Writing novels, he’s Tom Keneally. Works of history — such as The Great Shame (1998) about the Irish diaspora to the USA and Australia in the nineteenth century, and this year’s American Scoundrel, concerned with the adventures of politician, general and amorist Dan Sickles — are by Thomas Keneally. There is more doubling in Keneally’s most recent novel, for he uses two titles. In this country, we have An Angel in Australia; in Britain, The Office of Innocence. Each suggests a different line of approach to a novel that seems in some ways old-fashioned, so instinct is it with his earlier work. By the way, Keneally’s novel count is now twenty-six, including two under the pseudonym ‘William Coyle’.

We meet young Father Frank Darragh as he walks out of St Patrick’s Seminary, Manly, in the early months of World War II. He’ll be back, unlike Keneally, who left the Church irrevocably in 1960, before taking his final vows. Frank is accosted by an ageing exorcist, shuffling in for a meal. This Monsignor disconcertingly instructs the ‘sheltered boy’, the ‘eternal priest’ (as Keneally will later call Darragh) that he ‘must be a merciful confessor’. It is an injunction that probes the heart of this young man for whom innocence, or openness to the pain of others, is indeed the badge of his office. What Father Darragh has to confront in wartime Sydney is all that is implicit in the local name for this book. An angel is made in Australia (as three have been in America) by a violent, obsessed, yet coldly controlled American soldier who finds a cruel, triumphant way to think of his murders.

An Angel in Australia returns us to Keneally’s most frequented and seminal time and place: inner-western Sydney in the 1940s, when his father (to whom the book is dedicated) was serving in North Africa with the RAAF. His second novel, The Fear (1965), revised and reissued twenty-four years later as By the Line (1989), was set there and then. His memoir, Homebush Boy (1995), also genially and generously returned to that period of his childhood. A number of Keneally’s novels are set during World War II, including Season in Purgatory (1976), The Cut-Rate Kingdom (first published as a special number of the Bulletin in 1980), Schindler’s Ark (1982) and the two ‘Coyle’ novels, Act of Grace (1988) and Chief of Staff (1991). In Keneally’s historical imagining, the crucial event in the nation’s past was the one that he lived through as a child: the anticipated Japanese invasion of Australia. A key line in this book is the bald announcement: ‘The Japanese are in the Harbour, gentlemen.’ Not the Great War — neither Gallipoli nor Flanders and Picardy — has so exercised Keneally as that possibility of extinction in 1942. He invites us to take seriously the remark of Mr Regan, the neighbour of Frank’s mother: ‘We’re a race that deserves punishment.’

It’s a sentiment that we have heard before. In A Family Madness (1985), Ruddi Kabbel — Belorussian survivor of World War II, then immigrant to Australia — reckons that his new country will be swamped by Asia. This echoing is a signature tune of Keneally’s fiction, which is full of recurrent motifs, characters, moral dilemmas. An Angel in Australia recalls and rehearses not just previous war novels, but Keneally’s earlier treatment of Catholic institutional life. Thus, in Three Cheers for the Paraclete (1968), the intellectual priest Father Maitland fell foul of his hierarchy, as does the youthful Frank Darragh, whose Monsignor warns him that ‘you’re beginning to annoy me. You do erratic things.’ Maitland’s dire punishment was to be forbidden to write. That which Darragh ultimately receives, following an enforced retreat, may seem to him more like salvation. Tormented as
Darragh is, he holds a middle ground between two other priests in Keneally’s canon, poles of their vocation: the priest who sexually mutilates himself in Act of Grace and the venal punter Father Frank O’Brien who goes as far as gaol in Woman of the Inner Sea (1992).

Old themes force themselves to prominence in An Angel in Australia — especially dramas of conscience. Haplessly but willingly, Darragh is drawn into helping a coloured American soldier, the flamboyantly named Private Gervaise Aspillon, who has gone AWOL and is living with a white woman in Lidcombe. He is implicated in this business by the saturnine Master Sergeant Gene Fratelli, who will be his tempter and tormentor. Into the mix goes Mrs Kate Heggarty, mother of a young son, wife to a man taken prisoner by the Germans in the Middle East. As he takes each earnest, compassionate step, Father Darragh sinks further into the mire of hierarchical disapproval. He does not much impress the Catholic constabulary either, notably Inspector Kearney — a figure that Keneally draws from central casting — veteran of the Shark Arm and Pyjama Girl murder cases, and now in search of a strangler.

These details indicate the careful topicality of An Angel in Australia, whose climax occurs during the night of the Japanese midget submarine attack on ships in Sydney Harbour. The novel’s murderer puts us in mind of Edward Leonski, who killed three women in Melbourne before being hanged at Pentridge. Keneally’s villain is much more disciplined and sinister (no binge drinking and walking on his hands on the tops of bars, as for Leonski). This man likes ‘women who’d been used and were kind of sad’. Not so far out to sea, national fates are being decided. Keneally ventures one of his grand rhetorical moves to make us rethink the then separately from the complacencies of now. The Battle of the Coral Sea was ‘new and fantastical warfare. The destiny of the Western and Christian world was to be decided in these bright, equatorial waters.’

Yet the spaciousness of that prose is not typical of the register of An Angel in Australia. This is a shorter and more restrained novel than Keneally’s previous one, Bettany’s Book (2000). Here, there are not three or more stories entwined and demanding their due telling, and Keneally has concentrated his storyline, although not at the expense of a bracing, open ending. He has returned to his years as a trainee priest to write again of the compromises with authority enjoined in the religious life. The tone is, perhaps, less forgiving than it has been. This is an oxymoronic book — a subdued novel by Tom Keneally. Its accent is meditative, its notes of sadness leavened by the resilient self-regard of the characters he has mustered. It is not the first time, nor one hopes is it the last, that Keneally has used a novel to review where he has ventured in a career of nearly four decades. And that has usually been the basis for another surprise, for an unexpected departure that is no doubt already in train.