Introduction

Alex Miller: The Ruin of Time is the first sole-authored critical survey of Miller’s novels as a complete body of work. In the absence, as yet, of a definitive biography or autobiography, my approach has been to devote a chapter to each of the novels in turn, placing them briefly in their relevant biographical and historical contexts, describing the people, circumstances and sources that inspired them, and offering interpretations that are intended to be thorough and well informed though not in any sense definitive: a reliable and stimulating point of reference, it is hoped, for future critical conversations. I have attempted to illustrate the wide scope and complexity of Miller’s subject matter, and his abiding aesthetic and ethical preoccupations in each of the novels while also attending to the rich network of connections, both formal and thematic, that exists between them. Readers who require a more detailed account of Miller’s life can turn to my earlier edited volume, The Novels of Alex Miller: An Introduction, which includes a chronology, an introductory essay placing Miller’s novels in the context of his life and describing their major themes, and an autobiographical memoir, “The Mask of Fiction”.1

In thinking about my approach and responsibilities in writing this book, I was aware that Miller has had a good deal to say about the relationships between art, literary fiction and criticism, both in the novels and in his published essays. In The Ancestor Game, for example, the Melbourne writer Steven Muir is introduced to the artist Gertrude Spiess, who is soon to hold an exhibition of her work at the Falls Gallery in Richmond. She shows Steven an “extended essay in biography and criticism” that has just appeared in a fashionable Melbourne art magazine:

The article posed as scholarly, but possessed none of the enthusiasm and generosity one hopes to find in a work of scholarship. It was disappointing. It lacked an ardent desire to share understanding, to bring lucidly before the reader certain precious results of a search for knowledge. It was, in fact, little more than a promotion for a one-woman exhibition of Gertrude’s drawings, which was to be mounted later in the year at a Richmond gallery. There was, however, another, more concealed, meaning to the text, evident in certain passages: “The merging of different motif areas in her drawings and the transformation of spatial relationships into flat correspondences gathers towards a distortion of depicted

reality and the dissolution of its phenomenal form”. I didn’t try to reach the sense of this. I understood the point of it was to transpose the locus of authority from the works to the discussion of the works. The writer had assumed the role of validating authority for the images he discussed. In order to do this he had been required to transform what he saw with his eyes into ideologies that he could “see” with his intellect.2

“Enthusiasm”, “generosity”, an “ardent desire to share understanding”; to bring “lucidly” before the reader the results of one’s research; to avoid the temptation of transferring the focus from “the works to the discussion of the works”; these are worthy and challenging goals for an academic critic setting out to write an “extended essay in biography and criticism”. In the light of Miller’s own frequent comparisons between writing and art, I am drawn to the idea of curatorship as a way to think about the responsibility literary critics have toward creative writers. My aim in this book has been to convey what my colleague Pat Buckridge would call an informed appreciation of Miller’s novels,3 and while my readings are certainly informed by critical and cultural theory, even to the point of setting out to demonstrate how richly the novels answer to the interests of contemporary theory, I have tried to avoid their being theoretically overdetermined.

Central to Miller’s work is the importance of friendship, hospitality and gift exchange, both as themes in the novels themselves, and as part of Miller’s understanding of the conditions of their creative production. The American critic Ronald A. Sharp, who has himself written a book about friendship in contemporary fiction, argues that his understanding of the gift is “Miller’s central trope . . . for . . . defining act[s] of friendship and . . . artistic creation”2 Miller has told the story many times of how he came to write his first published work of fiction: it has acquired the status of an originary event in his career. Miller has said that while he had been a storyteller from early childhood, it took many years before he found his ”authentic material” A key to this was the wise counsel of his friend, Max Blatt, whom Miller recalls as “a central European intellectual of the kind J.P. Stern and W.G. Sebald write about with such beautiful nostalgic elegance”. Max interpreted European literature and philosophy to him in a way that he had not encountered at university in Melbourne in the 1960s, and helped him to find his vocation as a writer. At his farm in the Araluen Valley near Goulburn, where he lived between 1968 and 1974, Miller wrote three manuscripts, which he describes as his “pre-novels”. Max would come up to visit by train from Melbourne, staying for a week at a time.

On one of Max’s visits, Miller presented him with a 400-page novel in manuscript, which he read through the day and into the early evening. Miller recalls: “I was woken by the thump of the 400 pages landing beside my head. I sprang up. Max was lighting a cigarette. With a mixture of disappointment, frustration and regret, he said, ‘Why don’t you write about something you love?’ ” And then an exchange took place between the two men that resonates throughout Miller’s novels. That night, Max told Miller the story of his own escape from an anti-Semitic attack in Poland at the beginning of the war. Miller did not sleep, but wrote his own, fictional version of the story, which he gave to Max to read the next morning: “When he finished reading it, he said with feeling, ‘You could have been

2 Alex Miller, The Ancestor Game (Ringwood, Vic.: Penguin, 1992), 18–19.
there, and embraced me.” The result was the short story, “Comrade Pawel”, which is set on the outskirts of Warsaw on the eve of the Nazi invasion in 1939.

This sharing of a personal story foreshadows the way Steven Muir reworks Gertrude Spiess’ translation of her father’s diaries in The Ancestor Game; it foreshadows the way the portrait painter’s creativity is revived by his encounter with Jessica Keal in The Sitters, and again when Toni Powlett first speaks of his father’s death to Marina Golding during their picnic on Bream Island in Prochownik’s Dream; it prefigures Max Otto’s writing up of Dougald Gnapun’s oral account of his ancestor’s military leadership in Landscape of Farewell; and it is echoed nearly forty years later in the novelist’s appropriation of John Pattern’s story in Lovesong. Friendship, hospitality and literary hospitality, or intertextuality, are fundamental to Miller’s thinking about the art of fiction. Other friendships, other artistic collaborations that are important to understanding his work, and to which I will return in this book, include his friendships with the Melbourne artists Rick Amor, Lyndell Brown, Charles Green, Allan O’Hoy and Patrick Pound; the poet and Overland editor Barrett Reid; and Miller’s circle of Indigenous friends and collaborators, including the Jangga elder Col McLennan and his partner, Liz Hatte, the Barada elder Frank Budby, and the writer Anita Heiss.

It is one of the laws of friendship, as Jacques Derrida has shown, that one friend will always be left to mourn the death of the other, and that friendship is a form of a priori mourning. In their introduction to Derrida’s eulogies for his own friends who have died, beginning with the death of Roland Barthes in 1980, Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas suggest how the oeuvre of a writer becomes, with the passing of time, a memorial to friendship and an ongoing work of mourning:

By gathering these works of mourning – by incorporating them – into a single volume, we hope to make even more apparent the ways in which the oeuvre or corpus of Derrida has, to cite Proust . . . come to resemble “a huge cemetery in which on the majority of tombs the names are effaced and can no longer be read,” a cemetery where some of the names are nonetheless still legible because of these acts of mourning and friendship, even if these names mask or refer to others that have long been obscured. We will ultimately be asking, therefore, about the encryption of names and friends in an oeuvre, about the way in which an oeuvre does not simply grow larger, but thickens with time, ages, comes to have time written across it, becomes wrinkled, furrowed, or folded, its volume worked over like a landscape, or indeed, like a cemetery.

In one of his most recent public addresses, The Gifford Memorial Lecture, given at Vassar College in 2013, Miller has spoken about this “thickening” of his work over time, and the work of mourning for friends and family who have died. Three names, in particular, are singled out for memorialisation: Max Blatt, Allan O’Hoy and Barrett Reid. Miller’s first published work of fiction, the short story “Comrade Pawel”, was literally a gift of friendship – and a citation – from the life of his friend Max Blatt. His first written, though second published novel, The Tivington Nott, is dedicated “in loving memory of my father”. The An-

Ancestor Game is again dedicated “for Ruth & Max Blatt”, and was written as a memorial to the life of Miller’s friend, the painter Allan O’Hoy, who committed suicide in 1982: “Writing people back into the record is something I have often found myself doing.” The initial inspiration for Conditions of Faith was Miller’s reading of his mother’s diary for 1923, written before her marriage at a time when she was living in France, and sent to him in Melbourne by his brother Ross after Winifred’s death in 1994: she appears in the novel as Marie, the young niece of George and Emily Elder’s landlady, Madame Barbier. Autumn Laing begins with a quotation from W.B. Yeats: “New Year’s Day 1991. They are all dead and I am old and skeleton gaunt.” Autumn’s voice, Miller explains, came from his love for another dead friend, the poet Barrett Reid, whom he met at Heide in 1990, who appears in the novel as Barnaby Green. Miller has said that “the voice of Autumn Laing . . . is really in the spirit of Barrett Reid, not biographically, but in the spirit of his energies and determinations . . . his passion for getting the truth out and for his generosity”. “My life is full of dead friends”, Miller writes: “At my age that is not unusual.”

During the late 1990s and early 2000s, the relationship between the writing and publication of Miller’s novels, and their biographical sources and contexts, became quite complicated. After travelling to China in 1987–88 and the critical breakthrough with The Ancestor Game in 1992, The Sitters in 1995 reflects Miller’s increasing engagement with Melbourne’s art scene, especially his friendship with Rick Amor. To that extent it forms part of a sequence of novels that constitutes one of the most sustained and insightful examples of ekphrasis, or writing about art, in all of Australian literature. They are The Ancestor Game (1992), The Sitters (1995), Prochownik’s Dream (2005) and Autumn Laing (2011). The writing and publishing histories of this sequence, however, were interrupted by another, the Central Queensland novels: Watching the Climbers on the Mountain (1988), Journey to the Stone Country (2002), Landscape of Farewell (2007) and Coal Creek (2013). In 1997 Miller visited Liz Hatte and met Col McLennan in Townsville, and in 2000 he travelled with them to the Central Highlands, where he met Frank Budby; these friends were the inspiration for Annabelle Beck, Bo Rennie and Dougald Gnapan in Journey to the Stone Country and Landscape of Farewell. These two major sequences, which reflect what Miller himself has described as the two apparently separate hemispheres of his Australian life, the one rural and regional, the other urban and cosmopolitan, were in turn interrupted by Conditions of Faith (2000) and Lovesong (2009), which are themselves connected in having women protagonists and by their sources in Miller’s experiences in Paris and Tunisia.

Miller has said that when he first began to draw upon his memories as the source of fiction while writing The Tivington Nott, he felt like an archaeologist beginning to excavate “a buried city of great complexity.” The architectural metaphor indicates the extraordinary complexity with which some of his individual novels are designed, especially The Ancestor Game and Autumn Laing, but also the many intricate connections between the novels, which require that his readers come to see them, cumulatively and progressively, as a coherent body of work. Wherever possible in this book I have sought to capture not only the

9 Alex Miller, “This Is How It’s Going to Be Then”, Australian Book Review, no. 127 (1990): 30. In “Constructions in Analysis” (1937), Freud suggests that the work of the analyst “resembles . . . an archaeologist’s excavation of some dwelling-place that has been destroyed or buried or of some ancient edifice”. Quoted in Vilashini Cooppan, Worlds Within: National Narratives and Global Connections in Postcolonial Writing (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 295.
intricate internal design of Miller's individual novels but also this architecture that links them together as a body of work, an oeuvre, a coherent intellectual and aesthetic project—a life's work. Often the relationships between the novels are chiastic or mirror images, as in the relations between Conditions of Faith and Lovesong. Emily Elder travels from Paris to Tunisia in quest of her professional identity, which is interrupted when she becomes pregnant to a priest, while Sabiha travels from Tunisia to Paris, where she feels incomplete until she becomes pregnant to Bruno Fiorentino, while her eventual journey to her husband's home in Australia completes the mirror image of Emily's journey from Melbourne to Paris and Tunisia.

Names, dates and snippets of conversation recur throughout Miller's novels, not only joining one with the others, but also connecting the body of fiction to its sources in Miller's life. Max Otto and Alex Miller, for example, were both born in 1936, while Max Blatt and Miller's father, "Jock" Millar, were both born in 1907. Autumn Laing casts aside Edith Black's beautiful impressionist painting in 1937, the same year that Lang Tzu destroys his grandfather's mirror and book of the ancestors: the near-identity of their names is surely intentional. The Ancestor Game and Victoria Feng's fictional book, The Winter Visitor, both have 302 pages. The name of Miller's mother, Winifred Croft, is given to the young English stockman, Robert Crofts, in Watching the Climbers on the Mountain, and to Max Otto's dead wife, Winifred Otto in Landscape of Farewell, while Marie, Emily's daughter in Conditions of Faith, is the name of the dead wife of the novelist, Ken, in Lovesong. Max Blatt's statement to Miller after reading "Comrade Pawel" ("You could have been there") is repeated by Lang Tzu after reading Steven's account of his birth in Hangzhou in The Chronicle of the Fengs, and by Dougal Gnapun in response to Max Otto's account of his great grandfather's armed resistance to the settlers in Landscape of Farewell. Poignantly, the dying words of Sabiha's father, "It will be alright when Sabiha gets here", echo Miller's mother's words before her death in England in 1994, "It will be alright when Alex gets here". The topography of personal relationships and of creativity established in the relationships between Ward Rankin's enclosed study, Ida's bedroom, and the men's quarters in the early novel Watching the Climbers on the Mountain, is echoed in the layout of the cabins aboard the Kairos in Conditions of Faith, the gazebo in the garden at Coppin Grove where Victoria writes her book, The Winter Visitor, in The Ancestor Game, and the location of Toni Powlett's studio across the courtyard from his wife Teresa's kitchen in Prochownik's Dream. Enclosed spaces like Ward Rankin's study, Captain Anderson's map room, and the valleys of the Barle and the Exe in The Tivington Nott, and of Ranna Creek in Journey to the Stone Country, all places of containment, exhaustion and failure, contrast with the horizons and open vistas seen elsewhere in the landscape, or with the routes of the characters' journeys, their "voyages out" to new, more productive relationships and new worlds. These are just some of the signs of Miller's "buried city of great complexity", which readers of his novels will continue to discover as they begin their own excavations. These tiny but deliberate repetitions in the oeuvre, like the warp and weft of a fabric, are the clues to its larger design and patterns.

10 The inconsistent spelling was a consequence of clerical error.
11 Alex Miller, "In the End It Was Teaching Writing", Australian Literary Review 3, no. 2 (2008): 17.
My title, *The Ruin of Time*, is meant to capture Miller’s pervasive awareness of historical change, of the human experience of being-in-time. Its most conspicuous manifestation is the disappearance of established worlds and the people who live in them, including the wartime London of his boyhood, the traditional rural society of Somerset that had survived into the postwar years, the apparently failed project of settler colonialism in Australia, with its projection of vast pastoral enterprises into Aboriginal lands, and the remnants of the Qing Dynasty, which survived the European presence in Shanghai and Hangzhou until the second Japanese invasion of 1937. The most visible emblem of being-in-time is the unconserved ruin: Huang’s dilapidated traditional house in Hangzhou and his grandson Lang Tzu’s equally dilapidated boom-era mansion in Coppin Grove, Hawthorn; the termite-eaten remains of Ranna Station; the stone playgrounds of the Jangga at Mount Bulgonunna; the ruins of Verbena Station; and the burial cave of Gnapan at the summit of the Expedition Range. The presence there of his skeleton, his mortal remains, is a poignant reminder that the human body is also one of the ruins of time, as evidenced by Steven Muir’s sense of the vulnerability of his friend Lang’s damaged face, the ulcerous skin of the dying Theo Schwartz in *Prochownik’s Dream*, and the aged body of the once beautiful debutante, Autumn Laing.

Miller’s powerful and memorable images of the ruin of time include the dribbling hour-glass of debris suspended over the dining table at Ranna and the debris stuffed into a hole in the floorboards of Panya’s cottage at Mount Coolon, but also the cold air that blows across the ruined body of Theo Schwartz after his stroke, and the “powerful wind” into which the figure of her father bends in Nada Powlett’s sketch of the running man. Miller calls this “the rush of time”, while W.G. Sebald describes it as “the Rings of Saturn”, the gravitational field that catches up the debris of cosmic catastrophes. Walter Benjamin called it the storm of progress:

> A Klee painting named “Angelus Novus” shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.14

As with Benjamin’s angel of history, the characters in Miller’s novels can only look backwards, not forwards in time. At the beginning of *The Ancestor Game*, *Journey to the Stone Country* and *Landscape of Farewell*, Steven Muir, Annabelle Beck and Max Otto each see their past self-reflected back at them in the mirror as if they are looking back from the future self they are already in the process of becoming; but the Becks and the Bigges cannot

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12 I am indebted to Brigid Rooney, “The Ruin of Time and the Temporality of Belonging”, in *The Novels of Alex Miller*, 201–16.
see from Ranna Station in the mid-nineteenth century into the future that Annabelle Beck inhabits: her modern Australia – our Australia – is their future, but not one that they could have imagined or would have wanted for themselves.

While Miller has received high praise for the technical mastery of his storytelling, and the transparent and often lyrical ease of his writing, one of the central arguments of this book is that we are only now beginning to see the complexity and self-reflexiveness that lies just beneath that apparently realistic surface. This is nowhere more obvious than in the novels’ rich intertextuality, which enhances both the drama of character and the drama of ideas. Miller has been read too quickly, too transparently as a realist. His characters exist in and come to life through a rich fabric of metafictional devices, and historical and intertextual allusions: indeed, they often communicate with each other through intertextuality. Here is an example from Autumn Laing. It takes place in the library at Old Farm, where Miller’s characters are surrounded by the books and paintings that are an integral part of their conversations. Autumn has been reading to Pat Donlon from Oscar Wilde’s The Critic as Artist. The book lay “face down in her lap”, as if the reader were required to notice its title and to ponder its significance. Wilde’s The Critic as Artist is a dramatic dialogue that takes place in the library of a house in Piccadilly, overlooking London’s Green Park. Gilbert and Ernest represent different aspects of the relationship – we might say, using one of Miller’s own terms, the collaboration – between the critical and creative faculties, as do Autumn and Pat in Miller’s novel. When Ernest speaks appreciatively of the current vogue for memoirs and biographies, Gilbert cuttingly remarks that “every great man nowadays has his disciples, and it is always Judas who writes the biography”. “Cheap editions of great books may be delightful”, Gilbert declares, “but cheap editions of great men are absolutely detestable”. When Ernest asks, “to whom do you allude?”, Gilbert replies:

Oh! To all our second-rate litterateurs. We are overrun by a set of people who, when poet or painter passes away, arrive at the house along with the undertaker . . . They are the mere body-snatchers of literature. The dust is given to one, and the ashes to another, and the soul is out of their reach.

We are reminded here of Adeli Heartstone’s arrival at Old Farm on 1 January 1991:

She . . . parked her car by the front door then walked around the side, coming through the rhododendrons to the back door as if she was one of our old group . . .

“Who are you?” I asked . . . She has the ruthlessness of a scavenger . . . I know them, the scavengers. They feed off our flesh before we’re dead . . .

“I’m the one who’s writing your biography”, she said . . . Breathless with self-esteem.

Adeli is one of Wilde’s literary “body-snatchers”. But so, we must conclude, is the novelist Alex Miller, for despite the transparent fiction of his “Editor’s note” and the invention of Professor Heartstone, it is he who is writing a fictionalised biography of Sunday Reed and

15 Alex Miller, Autumn Laing (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2011), 317.
17 Miller, Autumn Laing, 4–5.
Sidney Nolan, the great painter for whom he has had a life-long admiration. As I hope to demonstrate in subsequent chapters, Miller’s readers must also be alert to the implications of his allusions to Carson McCullers’ *Reflections in a Golden Eye* in *Watching the Climbers on the Mountain*; to Edward, Duke of York’s *The Master of Game* in *The Twisting Nott*; to Henry Adams’ *Chartres* and Samuel Smiles’ *The Lives of the Engineers in Conditions of Faith*; to his references to works by Rembrandt, Salvador Dali, Pierre Bonnard and Walter Sickert in *The Sitters* and *Prochownik’s Dream*; to Arthur Rimbaud’s poem, “Un Saison en Enfer”; and Guy de Maupassant’s novel *Une vie* in *Autumn Laing*; and to Rolfe Boldrewood’s *Robbery Under Arms* and Herman Melville’s *Billy Budd, Sailor* in *Coal Creek*.

The largest of Miller’s novels – the largest, that is, not just in their length and scope, but also in the complexity of their biographical and historical source material – are historical novels in the classic sense of that term described by one of Miller’s benchmark critics, Georg Lukács. That is to say, they use a fictional protagonist to provide a window on to the larger canvas in the history or culture of a period. As Geordie Williamson has rightly said, Miller’s novels are at their most engaging when they expose “the clasp between reality and invention”. Although Miller has been widely recognised for his subtle creation of character and his intimate exploration of the ethics of cross-cultural relationships, he has not been as well recognised for the substantial intellectual achievement of his most ambitious novels, which offer formidably original historical interpretations of global modernity in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries in its various vectors of migration, war, colonialism and global commerce. In some of the novels, including *Conditions of Faith* and *Autumn Laing*, this is combined with the classic forms of the *bildungsroman* and the *kunstlerroman*, in which the individual character undergoes a maturity or development in their personal or professional life. As Elizabeth McMahon argues in a passage I will have need to cite more than once in this book, Miller’s achievement is that his novels move so effortlessly from the abstract to the concrete, from the historical or the philosophical to the fictional: they negotiate “the leap from the abstraction of metaphor into the grounded realities of history and culture – and back again”.

In Miller’s novels, the relations between individual characters and their historical circumstances are rarely static, but often involve them in journeys across space, time, culture, or social class – or all of these categories at once. His characters are all engaged in quests and journeys, but as McMahon again points out, these quests typically involve not just a journey from one place or state of being to another, but a *double* displacement, a pattern of migration or journeying to one destination or state of mind that has then to be disrupted again or doubled by a further journey, often into the homeland or the heartland of the other. In this way, Lang travels from Hangzhou to Shanghai and then on to Melbourne, while Steven migrates from England to Melbourne and then, through his imaginative engagement with Lang’s history, to Shanghai; August Spiess travels from Hamburg to Shanghai, and then to Melbourne; Emily Stanton marries and moves to Paris, but then travels to Tunisia; Annabelle Beck returns from Melbourne to Townsville, but then

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20 McMahon, “Continental Heartlands and Alex Miller’s Geosophical Imaginary”, in *The Novels of Alex Miller*, 125–6.
21 McMahon, “Continental Heartlands”, 129.
goes on to Central Queensland with Bo Rennie, while Max Otto travels from Hamburg to Mount Nebo, but then goes on a final journey with Dougald to the Expedition Range; Sabiha travels from Tunisa to Paris, and eventually to her husband’s home in Australia.

In exploring the links between individual characters and wider social forces, Miller also has a recurring philosophical interest in the relation between human agency and social determination, between the individual and what he has called the “vast impersonal forces of culture and history”. Miller is well read not only in history but also in philosophy. In the first edition of The Ancestor Game, the problem of the relation between individual agency and external forces in modernity was captured by the epigraphs he selected from Søren Kierkegaard’s Either/Or and Judith Wright’s The Generations of Men. In the quotation from Either/Or, Kierkegaard suggests that the modern individual is a self-creator, free from those “substantive determinants” of family, race and nation that control the fate of individuals in classical literature, especially Greek epic and tragic drama. The Judith Wright quote, however, suggests the continuing importance of those determinants, of the individual experiencing their rootedness to family and place and culture. Miller was disappointed that reviewers had not grasped the tension in the novel between these opposing forces, and as a consequence the epigraphs were omitted from the American edition. In an interview with Simon Caterson, Miller explained, “there is a tension between these two positions which the book explores”, and he went on to object that “this was a bit too subtle for the reviewers, who ignored the Wright and concentrated on whether the Kierkegaard is borne out or not”.23

It has perhaps been too easy for critics to think of Miller as championing the “extraterritoriality” of art in George Steiner’s sense of that word: “A great writer driven from language to language by social upheaval and war is an apt symbol for the age of the refugee”.24 August Spiess and Lang Tzu, and Autumn Laing and Pat Donlon all appear, in their different ways, to be examples of modern extraterritoriality or cosmopolitanism. And yet, as we will come to see, Miller has an uncanny ability to dramatise different points of view without necessarily investing in them personally, and the opinions and passions of his characters are often undercut by narrative irony or brought into juxtaposition with opposing points of view. It is always a mistake to think that the opinions of Miller’s characters are his own. This is the case with Spiess’ diaries, for example, in which his modernist espousal of the artist as exile or émigré is carefully grounded in a particular time and place – Germany in the late nineteenth century – and then subjected to a forensic interrogation by his Chinese friends that has shocking consequences. Another example of Miller’s disinterested handling of ideas is his use of Henry Adams’ medievalism in Conditions of Faith as a counter to the heroic materialism of the novel’s modern engineers, though without himself investing in Adams’ idealisation of Catholicism and pre-modern cultures. The apparent cross-cultural equivalences among his various figures of the artist as migrant or émigré – including Steven Muir, August Spiess, Lang Tzu and the autobiographical figure of Alex Miller himself – with Aboriginal loss of country and dislocation in figures like Dougald Gnapun, whose fibro-cement house is near Mackay in Journey to the

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22 Quoted in Shirley Walker, “The Frontier Wars: History and Fiction in Journey to the Stone Country and Landscape of Farewell”, in The Novels of Alex Miller, 156.
Stone Country and at Mt Nebo in Landscape of Farewell, also raises difficult questions of cross-cultural comparison. These questions even threaten to ground Miller’s central pre-occupation with hospitality and the gift in the profoundly unequal opportunities available to white and Indigenous Australians within the Australian postcolony. As August Spiess puts it after witnessing the damage he has caused by his colonial presence in China, “For twenty blissful years I had lived as if the condition of extraterritoriality were a kind of literary conceit.”

While Miller’s novels are immediately accessible to the general reading public, they are manifestly works of high literary seriousness – substantial, technically masterly and assured, intricately interconnected, and of great imaginative, intellectual and ethical weight. Among his many prizes and awards, Miller has twice won the Miles Franklin Literary Award, for The Ancestor Game in 1993, and Journey to the Stone Country in 2003; the Commonwealth Writers’ prize, also for The Ancestor Game in 1993; and the New South Wales Premier’s Literary Awards Christina Stead Prize, for Conditions of Faith in 2001 and Lovesong in 2011. He received a Centenary Medal in 2001 and the Melbourne Prize for Literature in 2012. In 2011 he was elected a Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities. Having published his eleventh novel, Coal Creek, in 2013 – which won the Victorian Premier’s Fiction Award in 2014 – Miller is currently writing an autobiographical memoir with the working title “Horizons”.