

The Spectrum of Spectral Colonisation in John Scott's *Warra Warra*

DAVID MESHER
San José State University

The cleverness of Laurie Duggan's study of Australia as a *Ghost Nation* (2001) has less to do with its thesis than with the variety and insight provided by Duggan's examples. Subtitled *Imagined Space and Australian Visual Culture 1901-1939*, Duggan's text is involved with the artifacts of Australian modernism, pre-war culture, and the rise of technology in a way only suggested in his title. Duggan's "ghost" is a cultural, not paranormal, phenomenon, in which "'imagined' spaces and 'observed' spaces may coexist within other 'regulated' spaces and an individual may inhabit all of them" (xxii). Australia, for Duggan, is a "'ghost nation' . . . not in the sense that it is the shadow of something that is dead, but in a visual sense of images which ghost each other; not as layers or levels but as a kind of parallax view which must exist in any slice of time, whose images shift about (against) each other within time" (xxiii).

Duggan's "ghost", which provides a metaphor to deal with the series of culturally distinct realities simultaneously occupying the same space that is contemporary Australia, is therefore distinct from the colonial conception of Australian culture as a spot on the periphery attempting, culturally and in other ways, to duplicate (or "ghost") the imperial center. Still, when his theories of Australia as a "ghost nation" lead, even indirectly, to a contemporary Australian ghost story such as John Scott's novel *Warra Warra* (2003)—which describes the spectral re-colonisation of an Australian town by ghosts of the British passengers and crew of a jetliner blown out of the skies in a terrorist bombing—this seems less a misunderstanding than a further "ghosting" of Duggan's own thesis. Indeed, as Duggan himself has said, "The creation of imaginary space is really part of the process of colonisation" (131). Though John Scott's metaphor of colonisation in *Warra Warra* necessarily comes up short in its historical parallels, his novel's spectrum analysis of Australia's conception of itself and of its

present relation to its colonial past strikingly coexists with Scott's nostalgic indulgence in his own British roots.

After the opening paragraph, with its commonplace warning that "until your whole world changes, life goes on pretty much as it was" (3), Scott's novel is written as a long series of short vignettes, with the third-person narrative moving among an initially large group of characters that becomes smaller as the story develops, the action intensifies, and characters are killed off. This allows the author to document individual characters' thoughts and actions in the moments before and during, and in the days and months after a momentous event in the fictitious small town of Warra Warra, on the shores of Lake Coniston in central New South Wales—an event at the heart of the novel—the crash of an overseas passenger flight, killing everyone onboard and many on the ground. The cause of the crash—a bomb onboard the plane—has no apparent importance in the novel, other than to bring the jetliner down and to emphasise the sense of the novel as a very contemporary ghost story. The explosion itself is described, from the vantage of two people on the ground, only as an "orange glow suffusing the clouds"—the reason for which is finally made clear in the last line of the novel's first chapter, when Bill Pemmell, returning home to Warra Warra, comes upon "a jet engine half embedded in the centre of the road" (14).

To scenes of carnage on the ground, Scott adds another level of chaos, as Warra Warra becomes "the big story" (31), and is inundated by waves of emergency workers, journalists, and curiosity seekers. Politicians visit the crash site, including the Prime Minister himself, who callously recognises that "the incident of course was not without its advantages" (40). Then, as the media frenzy subsides, those with a professional stake in the disaster begin to leave, replaced by others with a more personal connection: "the overseas families, the lovers and friends of those who had perished on the flight". The bereaved hail from towns with names such as "Tideslow, Dog Dyke, or Tumby Woodside", yet they think of Warra Warra as, "this place with the strange name whose earth had claimed their William or their Prue" (49-50).

Considering the scale of the catastrophe, in which three hundred people die, the reader understands that the story has entered its supernatural phase when the narrator asserts that *actual* "trouble began some weeks later, when no more visitors came". The early signs of it are "no more remarkable than the dropping of a crochet hook, the spilling of a cup of tea. A certain clumsiness, perhaps. A lack of concentration" (50). Then unexplained lipstick marks on a glass and knocking on a roof. In the final paragraph of Part One, Bill Pemmell, the novel's main character, makes the first recorded

sighting, when he recognises the man standing in his yard as one of the crash victims. Pemmell “had seen this man carried off from his backyard, the parts of him pressed together inside a thick, black plastic bag. And now, as he understood it, the body had come back” (62).

Part Two, the longest section of the novel, recounts how the ghosts, “a host of luminous figures dementedly beating their arms and legs” (69), eventually occupy the town. “What had seemed space enough to accommodate both the living and the dead had proved insufficient” (80). Pemmell understands—for reasons that are never convincingly explained in the novel—why the townspeople cannot count on help from the outside world in the coming battle against the ghosts:

They had come to take the town from those who were already there. The people of Warra Warra, he knew now, must henceforth be in a state of war with these beings—no, these *non*-beings, these malignant absences, that threatened to usurp the very spaces of the living. Nor would there be anywhere to turn for help—the police, the army, all those who had poured into the town after the crash, belonged to that other world they had long ago abandoned, a world beyond boundaries that they knew could never be crossed again; a world long lost to them, now and forever. (84-5)

The ghosts attack first, murdering “families on the outskirts of town” (87). Not until an apparently despondent ghost destroys himself—by literally stepping into Pemmell—do the living have a method for fighting back. Pemmell soon informs the others, in terms that contrast with Duggan’s idea of the positive affects of simultaneously shared space, that “a ghost could be killed by occupying the space on which it stood” (111). In performing such an “earthing”, the living individual apparently absorbs the soul or personality of the ghost, including memories of the dead person’s former life. It is an experience which, as Pemmell explains:

shakes you up a fair bit at first. You get confused and wonder who you are . . . Then, in an hour or so, you come to your senses. It’s not an experience I’d recommend—but it’s the only real weapon we’ve got. (123)

Having noticed other things about the ghosts—that they seem to be afraid of fire, and that they are temporarily weakened by passing through solid objects—the townspeople concoct a plan to destroy the ghosts, who regularly gather at sunset by the lake. The plan even includes a group exorcism, to be performed by Joseph O’Phelan, the Latin-challenged local priest, but when the stratagem is discovered by the ghosts, Anne Hodgins, who has become one of Pemmell’s lieutenants, realises, “The townspeople,

all of them, are about to be caught in their own trap” (150). As, indeed, they are, with few survivors.

Though listed among the fallen by O’Phalen at the end of Part Two, Bill Pemmell is in fact not one of the casualties of the abortive plan to get rid of the ghosts. Instead, his earthing of a very strong spirit has led to that personality’s dominance of his mind. “Name: Barbara Bishop. Age: forty-three. Nationality: British, *English*, in point of fact. Address: 23 The Close, Rustington. Children: two, from her previous marriage. Occupation: Cabin Manager, Trans-National Airlines” (170-1). Part Three of the novel chronicles Barbara’s return to consciousness, which she shares with Pemmell, in a more positive play on Duggan’s notion of joint space than the “earthing” which brings them together, and suggests how that encounter within the same body provides Pemmell with the insight to solve the conflict between the living and the dead. Taking refuge at an abandoned school camp, Barbara remembers nothing after the onboard explosion, and now finds herself a “flawed woman in the solitary confinement of a male’s body . . . determined to cut away the bulbous pendulum between her legs . . . and should she bleed to death as a consequence, so be it” (175). Though Pemmell’s own consciousness eventually reasserts itself (apparently before any genital damage is done), something of Barbara remains within him: “he knew he had been closer to this woman than any other human being” (180).

And so, weeks or months after the ghosts’ victory near the lake, Pemmell returns to the town, which is now completely changed. Even the surrounding landscape looks distinctly un-Australian to Pemmell, with a “lushness the like of which he had seen only as a young man in Europe” (184). The town itself, renamed Warborough, has the look of “a new Arcadia”, with “half-timbering” on some of the shops (186). “Everything had been transformed into a scene of *Merrie England*. He hissed the words. They had prospered, these invaders, these murderers. They had made for themselves a paradise on earth” (190).

Pemmell has more reason for hatred: the ghosts have rounded up the surviving townspeople, and imprisoned them in a guarded compound, while dumping the bodies of the others in “an unmarked, uncovered grave” (190). But Pemmell can pass in and out of the compound, unrecognised by the ghosts, simply by training “himself to move between the two different consciousnesses” (188), his own and Barbara’s. Free to wander the town as Barbara, Pemmell visits his own home: “The house, he realised, was now a shrine in which only one object had been allowed to survive”. The object of the ghosts’ veneration is a model airplane, still hanging in his son’s room,

and Pemmell concludes, “They need a plane to take them back to England” (199). He also visits, as Pemmell, two sympathetic ghosts who explain their fellows’ predicament to him: “Like you, they want to go home. That is what we *all* want. . . . As returning is out of the question however, they have chosen to live here” (201). The third crucial piece of information is supplied by Anne Hodgins, who speculates that thirty-nine passengers and crew from the flight missing among the ranks of the ghosts “never rose because they found a resting place here”, in Cudgegong, the town at the bottom of artificial Lake Coniston (204).

Not just lives and property, then, but a sense of home, of familiarity and belonging, has been lost in the crash by both the ghosts and Pemmell himself; and, with his newly acquired insight into the “other”, Pemmell manages to resolve the problems of both sides, non-violently and relatively amicably, by relocating the ghosts underwater to the flooded town of Cudgegong, using an ark built for the Second Flood by an eccentric neighbor out of chicken wire and “layer-upon-layer” (13) of back issues of the town’s newspaper, which is then fitted with a pair of wings and has *Sirius*, the name of the crashed jetliner, “written on the prow” (214). Filled with ghosts, the ark is submerged in Lake Coniston. “The water rose within the hull—as oblivious to those gathered souls as they were to it, the ghosts’ voices warbling together, a hymn, an anthem, knowing they were finally on their way” (221). And with that, in at least one way, Scott, whose first collection of verse was entitled *From the Flooded City* (1981), seems to have come full circle in his writing.

Except for that ending, in *Warra Warra* Scott has created an allegory of colonisation, with the townspeople suffering the Aboriginal fate of displacement, massacre, and captivity, at the hands, once again, of new arrivals from Britain. In Ken Gelder’s terms, this is “an invasion fantasy that willfully echoes an Aboriginal experience, even as it erases Aborigines from the story—and all in order, finally, to make the townsfolk’s claim on their town stronger than it ever was” (5). Settler colonisation reshapes the land just as surely and as destructively as does the crash of a jumbo jet. Like the original colonists, these ghosts are in many ways blind to the Australian reality around them, both natural and communal, which they destroy in attempting to recreate for themselves a nostalgic image of “home”, complete with half-timbered buildings and a landscape reminiscent of Europe. Such parallels are striking but limited: whatever solution Pemmell and the others manage in the novel, there is little historic possibility of a “happy ending” to the colonisation of Australia that would be mutually agreeable to both sides,

indigenous and immigrant. Indeed, the necessary absence of any Aboriginal characters in Scott's version of rural New South Wales accurately suggests just how successful the original colonists were in pursuing their domination of Australia and its first inhabitants. In reviewing the novel, Don Anderson suggested that "Australia, even remote rural Australia, in 2003 is rather more multicultural than that" (45), but Scott's allegory operates in starkly racial terms, both on the ground and, as we shall see, in the air.

Scott's subtle employment of colonisation as a theme in *Warra Warra*, however, goes well beyond the overt parallels of the story, beginning with the novel's title—taken from the phrase, meaning "go away", which Arthur Phillip and the First Fleet are reported to have heard from the inhabitants of Botany Bay in 1788 while looking for a site for the first penal colony. Though Warra Warra and Lake Coniston are fictitious place names, the real town of Cudgegong was in fact flooded in the mid-1970s during the construction, just south of Mudgee, of Windamere Dam on the Cudgegong River; and Scott acknowledges Sue Harding's book *Cudgegong under Windamere*, as well as the staff of the Mudgee Information Service, among other sources, in a note at the end of *Warra Warra*. The resulting lake, a reservoir that supplies water for agricultural and domestic uses, is an example of the reshaping of the native terrain by contemporary Australians, and perhaps of the questionable stewardship of that land provided by the descendants of colonists.

Of greater significance are the street names on the map ("not to scale") provided at the beginning of the novel. Myall is the name of the main street of Warra Warra, and of the main roads out of town, fittingly enough, since the Myall Creek Massacre, on June 8, 1838, is the only such attack by white settlers on Aboriginal people in which at least some of the perpetrators were tried, convicted, and executed by the colonial judicial system. Kilcoy Road, which runs north along Lake Coniston from the west end of the town, recalls another Queensland incident, the reported poisoning of Aboriginal people at Kilcoy Station in 1842. Rufus Street similarly recalls the Rufus River Massacre, on August 26-27, 1841, in which at least thirty-five Aboriginals were killed. Eora Street, the only other street identified on the map, is taken from the name early British settlers gave to the Aboriginal people living in the Sydney area, of the Gadegal and Wanegal clans, from whose language English has borrowed such words as "dingo" and "wallaby". Lake Coniston itself may be named for the 1928 Coniston Massacre, usually considered the last known mass murder of Aboriginal people in Australian history, in which at least thirty-one and perhaps more than sixty died. Finally, Bill Pemmell's name is likely an allusion to Pemulwuy, an indigenous warrior and

Eoran guerilla leader who was killed in 1802, after defying the colonists for more than a decade. Eric Wilmot's *Pemulway: The Rainbow Warrior* and Henry Reynolds' *The Other Side of the Frontier: Aboriginal Resistance to the European Invasion of Australia* are also among Scott's acknowledgements at the end of the novel. Like Pemmell, Pemulwuy was thought to have died in battle at one point. When they detected signs of life, soldiers brought Pemulwuy to the hospital at Parramatta, where he slipped in and out of consciousness for days, before recovering sufficiently to make his escape, though, unlike Pemmell, Pemulwuy probably only had one consciousness to slip in and out of during his recovery.

The fact that Scott's early drafts of *Warra Warra* were completed by January 2001, before the publication of *Ghost Nation*, should in no way hinder the supposition that the novelist may have had Duggan's study in mind in developing a ghost story with colonial themes and shared spaces. Scott dates those drafts on the Acknowledgements page at the end of the novel, perhaps concerned that readers might think he was callously exploiting the World Trade Center attacks from September of that year. *Ghost Nation*, however, derives from Duggan's doctoral thesis, submitted at the University of Melbourne in 1999, something Scott would have been well aware of since the two have been friends beginning with their days at Monash University in the 1960s, and have even collaborated together on poems. Further, the clever "ghosting" of "Warra" at the top of each page, and other headings elsewhere in the novel, suggest a visual or multi-dimensional consideration of the theme, if not by Scott himself then by his publishers.

There is one way, however, in which Scott seems to have returned to the imitatively colonial mode of an Australia still on the cultural periphery: the Englishness of the airplane victims. Nowhere in the novel does it say specifically that the passengers and crew are all British, and that fact may come as something of a surprise to the reader, though there are plenty of inconclusive hints: one of the ghosts is called a "Pommie bastard" (80), the memories of the ghosts Pemmell earths are all set in England, the priest takes satisfaction in using Latin insults that "would give a British ghost something to think about, even if it were only some unpleasant memories of boarding school" (136), and the ghosts attempt to re-create "*Merrie England*" by making Warra Warra into Warborough. But the first and best indication that the reader is to understand that all passengers and crew are (or were) British comes in that odd remark about their bereaved families hailing from towns such as "Tideslow, Dog Dyke, or Tumby Woodside" (49). Australian readers from such officially named towns and localities as Tumby Bay (WA),

Half Tide (Qld), Murder Dog and Dyke Point (NSW), among many other examples, may be forgiven if they do not immediately discern the inimitable Britishness of place-names such as Tideslow, Dog Dyke, and Tumbly Woodside. Indeed, Scott may expect his readers to identify Britain not by the unusual names of these three very small towns scattered across it, but—curiouser and curiouser—apparently because those towns figure in a song about the closing of small railway stations during the Beeching cuts of the 1950s, as performed by the British duo Flanders and Swann, entitled “Slow Train”, and available on their 1964 album, *At the Drop of Another Hat*.

The song and, especially, the Beeching axe may well be more familiar to Scott, who was born in England in 1948 and migrated to Melbourne with his family in 1959, than to most Australians. Certainly, Scott seems either to be quoting the song from memory or to be transcribing it from a recording, because he has got one of the names wrong: Flanders and Swann sang about Tideswell, and not the nearby, smaller and always station-less Tideslow (or Tideslow Rake). The error seems to underscore how foreign to Australians Britain’s geography and culture have become, though some continue to assume otherwise, and fittingly makes Scott’s place-names slightly distorted “ghosts” of the Flanders and Swann original. There is even a connection between the song and the novel’s theme of airline travel: according to Donald Swann’s introduction, they were asked to write a song about airplanes but, agreeing with the woman who said “if God had intended us to fly, He would never have given us the railways”, they wrote one about the railways instead.

There may be more references to Flanders and Swann in *Warra Warra*. Early in the novel, for example, Tom Gibson deals with the heat of the day by thinking of the laws of physics: “‘Heat cannot of itself move from one body to another body,’ he recited, the words appearing from who knows where” (10). Scott (or Gibson) has it wrong here, once again, since heat can and indeed must of itself move from one body to another body, if the second is cooler than the first. Gibson soon identifies the line as the second law of thermodynamics, but it may well have “appeared” to him (or been misremembered by Scott) from an earlier track on the same Flanders and Swann album, entitled “First and Second Law”, the wording of which expresses the law correctly: “Heat cannot of itself pass from one body to a hotter body”.

Scott’s use of lyrics by Flanders and Swann suggests a level of nostalgia about Britain unusual in a postcolonial writer. “Slow Train” is unabashedly nostalgic, and even the satire of other songs often operates at one or two removes from the Britain they actually are celebrating with tongue in cheek.

As Swann explains at the beginning of *At the Drop of Another Hat*, “The purpose of satire, it has been rightfully said, is to strip off the veneer of comforting illusion and cozy half-truth, and our job, as I see it, is to put it back again”. The duo’s allegiances, as expressed in their “respectable songs for responsible people”, are neatly summed up in yet another song from that album, entitled “A Song of Patriotic Prejudice”, which has the refrain, “The English, the English, the English are best / So up with the English and down with the rest”. Scott’s medium in *Warra Warra*, however, is not satire but allegory, embedded in a ghost story.

Genre requirements may help explain Scott’s too-positive ending (since the conventions of using a contemporary public setting require that all the ghosts be gone by the fiction’s end). Beyond that, however, Scott’s allusions to Aboriginal history occupy the same space as his mismatched references to British satire, demonstrating the intellectual spectrum of the Australian “ghost nation”. It’s enough to know that, in English, we separate “homesickness” from “nostalgia”, though the latter means the former in classical Greek and modern Romance languages. Our nostalgia may be for things we may have never experienced personally, for what we believe to be the essence of a time or place we may have only imagined. For most Australians, “Merrie England” is as much the stuff of nostalgic imagination as is the unspoilt bush of their own continent, but in *Warra Warra*—and perhaps for the author himself—it is the object of an uncontrollable longing. Scott’s ghosts cannot return to England, any more than he himself can return to the Sussex of his boyhood, a spot that has existed only in his imagination for more than forty years, and is surely as subject to the lapses of mind and memory as a Flanders and Swann song.

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