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A National (Diasporic?) Living Treasure: Thomas Keneally

Abstract I: Malgrado Thomas Keneally sia riconosciuto come autore nazionale australiano, la sua reputazione internazionale e l'analisi, nei suoi romanzi, dell'esilio coloniale, dell'alienazione degli Aborigeni e delle migrazioni nel corso della storia riflettono aspetti dall'esperienza diasporica che dilatano lo stesso termine sino ad abbracciare aspetti 'transnazionali'.

Abstract II: Although Thomas Keneally is firmly located as a national figure, his international literary career and his novels' inspection of colonial exile, Aboriginal alienation, and movements of people throughout history reflect aspects of diasporic experience, while pushing the term itself into wider meaning of the transnational.

It may seem odd to be discussing Thomas Keneally in the context of diaspora. Born in the suburbs of Sydney, amongst contemporary Australian novelists, he is a National Living Treasure, has served on almost every national body representing writers, took part in a commission investigating the renovation of the Australian constitution, has his plaque in the 'writer's walk of fame' near the Opera House and is renowned for his support of the Manly rugby team and long residence in and around Sydney. In recent years he has published three volumes of stories about Australians, a work of history that consolidates his position as the grand old man right at the centre of Australian literary culture.

And yet, there are aspects of his life and work that do reflect diasporic experience. Moreover, the topics and wide distribution of his writing give his oeuvre the kind of transnational engagement that performs the work of diasporic destabilising of national cultural boundaries. For a while, Keneally did live overseas: for about a year in Britain, then later for two stints in California teaching creative writing at the University of California, Irvine. His first foray into living abroad coincided with the period in London of the Great Australian Expatriate: satirist Barry Humphries, poet Peter Porter, feminist Germaine Greer, general cultural commentator Clive James. Australia was renewing its national literary and film culture in the late 1960s and early seventies, and sensitive to old colonial power, so its 'culture police' looked askance at artists who chose to go abroad, and took an

even darker view of ones who wrote about people and landscapes other than in Australia — about “wombats and trade unionists”, to quote one of several complaints of the younger Keneally, who regularly railed against “my destiny of being a literary exile in my own nation” (Hickson 1985: 32). When his trip overseas led him to write about Joan of Arc (*Blood Red, Sister Rose* 1974), the 1918 Armistice negotiations (*Gossip from the Forest* 1975) and the partisan campaign against the Nazis in former Yugoslavia (*Season in Purgatory* 1976), Australian reviewers began to write him off as having abandoned his origins. Speculating in 1975 on his chances of winning the Booker in 1975, a journalist said, “it is another step in Keneally’s path away from being an Australian novelist” and Max Harris around the time Keneally finally wins the Booker grumbles (incorrectly): “What is increasingly clear is that he is not an Australian-published author these days” (*Sun Herald* 1975; Harris 1982). At this point in his career, being a diasporic Australian had little effect on the home nation; it merely confirmed the colonial binary. However, *Gossip from the Forest* was so experimental in its recourse to dramatic dialogue and sufficiently linked with Australian national mythologising of its role in World War One to garner good reviews both at home and abroad — D. R. Burns praised its concise style, comparing it to Hemingway, and Charles A. Brady declared Keneally “the most original writer in English”! (Burns 1975: 210; Brady 1976) and, along with its being shortlisted for the Booker Prize and filmed by Granada Television, it and its fellows helped to push the limits of what an Australian novel might be. By 1983 an Australian journalist asking “When do our Authors stop being Australian?” notes Keneally’s books appearing at the Frankfurt Book Fair and comments that “for all his undoubted Australian roots and lifestyle [he] is a prime example of the author who becomes international rather than national” and quotes his publisher, Ion Trewin, “Thomas Keneally is now accepted for whatever he writes, regardless of the setting” (Hedgecock 1983: 13).

Like Patrick White before him, Keneally would only be indulged in his expatriation and investigation of themes not directly relevant to Australia once he had been officially recognized by Europe via his winning the Booker Prize in 1982 and by the US in winning the Los Angeles Times Book of the Year award. Keneally also redeemed himself in the eyes of Australian critics by returning to his homeland and to Australian characters and settings, achieving successes with his revisionist view of pioneering white Australia from an Aboriginal perspective, *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* (1972) and his return to the story of Australia’s convict colony in *The Playmaker* (1987). It is worth noting that the former work was drafted in London, and owes some of its ironic take on settler triumphalist history to the author’s distance from his home society. Again, although *Blacksmith* received immediate national acceptance, and played a part in Australia’s reconstruction of a national film industry, it was international recognition of the book (most evident in its being awarded the Royal Society of Literature prize) and international circulation of its screen version that produced a quantum leap in Keneally’s wider reputation.

At this time, Keneally, even if not himself significantly split in either his work or life along the 'home and away' lines of diasporic experience (Hall 1996; Mishra 1996), was mentally exercised by white Australian society being collectively diasporic. The dominant national culture was derived from Britain and Europe and still expressed itself in colonial subservience to or nationalist aggressive opposition against its colonial origins. Keneally's essays up to the 1980s regularly talk about the lingering sense of antipodean 'exile' from cultural belonging (Krausmann 1979: 52; Keneally 1977). As he admits, this sense of diasporic disconnect does not affect younger Australians (Stretton 2002: 22), and in so far as the author continues to write works influenced by an older postcolonial sense of disrupted connectedness to historical antecedents, his positive reception has arguably been confined to people of his own generation, even though he consciously endeavours to break with the old foundational myths of a white settler Anglo nation. Regardless, however, of his reception within Australia, the international circulation of his books, and their consistent interest in current events overseas (Palestine Liberation Front activism in *Flying Hero Class*, for example) give his work a possible set of effects attributable to a transnational, if not a completely diasporic consciousness.

The ability to 'write back' to colonial sources and disturb set beliefs — to 'provincialise' the European metropolitan centre (Ashcroft & al. 1982; Chakrabarty 2000) — relies on an author holding a position as 'provincial' while being knowledgeable about metropolitan culture. To some extent, *Towards Asmara* (1989), Keneally's novel about the Eritrean war of liberation against Mengistu's Ethiopia, relocates 'first world' readers to an onlooking edge of affairs. It does this in centring its drama in Africa and showing up simplistic 'first world' charity efforts by both celebrity individuals and NGOs, and by exposing the shortcomings of Western individuals who take it upon themselves to become involved in 'third world' causes. The book also disrupts the nation space of Australia by having its protagonist moving at the start from Melbourne to a remote Aboriginal community. He and his wife discover a diasporic unsettlement of being at home while not at home, and the stress sends them both in different directions: the man becoming a foreign correspondent and eventually going to Eritrea. *Blood Red, Sister Rose* also attempts a fracturing of cemented myths inherited from Europe in turning Joan of Arc into an Australian 'bush' girl to show up her ordinary peasant origins and the ridiculous system of chivalry amongst Europe's elite. *A Victim of the Aurora* (1977) equally throws a critical light on the Edwardian values of heroism and Empire that informed both Britain and Australia, dramatising the collapse of an old world that happened during the First World War, then in the commercialisation of culture via Hollywood, and finally in the abandonment of former colonies when Britain entered European markets. Arguably it needed a 'diasporic' stance — an outsider who also 'owned' the culture via educational and ethnic connections — to be able to give worn 'home' orthodoxies a fresh, sharp glow of lived truth.

Keneally is of course from Irish stock, and his work constantly alludes to this fact. His first major success was *Bring Larks and Heroes* (1967), a tale of an Irish servant woman and an Irishman co-opted into the British army trying to make a future together amid inimical forces of class, 'race', political division and an alien land. His two novels about seminary life (his first, *The Place at Whitton*, 1964, and *Three Cheers for the Paraclete*, 1968) centre on the Irish priests and trainees who dominated Catholic life in Australia, and his second novel, *The Fear* (1965) dramatises episodes from his working-class Irish-Catholic childhood. Later, Keneally tells the stories of his maternal and paternal great-grandparents, one lot deported as convicts (*Bettany's Book* 2000), the other fleeing famine to become shopkeepers in country New South Wales (*A River Town* 1995). While writing these books, Keneally also set about recording the epic of Irish population movement as the result of the potato famine and anti-colonial protests. *The Great Shame* (1998) tracks the fortunes of many diasporic figures, some sent to Australia, escaping imprisonment there, and becoming leading figures in the US.

This body of work has not commonly been discussed in terms of 'migrant' or 'diasporic' writing amongst scholars of Australian literature, mainly because by the time those terms came into use they related to a new wave of immigrants from Italy, Greece and northern Europe. The Irish were absorbed into hegemonic Anglophone Australia. Up until the mid-1970s, however, Irish and Catholics were regarded as second-class citizens relative to an Anglo-Scots Protestant social norm, and sectarian prejudice and conflict was not uncommon if mostly kept out of public sight. It surfaced most noticeably in Irish opposition to Australia's involvement in imperial wars and to its proposed conscription of men to fight in World War One (Brennan 1964). Keneally shows something of how the Irish diaspora fractured Anglo-centric colonial society in his first two novels and his memoir, *Homebush Boy* (1985), in which fundamentalist Protestants distribute vilifying 'anti-Papist' leaflets and picket Catholic convents to 'rescue' young women being supposedly forced into nunneries. Later, his free-thinking Irish protagonist in *A River Town* (1995) is socially ostracised for failing to voice his approval of the Boer War. Keneally always seems to have been at the centre of Australian letters, so it comes as a shock to find Patrick White denouncing him to friends as a "bog-Irish failed priest" and fulminating against the fashion at the time for plays and novels about tormented Catholic priests (White 1994). In this context, Keneally's writing can be read as doing the work of minority diasporic literature: speaking to the majority to insert the group into cultural 'presence' and to call into question the dominant singular figuring of the nation. His championing of Aboriginal causes can also be seen as originating in his own family's history of being positioned within but also at the edges of Australian society.

Nonetheless, the increasing message of Keneally's work is not one of diasporic separation and psychic angst, but rather the miraculous process of displaced peasants, expelled criminals and deported political dissidents gradually coming to terms with each

other and their new land and forging a new national community — whether in Australia or in the United States. This is the theme of the non-fictional history of first settlement, *The Commonwealth of Thieves* (2005) and of its fictional precursor, *The Playmaker* (1987). *Bettany's Book*, along with the family history of convict emancipation and settlement explored by one of two sisters, also includes the story of the other sister who goes to the Sudan to carry out famine relief work. Her Sudanese doctor lover suffers persecution and is led to move overseas into exile, but not to join the sister who has returned to Australia to wage on-line human rights activism against the detention and torture of Sudanese dissidents. These tales might be read as engaging with diaspora, but the ending of the book records the convicts becoming respected citizens, and the sister settling back into Sydney life: it ends, "Slowly, over the course of the year,...she settled herself to become what [her convict ancestor] had no choice in becoming: an Australian" (Keneally 2000: 598).

Such an ending is not possible for people traumatised before resettlement. One work that does reflect a fully diasporic experience is *A Family Madness* (1985). Here we find the split simultaneity of past and present, Europe and Australia, preying upon a Byelorussian family. Their wartime history of nationalists doing deals with German occupation in order to survive creates legacies of guilt and rage that lead to a violent self-destruction incomprehensible to the insulated Australians they live amongst. Keneally's allegory about life under Saddam Hussein (*The Tyrant's Novel*, 2003) was another book based on testimony from interned refugees in Australia. As such, it is itself a tale of global diasporic movements as well as the author's attack on one nation's harsh treatment of people fleeing from war and persecution. Keneally also wrote about a Russian exile in Queensland who takes an Australian with him back to the fighting of the Russian Revolution (*The People's Train* 2009). His more recent *Shame and the Captives* (2013) is about Italian and Japanese prisoners of war in rural Australia and how their presence disturbs local life and how 1940s Australian life both disrupts and exacerbates cultural assumptions amongst the internees. Though there is clearly an interest in international movements to and through Australia, and in showing Australia's under-regarded historical ties to international affairs, Keneally's work usually relies on a normative Australian setting, protagonist or onlooker against which the immigrant or traveller appears as an outsider to be understood and sympathised with. In this way, much of his fiction cannot really be described as fundamentally engaged with diasporic themes.

However, Keneally is perhaps best known for working with material from another major diasporic community. His Booker-winning *Schindler's Ark* (or *Schindler's List*, 1982) compiles oral histories of Holocaust survivors and shapes them into a fictive drama. This work emerged directly as the result of Keneally's years teaching creative writing in the United States and indirectly through sympathies based on his family's history of diaspora and ethnic difference from dominant social groups. While Keneally kept a postcard of his Sydney beach home on his office door in California, suggesting the kind of double vision

of the diasporic subject (Hall, Mishra), he also shuttled to and fro between America and Australia, with side trips to Eritrea and Europe, so acted more as a cosmopolitan transnational. However, his years in the States allowed him to see aspects of Australian history as it shifted focus from Britain to America during and after World War Two, and to see elements of American history from a non-US perspective. His wartime novel of a fringe player on the global stage, *The Cut-Rate Kingdom* (1980), and the war-time murder thriller *An Angel in Australia* (2002) can be attributed to this 'offshore' perspective. The reverse view is seen in Keneally's fictional dramatization of a lesser-known battle in the US Civil War, *Confederates* (1979), plus his later short biography, *Lincoln* (2003), and his travelogue on south-western USA, *The Place Where Souls Are Born* (1992).

If the content of these works do not cohere into a tidily diasporic package, the work that the more well-known texts perform can certainly be considered as opening up borders of nation, ethnicity and culture to transnational negotiations. Keneally's 'Catholic' novels, for example, have clearly been translated in places like Spain and Poland to contribute to debate about the role of the church in those countries. *Schindler's Ark* is now translated into more than two dozen languages, and the huge pile of reviews and letters — both of appreciation and outrage — that it provoked from all over the globe attest to the book's active intervention in Holocaust awareness. Equally, *Towards Asmara* generated international awareness of the aspirations of an embattled minority and of the politics behind global food charity, engaged the author in lobbying the Australian government to recognise the provisional Eritrean administration, and the book was distributed to international observers attending the nation's first elections.

In fact, an overview of Keneally's fiction reveals so many movements within texts and of texts, mainly driven by empire, war and famine, it would seem that diasporas and their dynamics are so much the norm of modern life that the theoretical category can no longer be deployed with the same power to dissect specific cultural positionings or promote their place within national cultures. Keneally himself has been an inveterate traveller across three continents and Antarctica, and has developed three semi-autonomous but interconnected literary careers in Australia, Britain and the US (see Carter 2013). As such, he better fits a category of transnational writer. Whatever the label we apply to him, it is clear that Keneally and his work have challenged narrow national constructions of what literature should be and where its field of operations can be. In the process, it has also shifted perceptions of histories from around the world and much of this project has been compatible with the dynamics of diasporic experience.

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