
Scottish journalist and writer Cal Flyn’s memoir, *Thicker than Water: History, Secrets and Guilt* offers a compelling exploration of the impacts and legacies of British settler colonialism in Australia. It arrives in the transnational literary landscape at a time when questions of postcolonial settlement continue to trouble the Australian settler psyche. The Referendum on Constitutional Recognition supposed to take place in May 2017 appears to be stalled, if not indefinitely deferred, and renewed calls for a Treaty in its place point to the divisions both among Indigenous Australians, and between settler Australians and Indigenous Australians, about the best way to move towards a greater postcolonial justice for First Australians. Flyn’s memoir is a reminder that the settler state was forged as a consequence of a brutal unofficial war against Aboriginal people, which aimed to clear the territories to make way for British settlers. While the work of Henry Reynolds has contributed to increasing recognition of this warfare, and records of several massacres of Aboriginal people have come to light, this history of colonial violence remains deeply contested, and elided in many of the ‘official’ histories of settlement.

*Thicker than Water* is a story about these contested histories. It is also, as Flyn notes, ‘a study of nationalism’ (320). Flyn writes as an ‘outsider’, retrieving the ‘secret’ history of her Scottish ancestor, Angus McMillan, who is celebrated in the official records as the founder of Gippsland, yet was involved in a number of massacres of local Aboriginal people. Fresh from the Highland Clearances, which resulted in the dispossession of Scottish tenant farmers, he was persuaded to board ship for Australia, where he arrived in 1838, and worked on cattle stations in New South Wales, before going on to lead an expedition across the Australian Alps in 1839, in search of the fertile lands which would later become known as Gippsland. This two-year expedition was also a competition, as a rival party, funded by James McArthur, and led by the adventurer Pawel Strzelecki, also sought to lay claim to the lands. McMillan prevailed, setting up a property that encompassed 150,000 acres on the banks of the Avon River. If he had lost his lands in the Clearances, in Gippsland, he had become ‘laird’ of Bushy Park (127), and was later elected to the Legislative Assembly as Victoria’s member for South Gippsland. However, ‘settlement’ did not occur without conflict. It required the dispossession of the Gunai/Kurnai people, and this took the form of a series of ‘dispersals’ and ‘reprisal’ killings for incursions such as ‘skirmishes’ and stealing sheep (27). As Flyn’s investigation into her ancestor’s history reveals, McMillan led the infamous 1843 massacre at Warrigal Creek, where up to two hundred Aboriginal men, women, and children were shot, and a further eight massacres between 1841 and 1850. These have become known as the Gippsland Massacres, and resulted in the deaths of several hundred local Aboriginal people. McMillan is, of course, not alone as a prominent colonial figure whose official reputation is recast in the beam of historical evidence of mass killings. These include WA Governor John Stirling, who led a massacre of the Bindjareb (Nyoongar) people in 1834, shooting some twenty-five or thirty men, women, and children. Many massacres were conducted by landowners and pastoralists, and most went unpunished, although the Myall Creek massacre of 1838, which resulted in the hanging of eleven of the perpetrators, is a notable exception.

Flyn sets out to discover how a ‘pious’ man can become the ‘Butcher of Gippsland’ (6). The memoir opens with a powerful fictionalised account of the Warrigal Creek Massacre, and then retraces McMillan’s journey to Bushy Park, and the subsequent loss of his fortunes. Blending fiction, memoir, and excerpts from McMillan’s journals, *Thicker than Water* is a convincingly-researched intervention into the colonial archive, and how it represents, or misrepresents, the past. Flyn navigates the conflicted terrain between an historical record that is rather a form of

'hagiography’ (23), and the revisionist histories and contemporary newspaper reports that reveal McMillan was ‘responsible for the cold-blooded murder of hundreds of aborigines (sic)’ (26). Flyn’s journey both mirrors and reframes her ancestor’s, as she records deeply personal conversations with the descendants of the Gurnai/Kurnai people, historians and country museum staff, even a DJ working in a local country hotel, to interrogate her sense of ‘inherited guilt’, and whether ordinary Australians accept or deny any sense of collective responsibility for our history of colonial violence. These passages are deftly and sensitively handled, as Flyn confronts questions about postcolonial justice that are difficult to resolve because colonial amnesia continues to result in collective denials of the past. Flyn recognises that she is nonetheless entangled in this brutal history, and that this history complicates contemporary relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

*Thicker than Water* offers a refreshing insight into the inheritance of the not-quite colonial subject, left to account for the dark and disturbing elements of her ancestor’s colonial reputation. It demonstrates that the legacies of Australian colonialism extend beyond our borders, resulting in questions for descendants of those colonial subjects, about exactly what roles they have played in the violence of Australian settlement. As Flyn notes, she cannot ‘become an apologist for a murderer, a defender of the indefensible’. McMillan, she writes, ‘must be defined by his worst actions. He was a murderer. A mass murderer. A proponent of genocide’ (336). These closing reflections are juxtaposed with an Epilogue comprising an excerpt from the Melbourne *Argus*, detailing a party to ‘honour’ McMillan as the ‘discoverer’ of Gippsland in 1856 (343-4). This final colonial record glorifies McMillan’s exploits, to sit uneasily against Flyn’s closing reflections, which aim to reflect the ‘moral ambivalence’ of the colonial subject, and the ‘conflicts between his actions and ideals’ (337) that led him to murder.

*Thicker than Water* is a relevant and timely interrogation of what it means to be a prominent figure in Australian colonial history, of how we remember the past, and whose achievements we celebrate or deny. It has particular relevance to scholars of postcolonial studies, to those with a critical interest in the limitations of formal policies of Reconciliation, and to those with an interest in cultural memory and cultural trauma studies.

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