

**Richard Flanagan: *Wanting*.** London: Atlantic Books, 2008, 252 pp. £12.99, ISBN 978 184887 072 7. **Reviewed by Paula Kreiner,** University of Klagenfurt

Richard Flanagan's most recent book *Wanting* provides a stark contrast to the last book I reviewed for this journal. Like Bob Mainwaring's *Escape to Van Diemen's Land* Flanagan once again turns his attention to that remote penal colony. Unlike Mainwaring's unapologetically and uncritical convict-cum-pioneering success story, Flanagan's depiction of the colony of Van Dieman's Land, in particular the fate of its Aboriginal population is as distressing as it is uncomfortable.

In an author's note at the end of *Wanting* Flanagan refers to the "catastrophe of colonisation". It is this catastrophe that is depicted in the story of Mathinna, a young Tasmanian Aboriginal girl, adopted and subsequently abandoned by the governor of Tasmania, Sir John Franklin, the renowned polar explorer of the Northwest Passage and his childless wife, Lady Jane, as part of their great experiment of civilisation in the fledgling colony. This experiment is symbolically captured in a painting of the young but shoeless Mathinna wearing a favourite red dress given to her by Lady Jane. Mathinna's two dark feet are first painted over and later covered by the frame in a process reflecting the Franklins' attempts to eradicate and cover up her Aboriginality. In this task they fail for "the black child would not become white" (174). Recoiling from their failure in the colony and from Mathinna as the cause of it, they come to see her as representing their most public defeat in the colony and as responsible for Sir John's recall to England. In the ultimate irony, in a novel replete with irony, Mathinna, seeking to deaden the wretchedness of her subsequent life by alcohol, is strangled to death in a drunken brawl by a filthy red scarf that was once her beloved red dress.

The Franklins' experiment leaves Mathinna floundering abused and abased between two cultures, at home in neither but left wanting to know where she belongs. Wanting also to have and hold onto those most precious of human feelings: love and human dignity. Mathinna's story reflects the brutal treatment of her people at the hands of the colonisers. Once the daughter of a proud tribal chieftain and then petted darling of the Franklins' her fall evokes the pity and horror of the fall of princes. As does the systematic destruction and debasement of Aboriginal Tasmanians and their ancient way of life. Those the colonisers can find are exterminated; those few that survive are rounded up like cattle and exiled to Flinders Island under the guardianship of George Augustus Robinson, their so-called 'Protector'. Guided by what he sees as the correct measure of rational science and Christian compassion he weans them off their diet of berries, native plants, shellfish and game providing them with flour, sugar and tea. Inexplicably, "still they provocatively went on dying" (215). Flanagan effectively captures the horror of the colonisers' socio-cultural ideas and moral values in seemingly bland statements such as the Protector's: "Other than that his black brethren kept dying almost daily, it had to be admitted the settlement was satisfactory in every way" (2). Conciseness of language is one of the pleasures of reading a Flanagan novel.

Running parallel to Mathinna's story in the novel, albeit later in time, is that of Charles Dickens, the most celebrated novelist and thespian of his age. Living in England after Sir John's recall as governor of the colony, Lady Jane's approach to Dickens connects the two stories: the brutal fate of Tasmania's Aboriginal people and the midlife crisis of one of history's great novelists. Seeking to defend her husband's reputation as a courageous and honourable explorer, Lady Jane asks Dickens's assistance in repudiating charges of cannibalism levelled at Sir John's ill-fated Arctic expedition. Dickens, faced with a bleak home environment following the loss of his youngest child, buries himself in writing a furious counterattack and in doing so becomes obsessed by the story of the lost Arctic explorers. He encourages and assists his friend Wilkie Collins, who dramatises the story in the amateur theatrical *The Frozen Deep*, which is subsequently performed to standing ovations for Dickens's starring role as the

noble explorer Warden. In the course of auditioning professional actresses for the public performances, Dickens meets and falls desperately in love with the eighteen year old actress Ellen Terman. Flanagan's narrative moves easily between the different stories of the novel unified by the intertwined and seemingly inseparable themes of love, desire and despair. Love, or rather the cost of repressing love, is ultimately the central force of the novel. A multitude of different forms of that most abstract and difficult to define term 'love' compete with each other within the narrative jostling the characters around: attraction and compassion, lust and care, selfishness and selflessness, inclusion and exclusion. Dickens, who has just completed his novel *Hard Times* and who should be reaping the rewards of renown and wealth, feels that his soul is corroding and wants something more. He longs for the domestic happiness, contentment and love he writes about in his celebrated novels. He desires and is driven to distraction by Ellen Terman. Lady Jane desperately wants a child, to feel and give herself to a child's love, yet is terrified of giving in to this love. Instead she pushes Mathinna away and ultimately rejects her. She longs too for some passion in her marriage yet stoically makes do with trying to create something heroic out of her dull and ill-fated husband, who "gave no more appearance of an active intelligence than a well-tended pumpkin" (53).

Sir John longs for the camaraderie and glory of his earlier expeditions to once more instil a sense of pride and purpose in his life. Ironically the white world of the arctic is "the only emptiness he knew greater than himself" (196). He is enchanted by and longs for the vitally alive Mathinna, but rapes and later abandons her in a squalid orphanage, thus precipitating her fall into prostitution and alcoholism that culminates in her squalid death at the age of seventeen. George Augustus Robinson, the Protector charged with removing the remaining Aboriginal people from Tasmania and overseeing them in exile on Finders Island, longs to introduce them to civilisation and the glory of God. He is angered by their failure to allow him to cure and civilise them and is haunted by the idea that their death and suffering might, just might, be related to him, to his actions and his beliefs.

Flanagan's strength as a novelist is the force he brings to exposing the appalling colonial legacy in prose that borders on poetry. His narrative is both polemic and poignant. Satire sits along side of sensitivity to the very human limitations of his characters. The epic dimensions of the story are embedded with the individual. Flanagan's bitterly ironic depiction of the colonisers' attempt to bring the light of civilisation to Van Diemen's Land and its people has its place in the novel as does his sensitivity to Lady Jane's conflicting emotions towards Mathinna. Her inability to yield to maternal love and passion becomes a deadly form of cultural chauvinism. For Lady Jane it is this emotional control that marks the English out as different from the savages. Yet, Flanagan also provides us with glimpses of her desperate longing and loneliness beneath the façade.

Dickens too is caught between his yearning for love and his conviction that "the mark of wisdom and civilisation was the capacity to conquer desire, to deny it and crush it" (47). His longing for love propels him into increasingly frantic work on the play *The Frozen Deep*, which he sees as a metaphor for his own trapped and loveless existence. "For twenty years" he says at one point "had not his marriage been a Northwest Passage, mythical, unknowable, undiscoverable, an iced-up channel to love, always before him and yet through which no passageway was possible" (35). His obsessive on-stage representation of the character Warden provides him with a venue to give into and exult in his love for Ellen Ternan. In the role of Warden, he discovers he no longer wants to deny his wanting.

Ironically enough this insight takes place while on stage, while acting as opposed to living the ups and downs and complexities of real life. It propels him into the arms of Ellen but fails to provide him with an insight into the causes of the poor state of his own marriage. He sees only his wife Catherine as dull, lethargic and embittered. As a woman who views pregnancy after pregnancy as a cause for melancholy as opposed to jubilation. And yet she is hurt by his retreating from her emotionally and is worn out by multiple childbirths, suffering from back ache and a weakened bladder as

well as the recent loss of their baby girl Dora. Her tragedy is to be married to a literary great capable of infusing the character Warden in the play with selfless and heroic love but incapable of viewing his own wife compassionately. His tragedy is that he fails to understand he is play-acting and that escaping from the difficulties of his marriage has not in any way resolved those difficulties or addressed the cause of his wanting something more in life.

*Wanting* is a novel about the sad and tragic consequences of denying or being denied love. Flanagan moves from the failed and selfish wanting of the Franklins to Dickens, who believes he has found fulfilment to his wanting in the arms of Ellen. Nonetheless, at the end of the novel both Lady Jane and Dickens remain imprisoned emotionally. Neither her selfish stoicism nor his flight into play acting appears to offer a real and permanent solution to their wanting. And pretty and spirited Mathinna, who so enchanted Lady Jane and Sir John? Towards the end of the novel Flanagan writes of her that "The dance had left the dancer" (196). This is surely as sad and as evocative a description of the 'catastrophe of colonisation' as any.