



Views of Australian History in Aboriginal Literature

Abstract for chapter 6

In this chapter, a number of Black Australian literary approaches to the past are examined: the usage of singular and venerable black narrative structures, the attempt to explore the lives of heroic Aboriginal figures of the past, and a revisionist view of Australian history which conveyed, for the first time, an Aboriginal interpretation of past events.

The historical theme – one of the most important of all those developed in contemporary Aboriginal literature – is conveyed in many ways: through usage of the techniques of Aboriginal oral tradition; through the endeavour to foster a sense of contemporary Aboriginal pride in leaders and heroes of the Black Australian past; and through a reinterpretation of Australian (and Indigenous Australian) interracial history.

Keywords

'Pigeon', Colin Johnson, historical literature, Jack Davis, Jandamara, oral history, resistance, Robert Drew, survival, WEH Stanner

Views of Australian History in Aboriginal Literature

In some ways, Australians are now more preoccupied with their own past than they have been at any other stage in their history. As the recent spate of feature films dealing with Australian heroes and legends attests,¹ the history of such domestic and international endeavours caters to a wide popular audience. During 1988, the bicentennial of the British invasion, the emphasis upon Australian achievements of the past has naturally increased and there is a considerable amount of glorification of many of those events. It is ironic that this trend towards the honouring of the country's history occurs at a time when probably more Australians than ever before feel a sense of guilt and responsibility over their ancestors' treatment of Black Australians. Among this group there seems to be a wide acceptance of the viewpoint expressed by Shane Howard in his best-selling song, 'Solid Rock (Sacred Ground)':

They were standin' on the shore one day
Saw the white sails in the sun.
Wasn't long before they felt the sting
White man – White law – White gun
Don't tell me that it's justified
'Cause somewhere –
Someone lied.²

If many Australians identify with this feeling of guilty responsibility, there are equally many others who not only laud their own history and heritage, but also insist that Aborigines should become more tolerant and forgiving of past injustices. This attitude naturally irks many Black Australians for, in the words of Jack Davis:

I really think the majority of Australians are just buffoons. They tell us to forgive and forget what's happened in the past. Then, every Anzac day, they glorify their own history. How are we supposed to forget what's happened to us *in Australia* when White Australians keep on remembering their own violent history elsewhere? Besides, we have a lot more to remember right here.³

As is the case with many other historically oppressed indigenous minority groups throughout the world, the memories of Black Australians are often very long and very bitter. Kevin Gilbert considers this to be unavoidable, and he feels that Aboriginal writers should not shy away from examining the past, even if it produces resentment:

An onus is on Aboriginal writers to present the evidence of our true situation. In attempting to present the evidence we are furiously attacked by white Australians and white converts, whatever their colour, as 'Going back 200 years . . . the past is finished . . .!' Yet, cut off a man's leg, kill his mother, rape his land, psychologically attack and keep him in a powerless position each day – does it not live on in the mind of the victim? Does it not continue to scar and affect the thinking? Deny it, but it still exists.⁴

Aboriginal writers have, for the most part, heeded Gilbert's advice. A preoccupation with the theme of past injustice and an emphasis upon the concept of a venerable, autonomous, Aboriginal history is present in almost all Black Australian literature, regardless of the genre of expression.

There are a number of reasons for this preoccupation. One of these is the desire to give an Aboriginal version of post-contact history, to rectify what blacks see as distortions by European authors and historians. As Gerry Bostock writes, in his poem 'Black Children':

The white man settled this vast country;
Cleared the land;
Built a great nation democratic and free,
And they looked after you, their friends,
Our brothers, the Aborigine.

They had to protect you, care for you,
They gave you a home
Or you would have died of disease
Or starved if they left you to roam . . .

These are the lies
Of our white Judas brother;
He has taught us deceit

And contempt for one another
And watched amused
As we grovelled for fresh air
Under his racist care;
Derelict and abused.⁵

However, Black Australian views of history are not always as confrontationalist or as polemical as in this example. The theme of the pre-contact past can be invoked in order to emphasise other factors, such as the longevity and continuity of Aboriginal residence in Australia. In this vein, Oodgeroo Noonuccal writes:

Let no one say the past is dead.
The past is all about us and within.
Haunted by tribal memories, I know
This little now, this accidental present
Is not the all of me, whose long making
Is so much of the past . . .

A thousand thousand camp fires in the forest
Are in my blood.
Let none tell me the past is wholly gone.
Now is so small a part of time, so small a part
of all the rare years that have moulded me.⁶

Moreover, in her poem 'Stone Age', Noonuccal uses the concept of past eons as a symbol of the potential reconciliation of Black and White Australians:

White superior race, only time is between us –
As some are grown up and others yet children.
We are the last of the Stone Age tribes,
Waiting for time to help us
As time helped you.⁷

Another approach which Aboriginal writers employ is to focus upon Black Australian history, in order to establish Aboriginal pride in indigenous heroes and heroines of former generations. As Gilbert illustrates, the problem is one of both historical ignorance and purposeful neglect:

Ask white or black Australian kids to name a heroic Red Indian chief or a famous Indian tribe and most will be able to do so because of comics and films. Ask them to name an Aboriginal hero or a famous Aboriginal tribe and they will not be able to do so because Aboriginal history is either unknown or negative.⁸

Thus, what Aboriginal writers like Colin Johnson are attempting to

do in novels such as *Long Live Sandawara* is to fill this cultural void with positive historical images of Black Australians. Again, this desire to counteract the negative image with which Aborigines have been associated in most European histories – if they have been described in any detail at all – finds expression in other genres of Black Australian writing. For example, Maureen Watson writes:

‘Aboriginaland’, yes, your birthright,
No matter what some name it;
So dig your fingers deep in the soil,
And feel it, and hold it, and claim it.
Your people fought and died for this,
Tho’ history books distort it all,
But in your veins runs that same Aboriginal blood,
So walk tall, my child, walk tall . . .⁹

Finally, in some of their most recent writing, certain Aboriginal writers are expressing their race’s past in the present by drawing on distinctive and sometimes traditional modes of black oral narration in their works.

In this chapter, a number of Black Australian literary approaches to the past will be examined: the usage of singular and venerable black narrative structures, the attempt to explore the lives of heroic Aboriginal figures of the past, and the revisionist view of Australian history which conveys, for the first time, an Aboriginal interpretation of past events. Black Australian literary views of history are primarily concerned with an illustration of the lives of Aborigines, but it is inescapable that, in an alternative assessment of the Australian post-contact past, these writers should engage themselves with white historical figures and European ‘myths’ as well. This does not result in objectivity or dispassionate writing. It does mean that, in their eagerness to counterbalance the bias of previous white interpretations of the continent’s black/white interracial history, Black Australians sometimes run the risk of over-compensating by positing equally biased and contentious versions of past events.¹⁰ This is to be expected, for the literary search for a viable black history signifies an Aboriginal effort to establish racial facts and fictions at least equal in stature to those of White Australia.

Since 1788, Aborigines have frequently been engulfed in a cloud of historical ignorance born of the eurocentric bias of most Australian historians, a bias which did not begin to be counteracted until the past twenty years. Only during the past decade have historians such as Henry Reynolds, in his *Aborigines and Settlers* and *The Other Side*

of the Frontier,¹¹ shown the wealth of knowledge which can be gained from an attempt to understand the Australian past from an Aboriginal standpoint. As W.E.H. Stanner put it in his fifth Boyer Lecture of the *After the Dreaming* series in 1968:

It has seemed to me for some years that two aspects of the Aboriginal struggle have been under-valued. One is their continued will to survive, the other their continued effort to come to terms with us . . . There are many, perhaps too many, theories about our troubles with the aborigines. We can spare a moment to consider *their* theory about *their* troubles with us.¹²

One of the damaging results of the 'cult of forgetfulness' which Stanner describes was that Aborigines became little more than 'a melancholy footnote'¹³ to Australian history. Another was that what was done to Black Australians by Europeans was often conveniently ignored or glossed over – and much of this was, as we now know, extremely brutal. Of course, in many ways Australia was founded by the British upon the principle of organised, systematic brutality in the form of convictism; a form of institutionalised violence which has been penetrated very effectively by Australian authors as diverse as Marcus Clarke and Thomas Keneally. I will return to the theme of violence as it pertains to Aborigines and Australian society in the next chapter. What is significant here is that the near-invisibility of blacks in Australian historiography masked for so long the fact that Aborigines and Europeans held radically different views of what actually happened in Australian black/white interracial history. Only very recently has this Aboriginal version of historical events come to the fore.

It has not done so in a conventional way, for even today there are very few Aboriginal historians, and those such as Phillip Pepper and Robert Bropho have written books which can be considered not only as family histories but as socio-political analyses of oppression.¹⁴ The number of Aboriginal histories written by Black Australians will definitely increase in the future, as writers like Wayne Atkinson produce further work. But the question remains, 'What other sources exist for the tapping of Aboriginal history?'. The oral history approach is often fruitful, and there is no doubt that much work remains to be done in this field, despite the completion of projects such as Read's oral history of the Wiradjuri people of New South Wales. As Kevin Gilbert's eclectic *Living Black* has proven, this is a very fertile area for Aboriginal involvement.

However, even in the case of Aboriginal oral history gathered by

Black Australians, there are inherent limitations to the accuracy and comprehensiveness of the technique. In spite of Gilbert's groundbreaking contribution to the oral method, which showed just how much could be revealed by Black Australians responding to the questions of other Black Australians, the author was perceptive enough to realise that his information-gathering approach was restricted in a fundamental way. One of Gilbert's interviewees, Kate Lansborough, explained that: 'there were some other things I could tell you, but I don't think I'd better put them on this tape. Personal things that happened when I was little'.¹⁵ Even when being interviewed by another Aborigine, Lansborough felt inhibited by the technology of tape recording and by the awareness of possible publication of her words. This sort of reticence is almost certainly further compounded when relatively unknown white researchers attempt to secure personal interviews with Aboriginal people. This is not to deny the worth of oral historical projects; in the search for the Black Australian viewpoint, these projects are in many ways superior to a reliance upon official governmental and institutional records of Aboriginal affairs. Nevertheless, it must be recognised that the technique does have inbuilt restrictions.

Then it still must be asked, 'Is there any other source of knowledge into the post-contact Aboriginal past?'. The answer is an affirmative one, and in it lies one of the most significant aspects of Aboriginal literature: its historical dimension. It is not surprising to discover that Aboriginal autobiographies and political treatises have a marked historical perspective. They often illustrate the effects of coercive government policies upon the individual narrator and, by extension, upon the Black Australians of the time. It is perhaps more unexpected to find how significant and revealing Aboriginal creative writing dealing with historical themes can be.

Even with an increase in histories written by Black Australians (both those of a more conventional type and those derived from oral information), this will continue to be the case. For, when compared with white historical literature, Aboriginal historical novels and plays frequently offer strikingly different interpretations of past events – and do this in a stylistically unique fashion. In addition, oral material can be incorporated into Aboriginal creative writing at least as effectively as it can be into histories written by Black Australians. Aboriginal authors can thereby tap the huge wellspring of the oral tradition – a source which is as rich as it is foreign to European culture – and the use of such

sources renders Aboriginal writing even more culturally independent from White Australian literature.

Much seems to depend upon the genre which a Black Australian author chooses to explore. For example, Aboriginal short stories have tended to be modelled upon the European format and, despite their frequent Black Australian themes and concerns, have not demonstrated links with traditional black oral literature – which is one of the main reasons why they are not examined here. On the other hand, while no Aboriginal novelist has yet fully succeeded in incorporating the rhythms and atmosphere of such oral material into his or her work, Colin Johnson has made progress in this direction in his most recent novel, *Doctor Wooreddy's Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World*. It is in the genres of poetry and drama that some black authors have truly made this oral connection. These are the works in which Aboriginal literature breaks truly new ground in terms of both style and content: in a very real sense, this is an expression of the historical in the contemporary. I will return to an examination of the overall distinctiveness of Black Australian poetry in Chapter Eight. In this chapter, I emphasise the historical theme in several prominent Aboriginal plays and novels, some of which demonstrate this identifiable link with the black oral tradition.

The link is clearest in some Aboriginal drama, such as Jack Davis's play *The Dreamers*. Unlike some of Davis's other plays, such as *Kullark* and *No Sugar*, *The Dreamers* is not set in the past. Nevertheless, while not obviously historical in the temporal sense, it is strongly imbued with the sense of a specifically Aboriginal history. This is as a result of the *Nyoongah* language used throughout, the reminiscences of the old Aboriginal, Worru, and the strong Black Australian atmosphere established by the dream dances and didgeridoo music which bracket various scenes. However, the play is also consciously and overtly Black Australian in the contemporary sense, depicting the lifestyle of a typical Aboriginal urban household in the 1980s. Moreover, the almost entirely Aboriginal cast, setting and recollections, and the ever-present *Nyoongah* represent a challenge to the white theatre-goer and provide a unifying, contemporary sense of identification for Black Australians in the audience. Thus, in order to understand *The Dreamers*, it is important to realise that it portrays the Aboriginal past *preserved* in the present in a distinctive, memorable and entertaining fashion.

The play makes it clear that the current social problems and demoralisation of the Wallitch family have long historical roots. The

past and present are intermingled very skillfully in the character of Worru, as are memories both happy and sad. In short, Davis blends the two times through the play's structure, atmosphere and language; throughout, that language is rhythmically and colloquially Black Australian:

WORRU: Yeah, big mob, all go to Mogumber, big mob, 'ad to walk. Toodjay, Yarawindi, New Norcia. Summertime too. Can't go back to Northam, no *Nyoongahs*. *Kia*. I runned away with Melba. [*Laughing.*] Jumped the train at Gillingarra. Went back to Northam [*miming handcuffs*] *manadtj* got me at the Northam Show. Put me in gaol, Fremantle, for a long time. When I went back to settlement Roy was born, [*gesturing*] this big, *kia* [*laughing*] little fella.¹⁶

As this extract reveals, elements of personal memories, the *Nyoongah* language and Aboriginal history are cleverly integrated in a mutually supportive, yet unobtrusive, fashion. Davis has many natural talents which he applies through his plays to an exploration of his own heritage. For example, in interview he explained the source of his theatrical technique:

It's not too long since we were introduced to television and all that type of thing and when we lived in the Bush we had our own way of doing these things ourselves, so, that's why it's not too difficult for me to find an Aboriginal theme.¹⁷

What makes Davis's drama so distinctive and so important in historical terms is the unique Aboriginal lens through which he views these events. The legacy of the Black Australian past emerges in the way the speech is constructed as much as it does through the content of that speech. In short, *The Dreamers* is steeped in Black Australian history, even when Davis is not writing about the past.

Perhaps the best way to illustrate the singular characteristics of Davis's dramatic technique is to briefly compare his plays with Robert Merritt's, *The Cake Man*, an example of Aboriginal drama with a precise historical setting. It is noteworthy that the historical atmosphere of Merritt's play is established by its locale and action far more than by its dialogue. *The Cake Man* is a very impressive play in many respects and represents a strong indictment of the New South Wales Aboriginal reserves (popularly called missions) as they were thirty years ago. One of the most important themes in *The Cake Man* is a religious one. The Aboriginal father, Sweet William, declaims bitterly against Christianity, which is totally foreign to him:

Rube, my missus, she's always thankin' Christ for everythin' . . . anythin' . . . nothin'. Her an' that fuckin' book. [*With a laugh*] She heard me say that, I'd be in strife.

Christian she is, my old lady, a mission Chrishyun, the worst kind.¹⁸

The play is patently anti-missionary and, therefore, against forced conversion. In Merritt's view, the Church has buttressed the efforts of government to remove all the authority of Aboriginal men: together the two have, in figurative terms, emasculated them. Laments the [not so] Sweet William:

But, Rube, there ain't nothin' now I know to do. Just hopeless, and no price I can pay because there ain't no price I've got to give that anyone wants. *I've got nothing they want!*¹⁹

This is a vital historical comment. The wife and mother, Ruby, is the one who literally holds the family together – not her husband. Her greater strength of purpose is due to her religious devotion; Christianity is an essential prop or solace. But, as Merritt sees it, this interpretation is false, for he feels that the Bible enjoins her to be passive – to accept God's lot unquestioningly – and this ensures that she will never escape the mission system. He feels very strongly that Christianity has been:

the most destructive force that has ever hit the Aboriginal people. And, to be quite truthful – I mean it's sad to say this – . . . I think that if religion *has* enabled them to survive for 200 years they probably would have been better off . . . being killed, wiped out, annihilated . . . You can't even say it's Christian charity; it's a sick interpretation of a sad political philosophy.²⁰

The Cake Man is an historical play which makes pointed comments about black/white interracial history in Australia. The key point is that, unlike Davis, Merritt does not use the black oral tradition to convey this sense of the Aboriginal past. For example, in the overtly historical opening scene of the play, the author relies upon caricature – the symbolic stereotyping of the Priest, Soldier and Civilian and the Aboriginal Man, Woman, and Child – to satirise rather heavily-handedly the combined forces of 'God and Gun'. There is no Aboriginal dialogue at all here (the black characters are either dumbfounded or dead in this scene). The music is not Aboriginal but is, instead, a re-working of the Bing Crosby tune 'There's A Happy Land Somewhere'. In short, the first scene is predominantly white in speech, content, and action.

Merritt's technique of surrounding the main section of the play with two monologues delivered by Sweet William is also one derived from the European theatre (although he does incorporate a re-telling of the legend of the 'Emu and the Curlew' in the first of these, and

a description of the 'Eurie woman' in the second). In *The Cake Man* Merritt has skillfully appropriated the techniques of Western theatre in his first dramatic work. Unlike Davis's drama, the language of Merritt's play never presents a challenge to white members of the audience. It caters more to European theatrical conventions and is generally more accessible to non-Aborigines as a result. Admittedly, Davis also bows to some of these conventions, but he pushes his drama further from European expectations, into a realm of greater overall originality.

Of course, there is a certain amount of tension between the socio-economic constraints of the Australian theatre – part of the Western dramatic tradition – and all Aboriginal drama. Not only is there often a gap between the largely affluent white audience and the black poverty depicted on stage, but the high price of admission to most venues makes it impossible for the majority of Aborigines to view these works, at least in major centres. On the other hand, live theatre can be taken on tour to small towns and Aboriginal settlements, and has the potential for conversion into public 'street' performances, which would reach even poor, illiterate Black Australians. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said of Aboriginal novels in English: the genre dictates, if anything, an even more restricted Aboriginal audience. It is therefore clear that if Black Australian novelists had to rely for sales solely upon Aboriginal purchasers of their works, publishers would rarely, if ever, accept their manuscripts. At least at this juncture, it can be taken as given that Aboriginal novelists must rely to a great extent upon white funding bodies, publishers and readers in order to make their way into print.

It is therefore interesting to observe that in his second and third novels, *Long Live Sandawara* and *Doctor Wooreddy's Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World*, Colin Johnson claims to be making a conscious attempt to write in a style which is more accessible to Aborigines. With reference to the genesis of Aboriginal literature in English, these are both very significant texts which merit detailed analysis in a number of areas. The novels include historical treatments of pivotal episodes in the Aboriginal post-contact past. In *Sandawara* and *Wooreddy* Johnson endeavours to counterbalance years of white bias in the interpretation of these historical events. A close examination of the books reveals that he only partially succeeds in this aim: a careful comparison of the two with historical novels by White Australians reveals that his stated aims of accessibility to fellow-blacks and autonomy from white literary influence are, at least in the

case of *Sandawara*, partially subverted by his historical and literary method.

In order to understand what Johnson was trying to emphasise in *Sandawara*, it is necessary to briefly consider the historiography of Aboriginal resistance to the European incursion into Australia. In writing the novel, the author was attempting to overturn the dominant notion, widely held in Australian society until very recently, that the Aboriginal people offered no meaningful resistance to the white invasion of their continent. According to this popular view, such opposition as did arise was not only sporadic and short-lived but also disorganised and decidedly ineffective. Only during the past decade have Australian historians begun to re-examine, and to challenge, the myth of Aboriginal passivity. As one of the foremost of these revisionist historians – Henry Reynolds – has stated:

Recent confrontations at Noonkanbah and Arukun [sic] are not isolated incidents but outcrops of a long range of experience reaching back to the beginnings of European settlement . . . The much noted actions of rebel colonists are trifling in comparison. The Kellys and their kind, even the Eureka diggers and Vinegar Hill convicts, are diminished when measured against the hundreds of clans who fought frontier settlers for well over a century.²¹

One of the most striking episodes of Black Australian resistance took place in the Kimberley district of Western Australia where, for three years, a former police tracker named Sandamara²² led a concerted rebellion against white pastoral expansion. Sandamara carefully organised his resistance movement: taking advantage of European firearms and supplies, he adopted guerilla tactics which, on a number of occasions, were more than a match for his white opponents.

The exploits of Sandamara and his men have, until very recently, been largely ignored by white historians. To this day, the only published and readily available treatment of the insurrection by a White Australian is an historical novel, *Outlaws of the Leopolds*, by Ion L. Idriess.²³ This fact was made abundantly clear when, in his Honours thesis dealing with Sandamara, Howard Pedersen observed that the rebel was almost entirely neglected in studies of Western Australian Aboriginal history. Pedersen concluded, 'a novel, written in 1952 by Ion Idriess, is the only major piece of writing devoted to the subject'.²⁴ This statement is ironic, because Pedersen was either totally unaware of, or chose to ignore, Johnson's *Long Live Sandawara*, which was published in 1979, one year before the appearance of his thesis. Whether this omission

was intentional or not, it is ironic that the contemporary achievement of an Aboriginal Australian was thrown into the shadow of neglect in a study which was casting light on an historical Aboriginal achievement eclipsed by the same shadow.

In view of this historical vacuum concerning Sandamara, the importance of both Idriess's and Johnson's novels becomes very clear. At the outset, one would expect the two novels to be very different. They are separated by a quarter-century of socio-political changes; the two authors come from vastly dissimilar cultural backgrounds; and they emphasise quite different aspects of the clash between Sandamara and his followers and the white authorities. Idriess, naturally aiming his book at a white reading audience, emphasises not only the threat which the wily and dangerous Aboriginal leader presented but also, in particular, the courage, tenacity and cleverness of the police patrols which hunted him down. In a prefatory note he commented, 'But for the ceaseless work of the hard-riding police patrols he would have caused a lot of white tragedy in our Australian Kimberleys',²⁵ with a noteworthy emphasis on the word 'our'. Indeed, his final line in this introduction was a somewhat wistful *adieu*: 'And so, farewell to the "Days of the Big Patrols"' (p. 8).

Colin Johnson obviously had another aim in mind when he wrote his novel, for he has stated that it was directed at an Aboriginal readership far more than his first book, *Wild Cat Falling*. In his words, 'This was a conscious decision. Even the style is as non-intellectual as possible. I didn't want words getting in the way of the action and the argumentation'. *Long Live Sandawara* is also a far more stylistically experimental book, one half being written in the contemporary inner-city slang of the Perth slums, and the other in far more grand and imagistic language. Johnson explained the reason for this dual structure as follows:

It was two stories right from the beginning, in order to relieve the tedium of the modern novel. Also, it is very difficult in Western Australia not to write about modern times when you're writing about the past.²⁶

Whereas Idriess is lauding, above all, the valour of the Kimberley law enforcers, Johnson's emphasis is patently upon the heroism of Sandamara, and the style of his historical segment was deliberately adopted with this consideration in mind. As he put it, 'Very few Aboriginals know of this Aboriginal hero. That is why this part of the book is written in an epic style'.²⁷ Whether or not this consciously chosen style accurately reflects the meaning which Johnson hoped to convey is a more thorny question.

From the first word, the two books are at variance structurally and stylistically. As was noted in Chapter Two, Idriess, the inveterate outback raconteur, utilises hyperbole, hyperbolic punctuation (exclamation marks are ubiquitous) and animal imagery, to achieve the desired atmosphere of drama commensurate with the clash of civilised and loyal white man against primitive and depraved Aboriginal man. Near the beginning of the novel, Constable Richardson – who is later murdered by Sandamara when he commences his rebellion – inspects his black prisoners, suspecting that they are concocting a plan to break loose from their chains. The language is very revealing:

His mind now obsessed by a file, he stepped down from the verandah to again examine the chain, grimly conscious that his 'tigers' knew more of local conditions and happenings than he did, now that he was alone and Pigeon and Captain were away. Stone Age men! but cunning as a bagful of monkeys (p. 10).

The equation of the animal and Aboriginal worlds is repeatedly emphasised throughout the novel. The black men are devious, stealthy, and treacherous, but all the while somehow less than human – or so the imagery implies. For example, one chapter is typically entitled, 'Caught Like Rats In A Trap', and when Sandamara discovers a means of escape from the cave whose mouth the police are guarding, his 'eyes gleamed exultantly, his mouth widened in a long-drawn, animal-like whimper of joy' (p. 160). His men start digging their escape route 'with deep hisses and low, guttural growls' (p. 161) while outside a constable berates a black 'boy' with the words, 'You've got less brains than a porcupine' . . . 'And stop that hyena laughter' . . . 'or I'll chuck you down the cave' (p. 156). There appears to be little doubt that Idriess was, at heart, a white supremacist. To add insult to Aboriginal injury, the tone of his entire novel conveys the impression that it is historically accurate adventure reportage. The impression of historical scholarship is conveyed by the author's preface, which quotes references to numerous Police Department reports, the inclusion of a score of photographs of an anthropological nature intermittently throughout the text, and the author's assertion that he had consulted 'aboriginal friends' who obliged with 'big-feller talk' (p. vi) concerning the days of Sandamara and his guerilla fighters. Considering that Idriess travelled through the area and completed his research on Sandamara half a century after the events took place, he surely does not have a monopoly on historical veracity.

By the same token, neither does Colin Johnson, but what is beyond doubt is that his view of the significance of Sandamara's deeds is vastly different from that of Idriess. In his case the imagery is indicative of the goal which Johnson hoped to achieve by writing the novel. Idriess discovered in the Sandamara episode the potential for a fast-paced adventure story which was thoroughly Australian, and then proceeded to write one; a pattern of discovery and description which he repeated more than twenty times throughout his career. He continually subverts the potential heroism of Sandamara in the novel by emphasising the element of the chase: while the fox receives our sympathy during the hunt, he is not meant to win any more than grudging admiration. On the other hand, Johnson had a cogent personal and social aim in mind when he wrote *Long Live Sandawara*. The former goal was the attempt to rediscover his own roots in Western Australia after a seven-year absence from the country. The latter aim was an attempt to inculcate a sense of Aboriginal pride in those Black Australians who read the book: to cultivate the awareness of an Aboriginal history which included indigenous heroes and leaders, who had fought and died for their cause. The imagery, especially of the historical portion of the novel, is indicative of these aspirations. It is powerful, resonant, and fluid:

All the land moves, whirling like a cyclone, and the eye of the storm is this man, Sandawara, who sits apart from the others, his mind weighing the odds and thinking only of the final victory.²⁸

In the Idriess version of the events, Sandamara is calculating, cunning and warlike, but he is still a mere mortal. However, Johnson describes him as a quasi-supernatural figure, a *maban* or shaman with magical powers:

The men collect at the water's edge and nearby they see a soft rainbow light pulsating without strength from a dark figure. It is Sandawara. The men creep towards their leader and the strange roar dies away leaving only the sound of the rain and wind and thunder. Beyond them, the fires sizzle out. A lightning flash strikes a tree right next to where Sandawara is sitting and the fire runs down the trunk. In amazement and fear they seem to see a huge serpent wrapped about the body of their leader. It writhes about his body (p. 82).

Above all, Sandamara is what Kevin Gilbert has termed a black 'patriot',²⁹ who feels at one even with the Aboriginal trackers who pursue him and ultimately chase him to earth. He dies, not bitterly gasping and cursing the trackers, as in the Idriess novel (p. 239), but poignantly and serenely:

At last the trackers gingerly approach the fallen figure and circle it. They edge in and stand looking down. The white men are far off. The black men stare at their fallen brother and watch as he stirs and gets into a sitting position. 'Brothers, the white man can never take what I have', he gently murmurs, then falls back into freedom (p. 166).

The alteration in the character of Sandamara, and the new exhortatory and educative role he is given are both equally clear.

It must be remembered that only one half of *Sandawara* is an historical novel. The other half is terse in style, urban in environment, often humorous in characterisation, and frequently sexual in preoccupation. It is also very much concerned with the concept of Aboriginal patriotism. Sandamara as an historical figure is ever-present: as a role model for Alan, the sixteen year-old leader of the group, as an inspirational poster on the wall, and as a memory in the mind of the old, downtrodden Aboriginal elder, Noorak, who becomes Alan's link with his past and with his heritage. The parallel structure of revolution which is established, serious in the historical episode and comical – until the final gruesome chapter – in the contemporary segment, is very successful. According to the author, despite the blood-bath at the end of the modern segment (which indicates the futility of armed rebellion in Australia), the salient aspect is that Alan – the new 'Sandawara' – survives, to become a fully-initiated Aboriginal patriot and himself an inspiration for the future.³⁰

Therefore, both halves of Johnson's *Sandawara* differ stylistically from Idriess's *Outlaws*. The contemporary section of Johnson's book portrays very accurately the dialogue, speech patterns and environment of urban Aborigines, and it is this segment of the novel which is most evidently directed at an empathic Aboriginal readership. However, despite Johnson's claim that the style of the historical half of *Sandawara* is intentionally of epic proportions, Stephen Muecke correctly points out that his adoption of a mode of description appropriate to a romantic novel of the Western tradition could alienate potential Black Australian readers. In short, if Johnson is intending his book first and foremost as an inspiration for other Aborigines, he may in this way be defeating his own purpose. As Muecke puts it, in this section 'Pigeon the historical figure disappears, to be replaced by a romantic hero. The position of the reader shifts once more. We (as readers) need no longer be white or Aboriginal'.³¹

It is hardly surprising to find differences in the approach of Idriess and Johnson. What *is* surprising, and is perhaps a cause for some critical concern, is the similarity in content which becomes apparent upon a close reading of the two texts. It must be emphasised again that

although the version Idriess provides of Sandamara's exploits is only one interpretation of history (based largely upon Police Department records in Western Australia) other historical sources can be unearthed and other interpretations can be put forward, as Pedersen has shown. Yet, it is patently clear that, like many others, Johnson has used Idriess as his primary historical source. It is ironic that an Aboriginal author, who popularises a Black Australian resistance fighter and advocates close ties with traditional Aboriginal society, has allowed the work of a racially prejudiced White Australian writer to be his major factual wellspring.

It is true that Johnson and Idriess highlight different aspects of the Sandamara legend. For example, in the earlier novel, Sandamara's close ties with his mother and with his woman, Cangamvara, are repeatedly emphasised. Johnson does not note the first relationship at all and gives only glancing emphasis to the second. In the Idriess book, Sandamara's death spells the end of the rebellion, which is viewed as a disturbing aberration from the norm, presumably, of Aboriginal passivity. In the later novel, the hero's death is part of a continuum of Aboriginal resistance against white invasion. However, similarities of plot present themselves repeatedly in the two books. In both novels, Sandamara and his accomplice, Captain, are incited to revolt by their prisoner, Ellemara, who allegedly has a supernatural power of suggestion. In both, after killing the settlers Burke and Gibbs and taking over their supplies, Sandamara permits his men to open and consume the white men's casks of liquor (and an orgy of violence ensues) and the battle of Windjina Gorge is described in very similar terms in both books. In fact, on one occasion, Johnson seems to have come very close to plagiarising from the earlier novel, as the following two extracts reveal, the first from Idriess:

'Ah!' Pigeon would chuckle, 'it is because they love me so. They are always chasing me, they want me to be always with them – in a little hole in the ground. They will plant you too like that when they catch you, so that you can never get away again. So take care and cover your tracks, always remember that your tracks are leading you to a little hole in the ground. Never take a chance, always cover your tracks. Otherwise they might track you while you sleep. And you will wake up with lead in your guts!' (p.168).

Johnson's language is almost identical:

He listens to his men and chuckles and says: 'Those white fellows really love me. They run after me all the time and how can I say "no" to them. They love me so much that they want me to be with them for ever – in a little hole in the ground with no way out.

You better watch out that they don't start loving you and come chasing after you. They want you just a little now, and once they catch you, you'll never be free of them.' His voice hisses, then echoes on: 'So take care and always cover your tracks. Always be on your guard and be sure that no tracks lead towards your refuge in the earth. Never leave a mark for them to follow; never sleep with both eyes closed, or one day you'll sleep on with lead in your guts' (p.144).

Aside from any ethical considerations which the above extracts might raise, does it matter that the historical segment of Johnson's novel is derivative? In a number of ways, it does. First, the fact that a Black Australian appears to confirm the accuracy of a significant portion of the Idriess novel has important consequences. Not only is one far less likely to question the veracity of the description in *Outlaws of the Leopolds*, but the reliability of the sources Idriess has used remain equally unchallenged. In short, no alternative historical sources are contemplated. Yet as Pedersen relates, Aboriginal oral history paints a very different picture of Sandamara's defection from the police to a life of armed rebellion. According to oral tradition, the hero was himself a magic man, or *maban* (as Johnson notes) but he was not suddenly swayed to revolt against white authority by the persuasive, quasi-hypnotic influence of Ellemara. Rather, Sandamara killed Constable Richardson and liberated his prisoners because of tribal obligation: he had slept with many of the men's wives and had to make reparations; the discharge of those obligations necessitated the murder.³²

This is a far cry from the spontaneous conversion spawned by Ellemara, which Idriess suggests and Johnson accepts. After all, if Ellemara had possessed that kind of sway over Sandamara, it is logical to assume that the former – not the latter – would have been the leader of the insurrection. At the very least, the rapidity with which contacts were made with tribes throughout the Kimberleys, the speed with which action was taken by Sandamara and his newly-liberated men, and the organised, military style of the leader's tactics, all suggest, as Pedersen has pointed out, a premeditated plan of attack, whatever the motive.³³

Even if Pedersen's theory is accepted, it may not seem obvious what this has to do with Aboriginal literature. The answer lies in the fact that, in the field of black/white race relations writing in Australia, literature and history are very closely related. Mention has been made of the slowly emerging trend of white historians to examine Aboriginal history in its own right. In the absence of such study, literary works such as those of Idriess are often assumed to be a motherlode of

accurate historical material. Such an assumption is quite misleading; such fiction is never factual, nor is there any requirement for it to be so. Yet by the same token, it is arguable that some degree of historical accuracy does matter in such cases, for otherwise readers absorb ideas and prejudices in good faith without realising that the book they have put their trust in is only one version of the truth. No historical novel is value-free, and those of Idriess are no exception. The derogatory attitudes towards Aborigines which are evident in *Outlaws of the Leopolds* are echoed in statements which Idriess made about Black Australians on other occasions. At best, his attitude is highly ambivalent:

Never become too familiar with the Abo, but treat him in a friendly way, and leave him with the impression that you are a friend of him, and he of you. Then, should an opportunity occur later, he will do anything for you.³⁴

What of Johnson's novel? It has numerous strengths: the clarity of its characterisation, its realistic dialogue, its satire and the wedding of the historical and contemporary segments of the book. But after reading *Outlaws*, it is difficult not to have a lower estimation of the historical section of Johnson's novel. Hugh Webb has stated that *Sandawara* is 'black words on a white page'³⁵ in symbolic terms. Unfortunately, as has been demonstrated here, this is not entirely the case. Johnson is a talented novelist but, in order to do justice to his convictions, he will have to seek out sources and inspirations other than those provided by a writer like Ion L. Idriess.

Muecke has suggested that Aboriginal oral history of the type investigated by Pedersen may be one such source. It is fascinating to speculate about the novel that would have resulted had Johnson discovered this oral tradition. For example, Daisy Utemorrah of Mowanjumb, Western Australia, has related a story of Sandamara's capture which differs in a number of striking respects from the Idriess/Johnson tale of his death by shooting. According to Utemorrah, the police and black trackers managed to locate the magical stone in which Sandamara's powers inhered:

- Utemorrah: I think they find that stone then that he was weakened. And they waited for him at the steps and he came down.
- Interviewer: And they just shot him, did they?
- Utemorrah: No, they waited for him because he was so weak. His other wife gave him away.
- Interviewer: Ah really . . . she betrayed him?
- Utemorrah: Yes, she betrayed him. She came down the steps and when they caught her they said, 'Call Pigeon'. She said, 'Oh Pigeon! I'm being

attacked, come on!' She said, 'Pigeon! Pigeon!' And he came down – and they caught him . . . [Laughing] I would have cracked that woman's head; yes! Well, then, they caught him then. And they said they gave him this stone. And he said, 'No, it's too late; I don't want that one'. And he didn't want to run away and escape. He gave himself up . . . bravely too.

Interviewer: Idriess says he was shot, but you say he was hung?

Utemorrhah: Yeah, behind the rocks. Behind the place where he was camping. We went up there and we saw them gallows . . . They said, 'You know what that for?' He said, 'Yes; for me. I'm not frightened for it.'³⁶

It is certainly tenable that Johnson's novel would have been far more distinctive, original, and independent of White Australian literary influence had it been based upon such a resource.

The author has admitted that his sources for *Sandawara* were limited: one was actually Dame Mary Durack, who told him of the supposed sway which Ellemara had over Sandamara. Others were police records in Perth, 'a deliberate use of Idriess to establish a parallel and contrast', and 'some tales I heard'. It is significant that almost all of these sources are European, and it is equally significant that Johnson makes no apologies for this fact. The main reason is that, in the author's words:

My novel is really more mythical than historical . . . a novel is essentially 'gammon', fiction, and is not a factual work. It is not history, or even psych-history . . . I must emphasise that *Sandawara* though based on the historical person, is not Pidgin. At an early stage of writing the novel I might have entertained the idea of historical accuracy, but in the later stages I left any such idea, hence the name change to *Sandawara* and *Eaglehawk*.³⁷

In fairness, Johnson cannot be taken to task for not writing a purely historical novel – this would be as foolhardy as the condemnation of an allegorist for not being adequately literal. The mythic power of *Sandawara*, derived from sources as diverse as the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, and the Bible, is one of the outstanding attributes of the novel. The point is that, despite the author's protestations, the historical segment of *Sandawara*, because of its indebtedness to *non-mythical* white influences, does have an aura of factual legitimacy about it, as if it has been based upon events which actually occurred. The derivative aspect of *Sandawara* is strong enough to undermine the mythical strength of the novel; in short, Johnson partly subverts his own aims by relying upon white interpretations.

There is evidence that the author realises this contradiction. For example, with reference to *Sandawara*, he has admitted that 'Plagiarisation in historical writing is to some extent unavoidable'.³⁸ The converse may be that in literary 'myth-making', plagiarism and an over-reliance upon 'foreign' sources can be very detrimental, if not self-defeating. It is also noteworthy that, subsequently, Johnson emphasised the crucial role of the oral tradition in the development and expression of contemporary Aboriginal literature:

The Aboriginal writer defines and portrays Aboriginal people . . . An art or literature divorced from its roots is pure dilettantism . . . Our literary tradition as oral literature has existed since time began. The love song cycles of Arnhem Land are of utmost importance as the inspiration for future literature both in content and form . . . Oral literature continues to form the basis for much Aboriginal literature.³⁹

In other words, Johnson has become more convinced of the necessity to express his own cultural roots – not the devices of White Australian culture – in the production of culturally independent Aboriginal writing.

This places him, as a Black Australian novelist, in a difficult dilemma: what is to be done when no such oral sources exist? For example, with reference to his most recent novel, *Wooreddy*, he has written:

Wooreddy may be a more historical novel than *Sandawara*, but much of it is conjecture. There are no oral sources for it, otherwise I would have used them.

Consequently, he has been forced once again to rely upon a white interpretation of Aboriginal history to a significant degree:

In *Wooreddy*, I use the journals of G.A. Robinson, as one of my main sources of information on the events in Tasmania. Parallels can be seen at once, and one of my intentions is to allow these to be seen rather than to be heavily disguised.⁴⁰

In other words, a comparison of the writings of Robinson and Johnson could potentially offer intriguing and contrasting black and white interpretations of Aboriginal history. A comparison of *Wooreddy* with two contemporary fictional treatments of the same episode of Australian history is perhaps more just and is even more rewarding. Despite Johnson's injunction that, as 'a literature of the Fourth World', Aboriginal writing 'should not be compared to the majority literature'⁴¹ the fact of common European source material means that a comparison of *Wooreddy* with Vivienne Rae Ellis and Nancy Cato's *Queen Trucanini: The Last of the Tasmanians* and Robert

Drewe's *The Savage Crows* is a particularly interesting and fruitful one.

Queen Trucanini and *The Savage Crows* were first published in 1976, and the authors of both novels examine the complex of collective and individual guilt which has enveloped Tasmania's black/white interracial history. In both cases, the core of the historical action is derived from the journals of Robinson: these are paraphrased, extrapolated from, and are occasionally quoted directly. Finally, both books – and especially the former – treat the relationship between Truganini and the so-called 'Great Conciliator' in detail; they are easily the two most developed and interesting historical figures in the novels. On the other hand, in Johnson's book the focus shifts (as the title indicates) to highlight the exploits and philosophies of Truganini's husband, Wooreddy. The man who plays no more than a supporting part in the two works written by White Australians is elevated into a starring role in Johnson's book, where he becomes an Aboriginal prophet and visionary.

The change is far more than one of gender or emphasis (although it is generally true that Johnson is more at home, and more successful, with his depiction of male characters). Unlike Cato, Ellis and Drewe, Johnson does not trade in an exploration of the theme of guilt in historical and contemporary Australian society. Instead, he develops an often symbolic consideration of good and evil in the Black Australian world, examines how the two can be reconciled, and shows how the Aboriginal past and present co-exist. In short, the three novels offer, through varying styles, techniques and thematic emphases, very different interpretations of the same or similar historical events.

Cato and Ellis's *Queen Trucanini* is the most conventionally structured and, in a number of ways, the simplest and least successful of the three books. It replicates the chronological pattern of a typical biography, literally from the moment of Truganini's conception to the time of her burial, and in so doing follows very closely the life and letters of Robinson. The novel is competently, though in some respects rather archaically, written. The final impression remains that in their attempt to remain detached chroniclers of the events, the authors have sacrificed the reader's interest for the sake of historical thoroughness and accuracy. For example, their tendency to include minute details of personal habits and garments is an unnecessary brake on the pace of the novel,⁴² as in the following extract:

The native men in their Sunday trousers and checked shirts with kerchiefs at the neck, were drawn up in ragged lines on the beach. As the portly, impressive figure of Sir John

stepped ashore in naval uniform of blue double-breasted frock coat and white trousers, his brown, kindly face beaming under his cocked hat, the natives gave a concerted yell and began capering in delight . . . Lady Franklin . . . had a pretty smile and eyes as blue as the straits, but her dress was sober in the extreme, a brown worsted travelling gown without adornments of any kind, and a shady straw bonnet.⁴³

Ironically, elsewhere in the book it is the authors' lack of explicit detail which gives a rather quaint, juvenile atmosphere to the text, perhaps due to the fact that the novel was written with a school-age audience in mind. This is particularly true when Cato and Ellis are referring to the sexual relationship between Robinson and Truganini. The unevenness of the book is further emphasised by the fact that, while this sexual dimension is repeatedly cited, it is always described with an incongruous and coy daintiness. For example, 'seeing Truganini emerge sleek and shining from a river', Robinson 'turns hastily away to hide the stirring in his loins at the sight of her' (p. 66) and when he finally succumbs to Truganini's wiles, the 'seduction' is described as follows: 'She flung herself backward, so that he fell top of her. Nothing but a shred of wet shirt between them. And that not for long.' (p. 82). Finally, Robinson's reaction to her love-making is to lie back and give 'himself up to a new sensation' (p. 83) and later, when he thinks of the event, 'fear and desire were once more contending for the mastery' (p. 86). This euphemistic treatment of sexuality is one which contrasts very markedly with Black Australian novelists' exploration of the same theme, as will be observed in the next chapter.

Understated as it may be, the sexual sparring between Truganini and Robinson represents one of the most interesting aspects of *Queen Trucanini*. Another is the emphasis upon guilt in the novel, which operates on a number of levels. There is the guilt of the white 'Vandemonians' over their attempt to exterminate the Aborigines so ruthlessly, and that of Robinson, for leading many of them to the island of their banishment and death, and for later turning his back upon the few survivors. Finally, there is the remorse of Truganini over having been involved – and in many cases having been more instrumental than Robinson – in coaxing her countrymen from their traditional areas to join the doomed 'Friendly Mission'. One of the more successful images in the novel is that of Robinson's guilty nightmare in which he dreams of:

a ghastly procession of natives passing by his bed, with their curly hair and their deepest eyes; but all their faces were white. He was calling the roll and they answered:

'Tunninerpeevay Jack Napoleon. How say you? Dead or alive?'

'Dead.'

'Robert Timmy Jemmy Smallboy?'

'Hanged by the neck; dead.'

'Isaac Problattener?'

'Dead.'

'Thomas Bruny?'

'Dead.'

'Rebecca Pyterrunner?'

'Dead.'

'Count Alpha Woorady?'

'... Dying.' (p. 212).

This sense of heartfelt, disturbing guilt is one with which Stephen Crisp, the protagonist of Robert Drewe's *The Savage Crows*, readily identifies. Culpability is the essence of the novel. Repeatedly, Crisp trades in remorse in a mildly masochistic and slightly sadistic fashion. When he gets his girlfriend pregnant six months before his mother's death, his sense of guilt over both events – and the possible relationship of the second to the first – is amplified. Yet, as a child, he had purposely tried to inculcate guilt in his mother for not realising that the symptoms of his prolonged illness were those of meningitis. Crisp's childhood embarrassments and inadequacies became the beacons which lit the way to the neuroticism and dissatisfaction of his adult life. For example, his failed attempt to rescue his friend Harley Onslow from drowning (especially after the two had just argued) elicited:

Certain guilts on different levels as well as sadness. His culpability quotient had in fact risen ever since. It unfortunately showed no sign of levelling off as people around him were hurt in varying degrees.⁴⁴

Even as an adult, the criticism of a private investigator concerning his impending divorce has the same effect:

'I'm a fond father myself'. Nevertheless, the old guilt juices flowed anew. Even a three a.m. homily from this avuncular idiot started them off (p. 134).

It is the concept of guilt and responsibility which links the historical and contemporary sections of the novel and gives the Black Australian past a cogent meaning in the White Australian present. Crisp, a metaphorical self-flagellator, feels so intensely about his ancestors' attempted extirpation of the Tasmanian Aborigines that he becomes totally preoccupied with his thesis on the subject, in an attempt to achieve some form of catharsis. This, by reflection, indicates Drewe's

belief that a larger sense of shared regret over these atrocities is surfacing in contemporary Australia. It is noteworthy that when Crisp finally travels to the Tasmanian mutton-birding islands to find that the state's Aborigines are not in fact extinct, he asks their leader:

'But what's the Blue Plum deal in?' But Crisp, above anyone, already knew. 'Guilt, of course. Fuckin' guilt. There's money in it boy, and a new tractor or abalone boat when you need it' (p. 262).

As the text reveals, and as the author summarises:

Guilt is the constant theme throughout. I mean a country's guilt paralleling the protagonist's guilt – Stephen Crisp's personal guilt . . . I wanted to write about the sort of person who was looking for a sense of expiation rather than performing that act in the book.⁴⁵

Drewe's comments are revealing, and go a long way towards explaining why the work is brave, in places brilliantly evocative, but ultimately flawed. One reason for this is the novel's bipartite structure. While the parallels drawn via the technique of counterpoint often do succeed – as when the news of Crisp's father's death is juxtaposed with an historical letter from Archibald McLachlan, concerning the morbidity of the Aborigines relocated to Swan Island – it is very difficult to balance the reader's interest between the historical and contemporary segments of the novel. Due to the mordantly cynical style of much of the book's modern section, and the far more reserved, descriptive style of the historical portion, the reader tends to resent wading through the latter in order to return to Crisp's contemporary dilemma. Ironically, this is largely a result of Drewe's desire to maintain even-handedness and detachment in the historical segment, especially when dealing with the Robinson/Truganini relationship:

I did think I had treated her [Truganini] with dignity, first of all as a *woman*, and I mean I was interested in her as a woman firstly . . . I scrupulously kept to historical facts . . . I resisted the temptation of having her romantically inclined with . . . George Robinson; when in fact I am positive that they did . . . He [Robinson] being a lower middle-class English . . . artisan, wasn't going to put it in his memoirs that he'd slept with a black woman. And so I didn't feel it honourable or honest to sort of have them . . . going to bed at every opportunity . . . Given the lee-way that I had, I think that that was actually fairly scrupulous.⁴⁶

The tension between Drewe's desire to remain 'scrupulous' and his natural inclination to cast Robinson and Truganini as lovers is a liability in the novel. Similarly, there is a disjointed atmosphere in the

book created by the author's attempt to divorce art from overt political commentary. The irony is that, while he attempts to take refuge in the mythical concept of uncommitted impartial historical 'fact' in *The Savage Crows*, the thrust of the novel as a whole is inescapably political. The intensity of the contemporary segment of the novel reflects not only the working-out of Crisp's own guilt through the discovery of Aboriginal survival and resourcefulness in Tasmania, but also Drewe's own deeply-felt convictions. There is a passionate tone to Crisp's fictional dilemma, as there is to Drewe's own feelings about Black Australia. When asked in interview, 'What goes on in your mind when you are writing a book like this?' he replied, 'I wanted to annoy white racists; I wanted to bore it up the white racists – right across the country . . . I wanted to annoy *them* more than I wanted to bring pleasure to Aborigines'. At the same time, Drewe tried to restrain this intensity for aesthetic reasons:

I am personally deeply committed to the [Aboriginal] question, but I wanted it to be the *core* of my book; the core of my book of *fiction*, rather than to override everything else . . . I don't know how subtle you can be – I mean the balance of subtlety and passion – . . . it's the two things coming together that might make the art *work*. One without the other is . . . just sheer polemics; it loses me I'm afraid, even though it's a cause I believe in intensely. It loses me as art.⁴⁷

The author is treading a thin, ambivalent line between commitment and detachment, and this is reflected by the novel's contemporary and historical segments respectively. Robert Drewe is a skilled author: the sardonic, pithy and sometimes distasteful images he employs have made Stephen Crisp memorably irresolute. Drewe's dilemma is shared by many sensitive White Australian authors who firmly believe in the Aboriginal cause. They support such issues so strongly that they feel compelled to fictionalise them, but when they enter the fictional universe, they feel constrained by literary conventions and a perception of the inviolability of 'art' – and the result is a disconcerting sense of tension. *The Savage Crows* is far more accomplished than *Queen Trucanini*. However, it is ultimately flawed by the disjointed tone of the book's two time streams, stemming from Drewe's inability to achieve a satisfactory 'balance of subtlety and passion' in the novel.

This raises the contentious issue of literature as propaganda, which will be considered with reference to poetry in Chapter Eight. It is significant that in his novel *Wooreddy*, Colin Johnson makes no claim to 'academic even-handedness'. In this book, which is, unlike *Queen Trucanini* and *The Savage Crows*, directed equally at Black and White

Australians, the author endeavours to write 'with a 'passionate control' about the history of his race'⁴⁸ and through his subtle and far-reaching symbolism, he succeeds in doing so. *Wooreddy* is evidence of the fact that politically-informed and relevant literature does not necessarily have to be overtly polemical: it is a very accomplished example of Aboriginal writing.

The work – Johnson's first entirely historical novel – pivots on dualities: those of fire and water, black and white, good and evil. In *Wooreddy* the author informs known Australian history with symbolism and mythology drawn from Aboriginal and Eastern cultures. The symbol of resolution and enlightenment in the novel owes as much to Buddhism as it does to Black Australian religion. All of this is accomplished through the device of the visionary or seer, the relatively unknown Tasmanian Aboriginal historical figure, Wooreddy. In the opening pages, which depict Wooreddy's initiation, Johnson establishes his symbolic universe and Wooreddy's position in it:

His uncles held him down while a stranger thrust a firebrand into his face. Another man chanted the origin of fire and why it was sacred for him. Fire was life; fire was the continuation of life – fire endured to the end. He came from fire and would return to fire . . . Fire was a gift from Great Ancestor and Wooreddy had been selected as one descended from that gift. Now while he lived he had to ensure that fire lived.⁴⁹

In *Wooreddy*, the potency of fire's conqueror – water – is even more pronounced: 'The salt-smell caused him to think of that thing, neither male nor female, which heaved a chaos threatening the steadiness of the earth' (p. 1). In short, fire is representative of Aboriginal cultural continuity – of goodness – while water reflects the generalised evil power of *Ria Warrawah*. By extension, water also images the white men who sailed upon its surface, who raped and plundered the Aborigines, and who eventually – with the aid of Truganini and Wooreddy – removed some of the battered remnants of their race to an off-shore island to pine away and perish:

The creature touched the land. It carried pale souls which *Ria Warrawah* had captured. They could not bear being away from the sea, and had to protect their bodies with strange skins . . . Clouds of fog would rise from the sea to hide what was taking place from Great Ancestor. Then the pieces holding the last survivors of the human race would be towed out to sea where they would either drown or starve (p. 4).

The phrase 'It is the times' becomes a refrain which underlines the inevitability of the defeat of the Tasmanian Aborigines by the European invaders. From the outset, an atmosphere of predestination is created

by the author. It is because Wooreddy as visionary can perceive that the 'world is ending' for the Tasmanian blacks that he can clothe himself with the numbness and detachment which enable him to observe that process. Then, with considerable levity and irony, Johnson proceeds to detail these events, primarily as they affect the three main characters – Wooreddy, 'Trugernanna' and Robinson.

Aside from its symbolic aspects, one of the most distinctive elements of the novel is the author's usage of traditional song rhythms to evoke the atmosphere of special tribal occasions. This is the first Aboriginal novel in which such traditional Arnhem Land oral literature is recognised and emulated in poetic fashion:

The women sit thinking of their men folk:
They stand thinking of their men –
While we dance thinking of our women,
Thinking of our beautiful women –
While they dance thinking of their
Handsome men, handsome men –
Handsome men thinking of beautiful women.

The eyelashes flutter together –
Breast to breast together –
Heart to heart together –
Fluttering, seeking, finding –
Dance, men, dance you to me –
Sing, women, sing me to you:
We come, we are coming –
You come, you are coming –
Hallahoo, hallahoo hoho:
Hallahoo, hallahoo, hoho! (pp. 163-164).

Hence, though there are no Aboriginal oral sources for the Wooreddy story as such, Johnson has skilfully managed to incorporate a poetic legacy of the black oral tradition into his work. In addition, although *Wooreddy* details many of the same events that are chronicled in *Queen Trucanini* and *The Savage Crows*, there are significant divergences in plot. For example, the rebellious Tasmanian amazon, Walyer, and her band of renegade male warriors are a striking inversion of the traditional Aboriginal leadership model, and they appear only in *Wooreddy*. Stylistically, Johnson's book is also set apart by its consistent and effective caricature of Robinson, which is taken much further than in either of the books by White Australians. However, what is most important is the symbolic context of *Wooreddy*;

above all, the illumination of the book's protagonist just before his death.

After a night in which Wooreddy dreams of his spirit ancestors holding out their beckoning hands to him, Wooreddy's mainland companion, Waau, leads him to the sacred cave of his ancestors while he discusses the potency of evil:

'Puliliyan is our Ria Warrawah, but unlike you and your people we face him and gain powers,' Waau said matter-of-factly.

'And some of us too have faced Ria Warrawah and gained powers,' Wooreddy asserted. *'Puliliyan and Our Father are close relatives,'* Waau stated. *'Everything comes in twos, but behind them stands only one'* (pp. 195-196).

This leads Wooreddy to the revelations which represent the climax of the novel – and of his life. After having believed since his birth that evil always resided in, and was manifested by, the ocean, he comes to realise that this conception is only partially correct:

Wooreddy began to feel a terrible dread rising in him. It seemed that all he had believed, the scheme that had supported his life, had been but part of the truth. Things were not the simple black and white he had imagined them to be (p. 196).

Instead, behind the dualities which had marked eons of Tasmanian Aboriginal existence lay a new awareness of unity:

He trembled all over and kept in the light falling through the cave mouth. Great spears fell from the roof. Great Ancestor casting down his spears to keep *Ria Warrawah* at bay – but other spears rose from the floor to join them in a oneness. They met and there was no conflict as he had always thought there should be – that there had to be! And his skin did not itch at the proximity of *Ria Warrawah*, and he did not feel threatened by the new truth, though he felt beyond his old life. *Ria Warrawah* and Great Ancestor came from a single source and somewhere was that source he had been seeking in his dream. He moved further into the dripping darkness of the cave and it did not panic him. It was the origin of all things (p. 197).

This is a crucial and symbolic phase in the novel, in the life of Wooreddy, and in Johnson's analysis of the span of the black Tasmanians' traditional world. It is at this stage that the reader is made aware of the fact that all three will and must soon end.

What, specifically, does the symbolism mean, especially with reference to Aboriginal history? To begin with, it is only through contact with a foreign tribe that Wooreddy discovers this universal truth. This seems to imply the necessity for pan-Aboriginal communication in order to arrive at the unity behind diversity in contemporary

Aboriginal affairs. Second, if evil and good, fire and water, black and white, all emanate from the same source, violence done to the other is equally violence done to the self. This would appear to indicate that blood-letting on both sides was clearly barbarous and was no solution to historical interracial conflicts in Tasmania, just as Johnson believes such brutality is futile today. Third, this image seems to suggest, not stoic detachment, but Aboriginal adaptability and resilience. There is also an implied awareness that not all whites are evil, just as in the days of Wooreddy, there were also compassionate Europeans, such as those who rescued Truganini's father, Mangana, from drowning in the ocean.

Above all, the image emphasises the spiritual wholeness of Aboriginal culture and the desire for a black solidarity in contemporary Australia, especially in light of the symbolic final paragraph of the novel. The body of Wooreddy is found dead in the ship which is returning Truganini and Dray to Flinders Island. But 'the real Doctor Wooreddy' – his spirit of pride and survival – lives on and informs modern Aboriginal commitment and action. There can be no doubt that the following passage was very carefully and deliberately written:

The yellow setting sun broke through the black clouds to streak rays of light upon the beach. It coloured the sea red (p. 207).

Therefore, the spark of light which then rockets up from Wooreddy's shallow grave to the sky travels through a firmament which is coloured in the hues of the Aboriginal land rights flag, a symbol which, while not immediately obvious to all readers, is strong and distinctively Black Australian.

The historical theme, one of the most important of all those developed in contemporary Aboriginal literature, is conveyed in many ways: through usage of the techniques of the venerable Aboriginal oral tradition; through the endeavour to foster a sense of contemporary Aboriginal pride in leaders and heroes of the Black Australian past; and through a reinterpretation – often vividly symbolic – of Australian interracial history. These are just some of the most important ways in which contemporary Aboriginal writers articulate their racial heritage. Throughout, as the closing lines of Johnson's *Wooreddy* attest, the present is perpetually infused with the past.

Notes

- 1 *Breaker Morant, Gallipoli, The Man From Snowy River* (both the original and its sequel) and *Phar Lap* all come under this category.
- 2 Shane Howard, 'Solid Rock (Sacred Ground)', on the album 'Spirit of Place' by *Goanna*, W.E.A. 600127, (Sydney, 1982).
- 3 Personal interview with Jack Davis, Canberra, November, 1981.
- 4 Kevin Gilbert, 'Black Policies', in Jack Davis and Bob Hodge, eds, *Aboriginal Writing Today*, (Canberra, 1985), p. 41.
- 5 Gerald L. Bostock, 'Black Children', in *Black Man Coming*, (Sydney, 1981), p. 14.
- 6 Oodgeroo Noonuccal (Kath Walker), 'The Past', in *My People*, (Milton, 1981), p. 92.
- 7 Noonuccal, 'Stone Age', in *ibid.*, p. 21.
- 8 Gilbert, *Living Black: Blacks Talk to Kevin Gilbert*, (Ringwood, 1978), p. 3.
- 9 Maureen Watson, 'Walk Tall', in *Black Reflections*, (Wattle Park, 1982), p. 15.
- 10 Biskup makes this point in his article, 'Aboriginal History', in Mandle and Osborne, eds, *New History Today – Studying Australian Society*, (Sydney, 1982), p. 30.
- 11 Henry Reynolds, *Aborigines and Settlers: The Australian Experience 1788-1939*, (North Melbourne, 1972); *The Other Side of the Frontier; Aboriginal Resistance to the European Invasion of Australia*, (Ringwood, 1982).
- 12 W.E.H. Stanner, *After the Dreaming*, (Sydney, 1969), pp. 55, 57.
- 13 *ibid.*, p. 25.
- 14 Phillip Pepper, *You Are What You Make Yourself to Be*, (Melbourne, 1981); Robert Bropho, *Fringedweller*, (Sydney, 1980).
- 15 Kevin Gilbert, *Living Black: Blacks Talk To Kevin Gilbert*, (Melbourne, 1978), p. 2.
- 16 Jack Davis, *The Dreamers*, in *Kullark/The Dreamers*, (Sydney, 1982), p. 134.
- 17 Quoted in Adam Shoemaker, 'An Interview With Jack Davis', *Westerly*, vol. 27, no. 4, December, 1982, p. 114.

- 18 Robert J. Merritt, *The Cake Man*, (Sydney, 1978), p. 12.
- 19 *ibid.*, p. 30.
- 20 Personal interview with Robert Merritt, Sydney, July, 1982.
- 21 Henry Reynolds, *The Other Side of the Frontier*, pp. 200-201.
- 22 Also referred to as 'Sandawara' and 'Pigeon'.
- 23 Stephen Hawke has prepared a revisionist history of the Kimberleys based upon Aboriginal oral testimony, cross-referenced with government records. Scheduled for publication in 1988, excerpts of the book – including the story of 'Jandamarra' – were published under the title, 'Our Black Past', 'The Great Weekend' Supplement, *The Courier-Mail*, 5 March, 1988, pp. Weekend 1-2.
- 24 Howard Pedersen, 'Pigeon: An Aboriginal Rebel. A Study of Aboriginal-European Conflict in the West Kimberley, North Western Australia During the 1890s', unpublished Honours Thesis, (Murdoch, 1980), p. 2.
- 25 Ion L. Idriess, *Outlaws of the Leopolds*, (Sydney, 1952), p. iv. All following quotations will be taken from this edition and page references will be given in parentheses in the body of the text, immediately after each citation.
- 26 Personal interview with Colin Johnson, Brisbane, July, 1980.
- 27 *ibid.*
- 28 Colin Johnson, *Long Live Sandawara*, (Melbourne, 1979), p. 72. All following quotations will be taken from this edition and page references will be given in the body of the text, immediately after each citation.
- 29 Gilbert, 'Because a White Man'll Never Do It', p. 203.
- 30 Personal interview with Colin Johnson, Brisbane, July, 1980.
- 31 Stephen Muecke, 'Discourse, History, Fiction: Language and Aboriginal History', *Australian Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1, May, 1983, p. 77.
- 32 Pedersen, 'Pigeon: An Aboriginal Rebel', pp. 52-53.
- 33 See *ibid.*, p. 57. In Pedersen's words, 'It is difficult to believe that such well orchestrated action and a planned military offensive could have arisen in a space of little more than a week. It invites speculation that Pigeon was thinking of such a move well before he killed Richardson'.
- 34 Idriess, 'Give 'Em A Go', *SALT*, vol. 5, no. 9, 1943, p. 18.
- 35 Hugh Webb, 'Black Words on a White Page: Colin Johnson's *Long Live Sandawara*', Seminar paper, Murdoch University, September, 1981.

- 36 Personal interview with Daisy Utemorrah, Perth, February, 1983.
- 37 Personal letter from Colin Johnson, August, 1982.
- 38 *ibid.*
- 39 Colin Johnson's speech at the 'Aboriginal Literature' section of the National Word Festival, Canberra, March, 1983.
- 40 Personal letter from Colin Johnson, August, 1982.
- 41 Johnson, 'White Forms; Aboriginal Content', in Jack Davis and Bob Hodge, eds, *Aboriginal Writing Today*, (Canberra, 1985), p. 28.
- 42 This may be partly because of Ellis's thorough familiarity with the history of Truganini. Her penchant for detail may retard the pace of this fictional treatment but her biography, *Trucanini: Queen or Traitor?*, (Canberra, 1981), is stronger as a result of this comprehensive approach.
- 43 Nancy Cato and Vivienne Rae Ellis, *Queen Trucanini: The Last of the Tasmanians*, (Sydney, 1976), p. 158. All further quotations will be taken from this edition, and page numbers will be included immediately after each citation in the body of the text.
- 44 Robert Drewe, *The Savage Crows*, (Sydney, 1976), p. 90. All further quotations will be taken from this edition, and page numbers will be included immediately after each citation in the body of the text.
- 45 Personal interview with Robert Drewe, Adelaide, March, 1982.
- 46 *ibid.*
- 47 *ibid.*
- 48 Quoted from the front dustcover of *Wooreddy*.
- 49 Johnson, *Wooreddy*, p. 5. All further quotations will be taken from this edition, and page numbers will be given in parentheses immediately after each citation, in the body of the text.