

Asia in Recent Australian Literature

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Introduction: *Orientalism* at Work

Australia's general re-orientation towards its Asian and Pacific environment in the years after 1945 was gradually and intermittently manifested in its literary productions. Especially in the 1970s, with the ending of the Allied War in Vietnam and the dynamic Whitlam Era in Australian politics, several Australian authors went in search of new places and issues in Asia for their narratives.

Regrettably, they did not seriously search for plausible characterisation there. To develop a believable character in another linguistic and cultural background is hard enough under any literary circumstance and for any literary worker. For Australian writers, orphans of Empire coming out of a hermetic Anglo-Celtic cell, that is especially formidable. They can hardly imagine what it is like to grow up as a Muslim Malay, or a Thai Buddhist. For that would have meant transcending, if not abandoning, the Orientalist mind-set which is characteristic of almost all Anglo-Australians for almost all of their two hundred years of history.¹

Following the distinguished literary

critic, Edward Said, Orientalism is defined as "the European vision of all Eastern peoples as exotic, remote, inferior, and subject to the political, military, economic, cultural, and sexual dominance of the West."² If the West, including Australia, is deemed culturally superior, then, Asia could easily be portrayed in fiction as dark, mysterious, melodramatic, illicit, violent, dangerous, even wicked. Perhaps, Asia is a different place to take a brief holiday, fight a war, or run away from. But it is not to be taken seriously and not worthy of sustained involvement. In fact, not too many Australian authors have taken Asia or any part of it, too seriously, or in a sustained manner.

Australian author, Robert Drewe tells an interviewer: "You don't constructively go out to look for topics -- things just start to occur to you and then in a strange alchemic way, events happen that seem to fit."³ Tasmania-born author Christopher Koch reflects on his novel, *Highways to a War* (1995): "I don't know that I have a great fascination with Vietnam or Cambodia. I get involved with whatever I am writing about at the time. . . I only went to those two countries for a short time after the war in the mid '80s. What I was fascinated by was the combat cameraman."⁴

This module takes up the work of three leading Australian authors, including Koch and Drewe, who have, if even for a relatively short while, responded to Australian involvement in Asia.

Three Representative Works

1. *The Year of Living Dangerously* (1978) by Christopher Koch

Set in the final days of President Sukarno's Indonesia of 1965, *The Year of Living Dangerously* focuses on the friendship between Guy Hamilton, an Anglo-Australian journalist, and Billy Kwan, a Chinese-Australian photographer. Hamilton comes to the Indonesian capital, Jakarta, on assignment of the Australian Broadcasting Service. He is tall, handsome, ambitious and self-serving. By contrast, Billy is a dwarf, odd-looking, and idealistic. For a time, they work effectively together as the veteran Billy acts as Hamilton's local eyes and ears. Both men are also romantically involved with a female staff member of the British Embassy in Jakarta, Jill Bryant, whose confidence Hamilton undermines in his quest for "the big story." *The Year of Living Dangerously* is, above all, an intense portrait of betrayal: Hamilton betrays Jill, Hamilton betrays Billy, and Billy betrays Great Wally, and so on.

Betrayal is also the key to Billy Kwan's fate. A passionate believer in social justice, Billy is eventually disillusioned by the cruel, yawning gap between Sukarno's rhetoric and action. He puts out a banner in bold letters, "SUKARNO, FEED YOUR PEOPLE." (p.248)

Billy's public protest results in his death at the hands of the presidential security forces. Trying to cover a street demonstration without Billy's guiding presence, Hamilton is cruelly struck in the eye by an armed guard, and symbolically becomes half blind just at the time of President Sukarno's fall in October, 1965. Baffled and out of his depth, Hamilton quickly retreats out of Indonesia by plane via Singapore to Western Europe, contemplating an eventual return to the "cool, dry spaces of southeastern Australia," which are "sanity" and "home." (p. 87)

2. *A Cry in the Jungle Bar* (1979) by Robert Drewe

A Cry in the Jungle Bar focuses on a big, awkward, obsessive agricultural consultant who is based in the Philippines and working in other parts of Asia. Like Guy Hamilton in *The Year of Living Dangerously*, Richard Cullen, a white male is trying to make sense of a complex and exotic foreign society, but in vain. "An 'ugly' white Australian confronts a racial guilt that is allied to personal failure and a guilty sexuality," according to Susan Lever.⁵ A former football great in his earlier days in Australia, he is a tragi-comic figure in his new role. Traveling doggedly through Nepal, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka on a United Nations mission to inspect buffalo livestock and facilities, he is troubled by a disintegrating marriage, fits of painful dysentery, and by the spectre of unprecedented poverty around him. "For a blind moment he could not remember which country he was in," (p. 133) though he eventually finds himself again in the cool, ex-colonial Anglophile hills beyond Kandy, drinking Orange Pekoe tea.

Eventually, Cullen's fastidious refusal to take advantage of the sexual vulnerability of Filipino prostitute leads to his stabbing by her pimp, and capture by soldiers of the Moro People's Liberation in Mindanao. For all his physical discomfort and emotional starvation, Cullen is a moral and genuine person who sadly happens to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

D'Alpuget's novel, *Minou Hobday*, the Vietnamese Eurasian second wife of the Australian Ambassador to Malaysia. Minou is young, sexually adventurous, irreverent, enigmatic, and manipulative. She, too, is haunted by her past in Vietnam, and the children she had been forced to leave behind. Minou's ultimate sacrifice on behalf of her children is incomprehensible to Judith. Judith is further alienated by the detached stance of her erstwhile Hindu lover, Kanan Subramaniam.

3. *Turtle Beach* (1981) by Blanche D'Alpuget

Judith Wilkes, a political journalist based in Canberra, is a yuppie in her thirties. Bright, wealthy, ambitious, forthright and prudish with a "sharp career woman's manner" (p. 22), she is active in the Women's Electoral Lobby. Married to a lawyer-public servant with thwarted political aspirations, she has two children. Judith's past haunts her present success. Earlier in her career as a foreign correspondent, she had reported on May 13 Incident of 1969, which involved racial riots in the Malaysian capital of Kuala Lumpur. During one especially gruesome episode, she had witnessed a Malay youth decapitating an innocent Indian pedestrian. The extreme circumstances of that time, in turn, prompted her impromptu affair with another reporter, an unwanted pregnancy, and guilt-ridden, sexually indifferent behavior. Again, involvement in Asia by an Australian is shadowed by disintegration of marital bonds. A decade later, Judith returns to Malaysia, this time to write about the "boat people" those Vietnamese refugees huddled in makeshift camps off the Malaysian coast after the end of the war and communist reunification in Vietnam. She has developed a strategic friendship with the other main character in

About the Authors

The distinguished American writer, John Steinbeck, once observed that "a novelist not only puts down a story, but he is a story. He is each one of his characters to a greater or lesser degree."⁶ It is therefore essential, in any analysis of a literary creation, to understand the major influences that have shaped the author. According to Edward Said, "authors are . . . very much in the history of their societies, shaping and shaped by that history and their social experience."⁷ So what has shaped the three authors being studied here?

a) *Christopher Koch*

Of English, Irish, and German descent, Christopher Koch was born on 16th July, 1932, in Hobart, Tasmania. His first job, at the tender age of 17, was as a cartoonist on the Hobart *Mercury* newspaper. A graduate of the University of Tasmania, he travelled to Britain, with stayovers in Indonesia and India, Koch describes this trip as a traditional pilgrimage for young Australians in the 1950s, back to the cultural core of Empire. Returning to

Australia, he worked for the Australian Broadcasting Commission as a radio producer on and off for more than a decade, before retiring in 1972 to write full-time, living at Leura in the Blue Mountains west of Sydney.

Whilst at the ABC, Koch did a stint in Indonesia for UNESCO in 1968, and he also stayed for a time overseas in the USA and Italy. His several novels include *The Year of Living Dangerously* (1978), set in Indonesia, and *Highways to a War* (1995), set mainly in Vietnam and Cambodia. *The Year of Living Dangerously* won *The Age* newspaper's Book of the Year Award, and was subsequently made into a feature film by Peter Weir, while Koch received the prestigious Miles Franklin Award in 1996 for *Highways to a War*. Other honours include a Doctor of Letters award from the University of Tasmania, and an Order of Australia for services to literature in 1995.

To understand Christopher Koch's fiction, it helps to be aware of his origins in Tasmania, his boyhood attachment to things British, his Roman Catholicism, and his experiences of travel abroad.

b) Robert Drewe

Robert Drewe was born in Melbourne in 1943, the eldest of three children, but spent his childhood in Perth where he went to school with, he says, "half of Australia's failed entrepreneurs".⁹ He and his siblings were "typical WA kids with blond hair, peeling noses and freckles," who spent most of the time out-of-doors.¹⁰ His first career was in newspapers. He has lived and worked in California and London, and now lives in

Sydney. Before turning to fiction, he twice won the national Walkley Award for journalism. As a resident of San Francisco in the 1980s, he worked briefly as a private investigator, and in 1995, he taught fiction writing at London's Brixton Prison. He has written four novels and two books of short stories. Robert Drewe is also a film critic, playwright and the author of several screenplays. His stage drama, *South American Barbecue*, was first performed in 1991. His affection for Australia's beaches is legendary.

Drewe visited the Philippines twice, first in 1965, sent by the *Melbourne Age* to cover the presidential elections won by Ferdinand Marcos, and again in 1974, when Marcos had declared martial law and rule by presidential decree in the name of a 'New Society'. "At that time," Drewe recalls, "I came up with the idea of using an Australian Manila-based agricultural adviser as the pivot for various events that I wanted to deal with in fiction."¹¹

The early influence of journalism on his literary style remains strong. Due to the training he received on the *West Australian*, Drewe "learned to write simple declarative sentences and how to be sparing with adverbs and adjectives, how to make every sentence pay."¹² To comprehend his approach to *A Cry in the Jungle Bar*, it helps to know that, "in literature, his world is one in which characters barely comprehend what is happening around them, where life and nature verge on the malevolent, where shards of sudden insight illuminate the confusion. One strength is an ability to pin down the fine detail of how people interact, socially and emotionally, to capture the nuance and undercurrents that exist beneath conversations."¹³ Drewe's

characters, notes Ray Willbanks in *Speaking volumes*, tend to be "modern Australians suffering problems of loss and identity brought about by changing relationships, changing values, and by the violence and chaos of the times."¹⁴

c) *Blanche D'Alpuget*

She was born in Sydney on 3rd January, 1944, and educated at the Sydney Church of England Girls Grammar School in Darlinghurst. In 1961, she began a journalistic career that took her from Australia to Britain and France, and included a posting to the Australian News and Information Service Office in Jakarta from 1966 to 1968. Her first marriage, to an Australian diplomat, Tony Pratt, facilitated lengthy bursts of overseas travel. Two of her published novels to date have been set in Southeast Asia. In 1995, she married for the second time to former Prime Minister, Bob Hawke, whose biography she had published in 1982. *Turtle Beach* (1981) received the Melbourne *Age's* Book of the Year Award, the South Australian Government's Biennial Award, and the Sydney PEN Golden Jubilee Award for Fiction. Feminist and postmodern issues feature more conspicuously in her creative output, with her central characters being female.

Overall, it bears noting that two of the three authors outlined above have extensive experience in journalism, as well as Australian literature, and all of them have travelled and lived, to a greater or lesser extent, in Southeast Asia and elsewhere. They also have very sceptical attitudes towards the durability of Australian marriages.

About the Themes

a) *Asia is alien and hostile, not like Australia*

Noticeable about each of these authors is their preoccupation with Australian characters in exotic settings, involved in the local scene but not too much. As one interviewer wrote of Christopher Koch:

"It is equally fair to visualise this 64-year-old novelist, drinking beer in a Saigon bar, the horrors of war raging outside the doors, battle-weary correspondents, operatives and diplomats, huddled around the table swapping stories of near death experiences, and Koch with a sharpened pencil and pad taking notes, dotting the i's and crossing the t's."¹⁵

In an innovative and engaging literary development, Koch in *The Year of Living Dangerously* actually employs the Javanese *Wayang Kulit* puppet play as the central motif for the story, and in particular its theme of enduring human conflict, between right and wrong, light and darkness, right and left. However, the main setting for the novel is not the streets of Jakarta but the Hotel Indonesia, which was the only large, modern hotel in Jakarta in 1965, and particularly the Hotel's Wayang Bar, where the small colony of Western journalists spend most of their time. The Wayang Bar is an air-conditioned oasis, cool, dark and sterilised, the very opposite of the hot, humid, noisy, volatile urban reality of Jakarta outside. Since the only Indonesians in the bar are waiters and servants, the Western journalists who gather there develop a camaraderie based on the culturally familiar props of alcohol and mateship, presided over by the genial but dubious fleshy giant, Wally

O'Sullivan, known as Great Wally. Their essential isolation means that there is no culture shock here. Sadly, the journalists come to equate the tiny world of the Wayang Bar with the larger world of Indonesia itself. Even Wally O'Sullivan's news stories typically come from tips filtered in to the bar from the outside, rather than first-hand reportage. No wonder they find it difficult to take Indonesia seriously. When they do write stories about the place, they emphasise the sensational and lurid aspects rather than the daily existence and struggles for a better life of ordinary Indonesians. The one significant Indonesian character, the editorial assistant Kumar, can be known only by his own utterances, on the surface.

b) *'Asia' is mysterious, intriguing, tantalising, but ultimately incomprehensible and impenetrable*

See, for example, Richard Cullen's abortive flirtations with Gigi Fernandez and Jenny Loh in *A Cry in the Jungle Bar*, and Judith Wilkes' passionate but unconsummated affair with Kanan in *Turtle Beach*.

c) *Australians are vulnerable and displaced in Asia*

Richard Cullen's struggle to comprehend an alien environment is paralleled by his struggle to recapture the romance in his marriage. Similarly, Judith Wilkes, the self-centred and self-serving character of D'Alpuget's *Turtle Beach*, just cannot comprehend the beliefs and actions of the sacrificial Eurasian, Minou, and the detached Indian, Kanan. Judith's quest for self-assertion and self-advancement pales in significance besides Minou's self-denying quest to rescue her children from the fragile refugee boats off the turbulent Malaysian coast. However, she does resolve to return to Australia to fight for custody of her own children after the divorce.

Conclusion

If a recent generation of Australian creative writers have emphasised the limitations of Australian involvement with the Asian region, then it will be up to the next generation to explore and emphasise the positive possibilities of more permanent engagement.

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Recommended Additional Reading

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Notes on Authors

McArthur GUNTER (Cosmos III), freelance poet and writer whose work appeared in numerous journals in the United States and other countries such as *Piedmont Literary Review*, *International Poetry Review*, *Native American Indian Community*, *Armchair* (United Kingdom), *Poetry Kanto* (Japan), and many many others.

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