunately, there is a stiff one-dimensional shallowness about all this down-to-earth manly goodness that proves difficult to digest page after page. This coupled with the narrator's somewhat pedantic approach leaves an impression early on that Martin is just too good to be true.

The good life comes to an end when his father dies. Unaccountably, given the narrator's earlier praise of Sir Reginald Palliser as a "good

squire", Martin's family is forced to leave the estate and fend for themselves. In the space of a few sentences the family is torn out from the idyllic estate community and forced to cope as best they can in the turbulent upheavals of discontented rural England in the 1840's. It is a change of fortunes that tests the reader's credulity. Safe, secure and well on his way to becoming a well rounded hero one day, Martin suddenly sees his options reduced to life in the poorhouse or a miserable death the next. The narrator, apparently unaware that his opening pages have engendered in the reader a sense of implausibility both in terms of character and plot, proceeds for another 350 odd pages in a manner that only strains our credulity further. This is a success story *par excellence*.

Sounding like a university commerce graduate considering his options, Martin looks at means and ways of getting transported to Van Diemen's Land "to get on" in life as he prosaically puts it. In his matter-of-fact tone he discusses with his brother-in-law, George the village blacksmith, the option of becoming a "rich colonial squire" as opposed to "being a downtrodden English farm labourer" (11). George duly helps him become convicted for theft and after receiving the local vicar's blessing for his actions – what else! – Martin is transported to Hobart in 1845.

In the fledgling penal colony, Martin's skills, abilities and general nice-guy persona naturally stand him in good stead. Assigned first to a public works gang he quickly becomes part of a hand-picked surveying group and is soon the respected right-hand man of the surveyor, Mr Kentish. The next step on his road to success is as land owner Charles Drewitt's convict servant. Martin quickly makes an excellent impression on Drewitt, is rapidly promoted to farm manager and subsequently takes on the role as assistant manager at Drewitt's timber mill. Let us not forget this is, in part, a Tasmanian success story. By 1850 at the age of 25 Martin is granted a full pardon with Drewitt's support. The fact that he single-handedly manages to overwhelm four armed bushrangers and obtain celebrity status following an article in the *Launceston Examiner* undoubtedly helps. The gold rush of the 1850's literally provides Martin with his golden opportunity. Too sensible to succumb to the lure of searching

for gold itself, he sets up a business carting freight to the goldfields. This is, of course, a resounding success. From freighter he then moves on to becoming hotelier and finally, after one heroic brush with death, part owner and managing director of a public share timber company in Tasmania. The moral of the story is clear: Australia is the land of opportunity for those upright souls willing to work hard and persevere.

The problem is, as I mentioned, it is all too improbable. Nobody is that good, nobody that lucky. Even the legendary heroes of the ancients had one small blemish. Not so Mainwaring's Martin. He effortlessly bounds from strength to strength. The narrator seems only to pause in his description of well-earned successes to provide Martin with appropriate opportunities to display his good qualities: he is the upright hero disgusted by homosexual approaches on board the convict ship, the good Samaritan who saves a stowaway on a steamship to Melbourne, the good mate to fellow convict Thomas Carter, the honest business partner, the defeater of bushrangers (on a number of occasions) and the opponent of corrupt goldfields police. The result? The reader quickly begins to suffer from fatigue at a narrative that consists of a linear trajectory of success upon success with cumbersome repetitions detailing Martin's numerous accomplishments.

Not only does the perfection of Martin's character and his extraordinary allocation of luck undercut the plausibility of the narrative, it is accompanied by a degree of narratorial clumsiness that is, well, at times almost funny especially when it comes to emotional or intimate scenes. One of the more intimate scenes in the book illustrates this best

He had been in bed for another hour and was sleeping lightly when he became aware that Alice was in the room with him, sitting on the side of his bed with her hand on his shoulder. He woke with a start, but soon realised what was happening. The thought flashed into his mind that he wasn't really surprised by the turn of events.

'Is there something wrong?' he asked

'No,' she said, 'not as far as I'm concerned.'

'Can I do something for you?'

'You can give a lonely woman a bit of company, that's all I want' [...]

The narrator goes on to provide a brief outline of Alice putting her arms around his neck and Martin putting his arms around her etc etc, to finish with the sentence:

Within a couple of minutes, she mounted him and accepted his manhood with enthusiasm. A few minutes later, they were sated and lay in each other's arms. (202)

The above excerpt also sums up the main role of women in the novel. Aside from cooking, they are there to ensure Martin's sexual satisfaction. Their own satisfaction is not deemed necessary, nor are they entitled to any form of commitment from Martin in return for services rendered. Mainwaring does not seem to see Martin's willingness to leave his partners as the next business venture beckons as a flaw in his character.

Mainwaring's depiction of convict transportation and the fledgling colony in Van Diemen's Land also poses problems for the critical reader. He promulgates the philosophy of 'terra nullius' packaged in the language of a boy's own adventure with more than a touch of modern tourism spin. The description of Martin's journey to the colony in the convict ship *Emma Eugenia*, "the fastest ship on the run" (22) appears to owe as much to the travel brochure genre as to Enid Blyton's *The Adventurous Four*. Mainwaring actually uses the word 'cruise' to describe the journey and at one point has one of the soldiers say "Don't say that we fail to give our passengers good service" (24). The convicts are portrayed as "companions and associates, in the manner of old school chums" (25). In case the reader has missed the point, we are told a couple of pages on that cleaning up after a storm was a shared experience that "generated a spirit of camaraderie amongst all on board" (27). The convicts pass the time of day "by fishing from the lower decks and playing games of their own making" (27) while live entertainment is provided by the "catchy hymns that all could sing" (30) and the moving sermons at Sunday church service.

Arriving in Hobart, "the weary travellers" are welcomed by "the clean smell of eucalyptus and myrtle forests" (29). After a day of rest Martin and Co. begin their walk northwards to Deloraine to meet up with the public works road gang they have been assigned to. Effusive descriptions of Hobart and the Tasmanian countryside accompany the group of convicts as they hike and camp along the way in a vein that would do today's *Tourism Tasmania* proud. Mainwaring describes the countryside as having "a shining cleanness and magnificence" (37) while Pontville is described as a delightful little village 15 miles from Hobart. The peace and tranquillity of some of the vistas make Martin think of paradise. Not one sentence in the entire book reflects the harsh and brutal conditions that the majority of transported convicts faced in what was Australia's 'premier' penal colony.

Once Martin joins the surveying group, Mainwaring moves from appreciative tourist to enthusiastic pioneer mode. The Kentish group discover "a vast expanse of beautiful, open country that stretched away to the west as far as they could see" (63). In line after line, Mainwaring tells us that this open country, a new and unexplored land. Aboriginal Tasmania is dismissed in a mere one sentence warning the convicts that they were entering 'blackfellow country' (41). There is no sense in the narrative that Mainwaring appreciates the irony of this statement. Indeed, it is this total absence of critical enquiry which makes the book so frustrating to read. Mainwaring's attitude towards white colonial Australia is one of unstinting admiration. Perhaps he is simply naïve. Or perhaps family pride plays a role in this regard, given that Mainwaring's forbears settled in and grew prosperous in Tasmania. Nonetheless, the fact that the indigenous Aboriginal population was systematically killed off in Tasmania as a result of white colonial policy is ignored as is the inhumane nature of the penal system itself.

It is an unapologetically rose tinted view of colonial history that gained particular prominence during the Howard era. Sadly, as Robert Manne comments in his *Whitewash: on Keith Windschuttle's Fabrication of Aboriginal history*, this uncritical view of Australian history is 'a song many people want to hear'. Mainwaring, while

obviously much less prominent than cause célèbre Keith Windschuttle, nonetheless plays a part in determining how our national past is remembered, commemorated and celebrated. In telling such a one-sided story of progress, the story of a heroic young man who settles in a strange country and, along with others, transforms it through hard work, innovation and bravery, Mainwaring uncritically reflects Australia's settler mythology. *Escape to Van Diemen's Land* is simply another telling of the heroic tale of the British as the discoverers, explorers and pioneers of the country and of how white men created a civilisation out of a wilderness. (Attwood 2005; 14). It is also a celebration of that mythical Australian Adam – the working class, rugged, taciturn, courageous hero. A mate in need. The battler who succeeds. A stronger, harder and more masculine version than the original British settler. A creature forged through his experiences with the land.

Ultimately *Escape to Van Diemen's Land* is about national identity, since it is through *stories* that a people come to understand their nation. In Martin and his life story Mainwaring celebrates an archetype and a history of a nation that excludes Aboriginal Australians, ethnic Australians and women. His is a safe, smug exclusive Australia. An Australia, that to my mind, actively prevents the reconciling of the nation's past and present, the rise of alternative voices and ultimately the development of a nation at ease with itself and its past.

Francis Bacon held that some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested. Reading is obviously a matter of personal taste. But to my mind, *Escape to Van Diemen's Land* is not a book to be tasted, swallowed or digested. It is best left on the shelf.

References:

- Attwood, Bain, 2005. *Telling the truth about Aboriginal history*. Crows Nest, N.S.W.: Allen & Unwin.
- Manne, Robert (ed.), 2003. *Whitewash: On Keith Windschuttle's Fabrication of Aboriginal History*. Melbourne: Black Inc.