

Kate Grenville: *The Secret River*. Text Publishing (Melbourne) 2005. 352 pp. ISBN 978-1921145254. **Kate Grenville: *The Lieutenant*.** Text Publishing (Melbourne) 2008. 307 pp. ISBN 978-1921351785. **By Anja Schwarz,** Universität Konstanz.

On 15 February 2010, exactly two years after Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd had offered the *Apology to Australia's Indigenous People* as the first act of the reconvened parliament, the author Kate Grenville was invited to contribute an opinion piece to the English broadsheet *The Guardian*. In her article, Grenville (2010) looked back on the progress that the project of reconciliation had since made and conceded that while there had been some movement, "the Rudd government can't point to any spectacular policy changes or huge improvement in outcomes." Rejecting the notion, however, that the apology had been just "hot air, a cynical exercise in spin", Grenville discussed the difficulties faced by the government's housing program for Indigenous communities as one example of "just how tangled the problems are." While symbolic acts were never enough, she concluded, the apology remains an "overdue and necessary first step."

This was not the first time that the author was asked to speak on behalf of Australian reconciliation abroad or at home¹ and, indeed, her role as *The Guardian's* expert on reconciliation 'down under' is hardly circumstantial. The article introduced Grenville as "an award-winning Australian author," and the British paperback edition of *The Lieutenant*, her latest novel portraying the first years of Australia's colonial history, had been published and reviewed in the same newspaper (Housham 2010) only two weeks earlier. It seems that her creative preoccupation with this period in history has authorised Grenville to become a sought-after commentator on the process of Australian reconciliation; a commentator who occupies a particular

¹ See, for instance, N.N., 2009.

discursive position: that of the settler-descended Anglo-Australian sympathetic to the Indigenous cause.

The Secret River (2005), the first of the two novels that earned Grenville this claim, relates the story of William Thornhill, a convict roughly modelled on the figure of Grenville's own great-great-great-grandfather, who is transported to the colony of New South Wales in the first decades of the nineteenth century and who, after his pardon, settles on the Hawkesbury River. Here, he rises from poverty to affluence and falls in love with the country he now calls his own. All throughout the book, there is ongoing and eventually violent conflict with the local Aboriginal people, whom Thornhill and his neighbours eventually 'disperse' in a gruesome massacre. In her memoir *Searching for the Secret River* (2006) Grenville locates her decision to write about Australia's early colonial history during the Reconciliation Walk across Sydney Harbour Bridge in May 2000, a grassroots event that drew a quarter of a million participants and was organised in defiance of the Howard government's unwillingness to offer a state apology to Australia's Indigenous peoples. In a passage from this memoir, Grenville describes her encounter with a group of Aboriginal men and women who are not walking but watching:

At the end of the row, a tall handsome woman frankly staring, as if to memorise each face. Our eyes met and we shared one of those moments of intensity – a pulse of connectedness. [...] It should have made me feel even better about what I was doing, but it sent a sudden blade of cold into my warm inner glow. This woman's ancestors [...] might have been living on the shores of Sydney Harbour when the First Fleet sailed in. The blade I was feeling was the knowledge that my ancestor had been there too. [...] He'd have come ashore right underneath where an Aboriginal woman and I were exchanging smiles. (12)

The passage is paradigmatic for the manner in which Grenville has related to both of her novels in public. Cross-mapping onto the past the contemporary Harbour Bridge encounter and the politics of reconciliation that inform it, this passage shows her concerned not only with the construction of her own author-persona as someone

engaged in reconciliatory politics² but also with the establishment of a particular understanding of the relationship between past and present that merits further investigation.

Similar to its predecessor, *The Lieutenant* is based on historical figures. It has variously been described as “a companion piece” (Guest 2009; Cross 2009) to *The Secret River* that “walks similar ground” (*Daily Examiner* 2008) and engages with many of its predecessor’s themes, “but from a different perspective” (Shilling 2009; Parini 2009). Grenville herself (N.N. 2008a) speaks about both novels as mirror-images of each other, “a kind of ying and yang”, explaining that “[t]he early days of settlement in Australia seem to have been the best of times and the worst of times, bringing out both the glorious and the terrible in people.” The two novels jointly explore this duality: while *The Secret River* focuses on the violence characterising early settlement, *The Lieutenant* allows Grenville to tell the story “about two people who find a way to start speaking to each other.”

The Lieutenant fictionalises the prolonged encounter between New South Wales’ first astronomer, William Dawes (renamed Daniel Rooke), and the Indigenous girl Patyegarang (recast as Tagaran) in the closing decades of the eighteenth century. To this day, Dawes remains relatively well-known as one of the very few historical actors in the history of early colonial Australia who, as Cassandra Pybus (2009: 12.1) remarks ironically, “can inspire a universally good press from historians.” The astronomer appears to have been an outsider to the first European settlement on Australian soil. What earned him his exemplary status (Clendinnen 2003; Flannery 1999; Mander-Jones 1966) is the fact that he slowly learned the language of the Cadigal people and was eventually stripped of his rank and sent home for refusing to take part in a punitive expedition to Botany Bay following spearing of the colony’s gamekeeper. Dawes notebooks, extensively documenting his conversations with Patyegarang, were re-discovered in a London archive in 1972.

² See Tom Griffiths (2009: 74.4-74.7) for a critical comment on Grenville’s self-staging techniques in *Searching for the Secret River* in particular with regards to the proclaimed difference of her project from that of historians.

In promoting *The Lieutenant* (2008), Grenville again has named the concerns of the present as motivating her writerly interest in the past. Eight years after the walk across Sydney Harbour Bridge however, her point of reference is no longer the opposition to Howard's conservative politics but Kevin Rudd's apology. In a statement that is posted on her publisher's website together with a short video clip (Grenville 2008a), Grenville describes the book as "not just another historical novel":

You know, in 2008, post Kevin Rudd's apology, we are entering another kind of Australia and another kind of possibility for dialogue between black and white is opening up, I think for the first time in 200 years, for the first time since Dawes had his conversations with Patyegarang. So in a way, I am thinking that his story tells us something that might be useful for us going into the future.³

Claiming that something 'useful for the future' can be learned from the story of Dawes and Patyegarang's historical encounter, Grenville invites readers to understand her novel as involved in the apology's reconciliatory, nation-building project. As she had done for *The Secret River*, she claims relevance for *The Lieutenant* beyond the immediate fictional content; a meaning that emerges both from the insights into the past that her novels promise to deliver and from the respective bearing that these insights have on the contemporary process of reconciliation.

And the novels have been debated precisely on these terms: less for their literary merit than for their engagement with reconciliation on the one hand and the 'history wars' among Australian academics about the nature of the country's colonial past on the other. It is therefore not surprising that Grenville's assertions brought to the defences a number of historians, tired, as Mark McKenna (2005) put it, of "[t]he rise of the novelist as historian, of fiction as history". Her claims for the political and historical relevance of her novels, these critics felt (see McKenna 2005; Clendinnen 2006 and Hirst 2005), illegitimately crossed the line between imaginative fiction and evidence-bound history.

³ For one among numerous other statements by the author that make a similar claim see Metherell, 2008.

While these “robust and telling critiques” (Griffiths 2009: 74.8) by prominent Australian historians of Grenville’s sentimental and sanitised portrayal of colonial history certainly make good reading, it might ultimately be more productive to understand Grenville’s project, as Kate Mitchell does in her reading of *The Secret River*, not in terms of wanting to accurately represent what happened in the past, but as attempts at reconciling the author’s sense of that past with the changing public uses of the past in the reconciliatory politics in the present. With the novel, Mitchell explains (2010), the author sought to “rewrite her family story in a way that repositions Grenville herself, taking account of her “swivelled” sense of identity.” This interest in the functions of colonial memories in the context of Australia’s contemporary phase of transition also appears to have been on the mind of *The Australian’s* literary critic, Stella Clarke (2006), when she defended Grenville against the allegations of historians. As a nation coming to terms with its colonial past, Clarke argued, “we [Australians] need all the help we can get.”

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