

Interviews

In Defence of “the Lesser Cousin of History”: An Interview with Rohan Wilson

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Abstract: Few branches of postcolonial literature are as contested as the historical fiction of settler societies. This interview with the Australian historical novelist Rohan Wilson, author of *The Roving Party* (2011) and *To Name Those Lost* (2014), explores the intersections between truth, accuracy, and existential authenticity in his fictional accounts of nineteenth-century Tasmania. Wilson offers a nuanced yet robust defence of fiction’s role in narrating colonial history. He explains his intentions in writing two linked yet distinctive novels of the frontier—one that focuses on the “Black War” of the 1820s and 1830s, and another that explores how racial violence is refracted by capitalism in subsequent decades.

Keywords: historical fiction, history and fiction, history wars, Australian literature, settler colonialism, frontier violence, Rohan Wilson

Rohan Wilson is one of the most exciting young novelists to start work in Australia. His first novel, *The Roving Party* (2011), appeared to critical acclaim, won The Australian/Vogel’s Literary Award, and prompted interest from readers and critics alike for its challenging approach to Australian history. In it, Wilson explores the brutality of the Van Diemen’s Land (Tasmanian) frontier in the 1820s and 1830s—the period of the “Black War,” a bitter struggle for control of the island between the Indigenous inhabitants (or Palawa) and white settlers, both free and unfree. *The Roving Party* centres on the actions of John Batman, a well-known figure in Australian history who spent a number of years farming and fighting in Van Diemen’s Land before founding the city

of Melbourne. In 1829 Batman led a series of “roving parties” into the bush to hunt the Aboriginal warriors who resisted his occupation of their land. In focusing on this little-known episode, Wilson foregrounds both the extent to which modern Australia was founded through ethnic cleansing and the ferocious resistance to that process. The novel is populated by angry, cruel, and frightened men, and the war with the Aborigines is a drawn-out struggle for survival driven by physical insecurity and the material realities of a conflict over limited resources. Yet while Wilson emphasises the violence of this hyper-masculine environment, he is also attuned to the nuances of the Australian frontier. His characters—both white and Aboriginal—are trapped in circumstances not of their own making, and he invites us to imagine the bewilderment and paranoia likely experienced by those living through rapid change on the colonial frontier. Most provocatively, Wilson frames the narrative from the perspective of Black Bill, a historically documented Indigenous Tasmanian who worked for Batman and assisted the settlers in their war against “his own” people. Black Bill provides access to the worlds of the settlers and their antagonists and challenges us to think of the frontier not only as a site of cruelty and oppression but also of exchange and transformation. Through him, Wilson shows us a moment in Australian history when other ways of living were possible as well as the violence that erased those possibilities.

Wilson’s fiction is significant for more than this rich evocation of context and character, however. By focusing on Australia’s early history, he has entered a contested field in which questions of who can write Aboriginal history—and how—continue to be debated. Since the 1990s Australia has experienced a series of public disputes, collectively referred to as “the history wars,” over the meaning of the colonial past for contemporary national identity.¹ Much of the argument has focused on the supposed moral character of the settlers and what their actions toward Indigenous Australians imply for the nation they founded. A key moment in this debate occurred in 2002, when conservative political commentator Keith Windschuttle published *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History*, a book which claims to prove that colonialism, especially in Van Diemen’s Land, was significantly less violent than

is generally believed. Windschuttle accused high profile historians of “fabricating” the past in order to promote a left-wing political agenda. The subsequent storm of protest, which was provoked especially by Windschuttle’s presentation of Indigenous Tasmanians as predatory savages and his refusal to accept the validity of any evidence pointing to the genocidal intentions of the settlers, resulted in substantial public discussion of Vandemonian history. As discussed in the interview below, this moment was an important inspiration for Wilson.

The controversy took a significant twist in 2005 when Kate Grenville published her Commonwealth Writers’ Prize-winning historical novel *The Secret River*, in which she explores the genocidal consequences of white settlement in New South Wales. During an interview, Grenville appeared to suggest that fiction is the best—because it is the most empathetic—forum for exploring the past, one better attuned to the complexities of history than the professional discipline itself (“Books and Writing”). A number of historians criticised her for this claim and derided her belief that the historical novel is an effective medium for disseminating knowledge of the past. For Mark McKenna, Grenville’s work demonstrates how fiction dulls the critical sting of “true” history and thus serves the interests of political conservatives. Likewise, Inga Clendinnen suggests that historical fiction offers a misleading promise of easy knowledge and sacrifices its claim to plausibility the moment it departs from archival rigour. This debate highlighted public disagreement over the content of Australian history and the proper means for its interpretation. All sides seemed motivated by an anxiety that other writers, particularly those of a rival political persuasion or those working in a different generic or disciplinary context, might corrupt the public’s understanding of the past.

This context means that Wilson’s historical fiction cannot be read in isolation from the highly contested discourses of national identity, post-colonial guilt, and historical truth. His work is at once a reflection on the events of the colonial frontier, the way those events are retold, and the meaning of those retellings for our identity as subjects of the historical imagination. Wilson followed his initial success by writing a second historical novel. His new book, *To Name Those Lost* (2014), is set in

Tasmania one generation after the events of *The Roving Party* and examines the island's social transformation after the close of the frontier. This continuity means the two novels can be read as an extended fictional reflection on nineteenth-century Australian history that prompts questions about the intersection of class, race, and gender in the production of colonial identity. Wilson asks us to consider what kind of knowledge is produced in the intersection of the documented and the invented in the historical novel.

Wilson has strong, distinctive views about the relationship between fictional imagination and historical truth, and the connection of both to debates about the colonial past. Over several months in 2013 Rohan and I exchanged correspondence about his work and discussed the intellectual, aesthetic, and political challenges of being a historical novelist in Australia.² What follows is a record of this conversation. It provides insight into the thoughts of an exciting new contributor to contemporary Australian literature and original reflections on some of the most important questions shaping that field.

What was your motivation for writing novels about Tasmanian/Vandemonian history?

Wilson: Robert Drewe wrote a book in the 1970s, *The Savage Crows*. It's about a middle-class white Australian who looks back into the history of Tasmania and discovers, for the first time, that sense of horror you have when you realise the scale of atrocities that went on down here. For that character, that horror pretty quickly develops into a sense of old-fashioned, hot-burning outrage. He starts ruining dinner parties with his white man's guilt, ruining his family life, alienating all the people around him who couldn't care less about what happened to the Palawa. I felt like Drewe must have written that book just for me. I went through a lot of what his character went through, and to be fair it is a common enough feeling for white Tasmanians like me. We live on Aboriginal land, and we know it.

So Kim Scott and Alexis Wright and all the other Aboriginal writers and poets have important business, extending the grand Aboriginal oral tradition into print and showing the world exactly what it is about

their respective cultures that has kept them strong through two hundred years of upheaval. But white writers have a more sombre task in front of them. We have to examine what it was about our culture that enabled the whole of society, from top to bottom, to turn itself towards genocide. We have to examine the parts of contemporary white culture that still bear traces of that disease of the heart and mind. I think that is what really drove the likes of Richard Flanagan and Kate Grenville and Drewe, and it certainly drove me too.

Does that sense of guilt explain why debate about the history of colonisation is so contested, and frequently so bitter?

Wilson: In 2002, I went to a session at the Tasmanian writer’s festival. Keith Windschuttle was there, Henry Reynolds too, Cassandra Pybus, Lyndall Ryan. All the most important historians of the Tasmanian past. At the time I had no idea about Windschuttle and what he’d stirred up with *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History*. So I showed up there and it was packed. The moment that Windschuttle took to the stage to speak the crowd began to murmur and shift in their seats. He talked about how these other historians on the panel had lied to us all. He said that the Tasmanians had been a culturally backward, barely human race that was already dying out when the whites arrived. There were some folk of Aboriginal descent in the audience and they were understandably agitated by this. It got heated; people yelled, people walked out. I thought, Wow, so this is what the past really means to people. I was hooked. I thought it fascinating. I wanted to know more and I wanted to be a part of the conversation. Fiction was the way for me to do that.

But the question that always stays with you is this: What was it about the frontier that drove people to massacre? Now, maybe there was no way to change what happened once colonisation was set in motion, and maybe it was a mindless mechanistic process like some historians will tell you. There are those like John Hirst who argue that, given the state of affairs in the nineteenth century, given the desire for grazing lands and the technological advantages the settlers had over the clans, and given the acutely racist attitudes that prevailed, bloodshed was always going to be unavoidable. While that may be the case, it seemed to me

that with men like John Batman, murder was always a choice made in a certain place and at a certain time. What I wanted to know was, what did it feel like to be in that place, at that time, and to make that choice? Would I have made the same choice? Am I a better man or a worse man than Batman? I still don't have an answer for that, but I suspect I have more in common with Batman than I care to acknowledge.

Do those questions make fiction a way for you to understand the past? Or is it rather a way to explore the past's significance for the present?

Wilson: Part of the problem is that we often want to equate what fiction writers do with what historians do. I think we can apply what Rudolf Bultmann said about myth to the practice of fiction. He believed that fiction and historiography were not only different ways of writing about the world, but different ways of perceiving it, and conceiving of it, too. In this sense, fiction is less about the past itself, and more about the human experience of the past, so much so that as Bultmann correctly identified it stops being an explanation at all and becomes an expression of our desire to experience the world or to know what it feels like to live in the world at different times. Bultmann realised that the effect of this was to universalise myth, to move it beyond the search for an objective picture of the world as it was. He thought that myth's function was not a search for historical veracity, in that sense, but a search for existential validity and I think the same thing applies to fiction.

One simple truth is that the understanding of the past you get through fiction belongs to a different order of knowledge than the understanding you get through historiography. I find fiction useful because it allows room to reimagine lost experiences, even if those experiences are necessarily flawed, limited, and fictional. That's not the kind of treatment of the past you deliver in historiography—treating it as a space for experiment and speculation. What I've written should never be called history. It's plainly fiction and it negotiates a very different ethical and epistemological relationship with the past.

Your decision to pursue an understanding of Tasmanian history through fiction seems slightly paradoxical, don't you think? After all, Windschuttle's

provocation was to accuse others of making up stories about the past and passing them off as truth—isn't that what historical novelists do of necessity?

Wilson: It might be paradoxical but that's because the nature of fiction itself is paradoxical. While it often appears to have a straightforward, transparent relationship to the world, to describe the real world as it exists, this is not really the case. Fiction is always doing so much more than simply sequencing the evidence of the past. It can simultaneously describe and poke holes in its own descriptions of the past through the use of irony. It can describe multiple sets of events with one description through the use of allegory, metaphor, or symbol. It can create whole topographies of the imagination and interweave them with facts. The moment that we believe fiction to be nothing more than a window into the past is the moment that we are at our most mystified, as Paul de Man would say, or our most naïve. I've always hoped that my writing went beyond naïve retellings by questioning what it means to be writing about the past at all, what it means to be a white writer appropriating a black voice, what it means to believe your writing can straightforwardly describe the past as it actually happened.

As for the word “truth,” I'm never really sure how useful that word is when talking about representing the past in a novel. Fiction writers go to a great deal of trouble to convince people that what we are telling them is the truth. If you stop believing in my story, it loses its power to generate emotion in you. So in that sense, I am very concerned that my stories can pass as the truth, or I should say to be as existentially valid as possible. I want them to be convincing for the time that you are reading them. If that means using known, established facts from history as a framework, then that's what I'll do. For critics and historians to turn around and accuse writers of trying to pass off their work as the truth seems to me a strange criticism. Fiction is powerful precisely because people believe it to be true.

The genre of the historical novel has been the object of public debate and anxiety in Australia in recent years. Most famously, historians castigated Kate Grenville for allegedly presenting fiction as a privileged mode of ac-

cessing the past—one superior to orthodox historical writing. What are your views about this debate?

Wilson: I think Kate's position has been misstated. She never said that she was writing history—it was much more nuanced than that. What she said was that she felt her fiction to be outside or above the history debates that take place, such as those between Reynolds and Windschuttle ("Books and Writing"). In saying that, she is right—fiction is not history. Fiction operates in a different realm. It is a different way of conceiving our relationship to the past. It has different rules, different standards, and different outcomes. It is, by definition, not a part of those historiographic debates. That's the point that Kate was trying to make, I think. There is clearly a distinction to be made between the mythopoeic ways of writing that we find in fiction and the philosophical ones common to historiography. They represent different conceptions of the world and different ways of explaining what it means to be human.

In fact, I would suggest that Inga Clendinnen, John Hirst, Mark McKenna, and all the others who chided Kate are making the same mistake for which they have so often chided other historians. It is the sin of self-projection, the sin of subjectivity. They are imposing their own concerns and requirements onto the established patterns of another culture. Fiction is not history. You cannot understand it by applying the cognitive models developed for historiography; you cannot assess it in the same way you would assess Robert Hughes' *The Fatal Shore* or Windschuttle's *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History*. You will inevitably end up with faulty conclusions, like the ones Clendinnen drew, if you do so.

But that debate was also indicative of a wider movement hoping to subsume the novel under the rubric of historiography. We're all partly to blame for it—readers, writers, reviewers. We all want to know how much research went into a book, how accurate it is. Writers are quick to talk this up because we know stories that are believable have more power than those that are not. Fiction is able to generate a sense of closeness to the past that is completely illusory, in the sense that you are no closer to the past at all, but nonetheless it is an illusion that is still very compel-

ling. On top of that, creative writing is an academic practice now, and it has to adopt the dominant ideas of the academy in order to be taken seriously. Of course, the dominant idea is history; economics, climatology, archaeology, astronomy, medicine, all disciplines must eventually look into the past and when they do, it is the historical method that controls the production of knowledge. Fiction is probably more susceptible to domination by the procedures of history than most, as we can see with the Grenville case.

But then again fiction also has a built-in defence against the overreach of the historical method. That is, it cannot be made to mean one thing and one thing only, the way historiography must. It always refuses a final reading, a final closure. We read in contexts that authors can never anticipate and in ways that they can never foresee. We read allegorically, ironically, and subjectively. We knock holes in the authority that authors have worked so hard to build. Their stories cannot stand up to the scrutiny that we apply. No story can ever stand up to this type of scrutiny because stories are not vehicles for historiographic accuracy, they are vehicles for human experience. Fiction is forced to face up to this, to deal with it. Novels like Richard Flanagan’s *Gould’s Book of Fish* have their genesis in the urge to face up to the flimsiness of language.

What do you mean by “human experience”?

Wilson: I would define it, in a circular way, as the stuff you find between the covers of a good novel. It’s the stuff we live everyday—the everydayness of life. The draining of mutton fat into a dish to make a slush lamp, like Grenville did. The thoughts that arrive as we smell the smoke. The pain we feel when we snuff out the wick with our fingers. Human experience is always at the centre of fiction and I think it’s important that writers stake out this ground as the province of fiction. Historians will inevitably dismiss as nonsense any suggestion that fiction has a monopoly over depicting human experiences, and to some extent that is true. They are scouting this terrain as well, sorting through the actions and motivations of people in the past. But that kind of dismissal is also symptomatic of the appetite that history has as a totalising form of knowledge. We see it time and time again: the

moment that fictioneers attempt to wall off a space for their practice, a realm beyond the reach of the historiographic method, the historians and reviewers and critics arrive and begin to question the value of material that hasn't properly adopted the procedures of historiography. John Coetzee once said that the position of supplementarity is the default position assigned to the novel, and I think he was right. Fiction is generally comprehended by historians, and perhaps by many fictioneers too, as the lesser cousin of history and as a supplement to the real work which is done by historians.

When *The Roving Party* came out, an article in *The Australian* followed soon afterwards that examined the historical events referred to in the novel, to see how my book held up (Romei). This was repeated a fortnight later when another article titled "The Truth about John Batman: Melbourne's Founder and 'Murderer of the Blacks'" (Clements) appeared on the academic website *theconversation.com*. While these articles were broadly supportive of my representations, they also reminded me of the enormous hunger that historians have for controlling where and how and why we talk about the past. In their view, material that falls outside a certain narrow set of standards is misleading and therefore dangerous. They want to police fiction as a practice to make sure that nothing untoward is going over there. That's why I feel novelists should insist very strongly that we have a monopoly over human experience, as an area that is outside the jurisdiction of historiography. Why not just let fictioneers speculate about what it was like to live on the colonial frontier without attempting to control, to limit, to ridicule those speculations? After all, it is territory that history as a practice has prevented itself from entering. But it seems that a few historians are not content with controlling how the evidenced past is viewed; they also want to control our speculations on what it may have been like as well.

You seem to feel that the tendency for readers to treat fiction as an authoritative discourse stems partly from authors' own desires to be accurate and grounded in evidence. Do you include yourself in that description? How important is it for you to base your exploration of "human experience" in the archive?

Wilson: As I mentioned, fiction has a very different way of approaching the evidentiary material. It is searching for existential validity more than historical veracity, and that means it negotiates a very different relationship to the evidence. When people treat fiction as authoritative, they need to be aware not to confuse existential validity with historical accuracy. Sometimes those things may line up, but more often they do not. Insofar as the evidence helps me to illustrate a state of affairs in a more believable or more interesting way, then I will follow it. But by its nature, the evidence of the past is fragmentary, incomplete, and difficult to decipher. Generally there is no evidence at all for the most basic things I require. Take a character like William “Black Bill” Ponsonby, for example. It seems probable that he actually existed, that he joined the roving party at Batman’s invitation, that he lived nearby to Batman, and that he married an Aboriginal woman named Catherine. There are some accounts of his behaviour, including an account of his part in the capture of the bushranger Thomas Jeffries and a description of his refusal to participate in the gang rape of a female homesteader.

The question is, what does it mean for me to make use of these accounts in my fiction? Does it make the Black Bill I write about “true” if I follow them? Even given this evidence, I still know practically nothing about how Bill as a person lived, acted, thought, or spoke. The moment I describe his appearance or make him speak I have entered, from a historiographic point of view, the realm of the speculative. Of course, the fact that fiction is able to convince you that the Bill I write about *did* exist in just the way I describe is paradoxical. It does give fiction a kind of authority, but that authoritativeness and that accuracy should not really be compared to what we normally find in historiography. It is of a different order entirely. Fiction’s first loyalty is always to character and human experience.

There is an emerging trend towards using author’s notes as a place to delineate the evidence-based from the purely speculative, and I think it is a reaction to exactly this kind of confusion. Kim Scott makes extensive use of the author’s note, and so too Tom Kenneally, Roger MacDonald, Grenville, Flanagan, and a large number of others. Instinctually, they want to fence off their fiction from the body of historiography which

they draw on and they do that by stating as clearly as they can that, while fiction makes use of historical sources, it is not history and should not be read as history. Yet, it's an inescapable conclusion that author's notes are part of the problem as well. They are a perfect illustration of how much influence the historiographic method has begun to exert over fiction, so much so that we now think it normal and proper to cite references.

Really good, really clever fiction always reveals the great irony that when writing history, the “real past” or the events themselves do not enter the equation. The past is lost, and like Keith Jenkins said the only thing that can ever be at issue is what we learn or reconstruct from the evidentiary material. That's not to say that the past is a phantasm or a hallucination—it was clearly real—but to point out that it can only enter the debate rhetorically and theoretically, never on its own terms, never as an observable or repeatable phenomenon. This is what good fiction always shows us. It's an essential counter-weight for the excesses of historical practice, in particular for the notion that there's one single unifiable truth “out there” that we can reach if we write rigorously and scientifically.

The Roving Party is set during the later stages of the frontier war in Van Diemen's Land, at a time when the settlers are trying to hunt down Indigenous fighters and break their resistance. Your characters are, for the most part, men engaged in extreme violence—men who enjoy inflicting pain. Why did you choose this moment, and these events, for your focus?

Wilson: I was hoping to achieve a number of outcomes with the novel, but foremost in my mind were the following three issues. Firstly, Batman obviously embodies many of the characteristics common to the mindset of the frontiersman. Since he lived on the frontier, had a young family, and had established relationships with Aborigines from the mainland and from Tasmania, his story seemed to me to provide an ideal framework for exploring the nature of the frontier, and of frontier life, during the Black War. That was always the primary motivation during the drafting of the novel—getting down a picture of the way Batman and his men lived, and through that, hopefully, some insight into what the war was about.

Secondly, I wanted to write about the racism that seemed to me, from reading primary and secondary sources, one of the biggest enabling factors of the violence. Fiction generally doesn't do racism well because racism tends to render characters unsympathetic. I wanted to see if I could capture a sense of the overt, extreme racism that was commonplace at the time, without descending into caricature. Again, using Batman's roving party as a framework allowed me this opportunity.

Thirdly, I found the make-up of Batman's roving party, as I read through the evidence, to be extraordinary. It was a mix of assigned convicts from various parts of Britain, tribal Aborigines from New South Wales, and one local Aboriginal Tasmanian. As a group of men, they were illustrative of the Frederick Jackson Turner conception of the frontier as a place not only where Europeans and Indigenes clashed, but where they met, intermixed, and formed something altogether new. It was a peculiarly Vandemonian group of men.

Your novel is about a war, but your protagonist isn't really sure which side he's on. Black Bill is an Indigenous Tasmanian, but he's been raised by settlers and helps them kill and capture their enemies. This position means he can see across the conflict, understanding both sides in a way that other characters can't—rather like the “wavering” heroes of Walter Scott, as theorised by Georg Lukács in The Historical Novel. Can you talk a bit about Black Bill and his role in your novel?

Wilson: I think “wavering” is the perfect way to describe him, although I don't know if you could call him heroic. The thing about Bill that I hoped to get across was his position as one of the first of a new kind of Tasmanian, a man who was as equally at ease among the clans as he was among the Europeans. There were quite a few others like him, in particular the bushranger Musquito, who was an Eora man brought to Tasmania when the Norfolk Island prison camp closed down, and various others taken as children and raised by settlers, the original stolen generation. Men who spoke English, who dressed as Europeans, who were de-tribalised, but who nevertheless maintained strong links to the local clans. They represent the very beginnings of contemporary Aboriginal identity, that kind of cosmopolitanism of being fluent and

comfortable in various cultures. There is a good deal of historical evidence for Bill, most of which paints him as independent, hard-living, violent, and yet also it seemed he was a loving man who married his wife Catherine, who was also Aboriginal, at St John's church in Launceston.

The hardest decision to make with Bill was to decide how he would have seen himself. He was raised by James Cox, one of the wealthiest settlers in the north at that time. He lived near and worked with Batman. He participated in expeditions to capture bushrangers and expeditions to capture and kill Aborigines. But none of that evidence tells us what he believed or how he perceived himself. Would he have still held a Palawa worldview? Or, given that he was raised by the Coxes, would he have been Christianised? Ultimately, it served my purposes in the narrative to have him more strongly identify with the settlers, and that was the path I ended up taking. The result was a character who felt deeply conflicted but couldn't be honest enough with himself to understand why. His wife tries to point it out to him a number of times, but the message just doesn't get through. Manalargena is the only one who can really make Bill think about himself.

You mention Manalargena, the leader of the Palawa resistance. He is probably the most "heroic" figure in your novel—and the most sympathetic. Yet by focusing on Black Bill we get a complex and ambiguous image of Manalargena, one that straddles both settler and Indigenous perspectives and takes seriously that "Palawa worldview." Can you talk about Manalargena and your representation of what Reynolds calls "the other side of the frontier"?

Wilson: Manalargena is regarded as a patriarchal figure in Aboriginal history, a kind of founding father of the modern identity. Many in the community today are descended directly from him. So I wanted to treat him as this colossus that walks into the narrative and takes over, like a living legend. I wanted him to command respect. That's one of the aspects of his personality that comes out very strongly in the historical material about him, that he had the deep respect of the clans. He would sit all night telling stories about battles he'd fought or acting them out. He probably loved the sound of his own voice a bit too much. He was also in touch with the unseen parts of the Aboriginal world and was

what the mainland clans probably would have called a cleverman. In particular, he believed his arm was possessed by a kind of demon or spirit that would talk to him and give him insights.

The difficult part is in trying to pin down exactly what Manalargena might have believed about the world. When George Augustus Robinson described the beliefs of the Aborigines, it was always in terms of paganism. You know, devils, spirits, witches. The historical records fail us badly on this point. Their worldview can never be meaningfully reconstructed. Writers have tried in fiction, most notably Colin Johnson. But his vision of Aboriginal beliefs was a mish-mash of Buddhism, Noongar, with a bit of that Robinsonian paganism thrown in as well. It was never meant to be authentically Tasmanian, and it never was. It never could be. So I decided from the very start to just hint at that broader universe that Manalargena represents. Use Palawa-kani [Indigenous Tasmanian language], use some of the more reliable parts of Robinson’s accounts, use some recent historiography by historians like Aunty Patsy Cameron and James Boyce. It felt more respectful that way. I thought it would be enough for the reader to get just a glimpse of what it might have been like and let their imaginations take over from there. I never had any intention of giving that deep immersion in an Aboriginal world in the way that Johnson did, or Alexis Wright does today.

Given this interest in exploring the complexities of the frontier, the focus of your new book might be considered a little surprising. It is set in Tasmania a generation later than The Roving Party, after the Indigenous population has been defeated and expelled from the mainland. Yet the island remains a brutal, violent place. Is that violence a legacy of colonialism? Are we seeing the consequences of colonialism in the form of a damaged masculinity?

Wilson: My writing process always begins with questions. When I finished *The Roving Party*, I still found myself troubled by some aspects of Tasmania’s past and the implications it had for the present. What had happened to the frontiersmen and the veterans of the Black War once the war had ended? What kind of citizens could they have become, given their history of violence? The land appropriated from the clans had been transformed into a place where these people lived largely free

from government interference, and I wanted to find out what sort of community the ex-convicts had created in the areas around Launceston and the north. The frontiersmen had lived rough, anarchic lives, and I believed that their communities might have reflected that.

Over time the northern districts became a frontier for a new kind of system—the capitalist society—which was jarringly different from the penal settlement that preceded it. Men like Thomas Toosey, a character I carried over from *The Roving Party*, were ticket-of-leavesmen who had been an integral part of the Tasmanian genocide and the colonisation of the island and began to settle into an independent lifestyle after the end of the war. But that kind of independence would have become harder to maintain as the century wore on, especially when the rollout of rail lines brought an influx into the northern districts and tenancy farming began to boom. When the Launceston and Western Railway Company collapsed in 1873, the state government imposed a levy on every citizen living near the Launceston-Deloraine line in order to fund a bail-out—an action that announced the emergence of the new age of capitalism on the island. While familiar enough to us today, at the time a bail-out was considered so radical that it caused rioting and other acts of civil disobedience in Launceston and the outlying districts. These competing forces, old and new, anarchic and capitalist, are embodied in the characters of Thomas Toosey and his sworn enemy, the Irish transportee Fitheal Flynn.

The race-based violence of the frontier becomes the class-based violence of colonial society? History repeating itself in new forms, with the underlying “human experience” left unchanged?

Wilson: Yes, I think that’s something very like what I had in mind. Class-based violence was always there in Tasmania, of course, in the institutionalised violence of the penal system. In fact, it was one of the foundational experiences for the majority of the early Tasmanians. One of the unique aspects of the Tasmanian experience is how that class-based violence became a source of the race-based violence as the brutalised convict men took every opportunity to then brutalise Aboriginal Tasmanians.

The violence of the Launceston riots was of a slightly different character. It came a generation or two later, so while you still had the presence of that foundational violence in the form of ex-convicts involved, you also had a new type of person, the free-born, democratic people who saw the state government as tyrannical and corrupt. The riots mark the emergence of a more recognisably modern consciousness in Tasmania. There was a lot of dissatisfaction with the cosy relationships big business shared with the government. Often it was exactly the same people—business owners in positions of power, wealthy men buying their way into office. People were understandably worried about the effect that would have on democracy. The collapse of the LWR Company and the subsequent government intervention would have confirmed the worst fears of many people. They quite rightly took to the streets to protest what they saw.

Rohan, thank you very much for sharing your thoughts. Best of luck with the new book and projects to come.

Notes

1 See MacIntyre and Clarke.

2 This interview was conducted with the approval of the Human Research Ethics Committee of the Australian National University. It was edited collaboratively by Dalley and Wilson; additional edits made by *ARIEL*.

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