

Chad Habel, *Ancestral Narratives: Irish Australian Identities in History and Fiction* (VDM Verlag Dr. Müller, 2008)

Chad Habel's wide ranging and engaging explication of the links between ancestral narratives as cultural memory and as identity formation focuses on the analysis of fiction and non-fiction by Christopher Koch and Thomas Keneally. Although written for an academic audience, the book offers enjoyment for general readers.

While thematic criticism like this can challenge readers with specific interests, Koch and Keneally devotees will find Habel's literary analysis of their texts through the retrospectoscope of ancestral narratives rewarding. Collective family and national memories have a way of suppressing and overlaying old injustices, Habel suggests — and sociologist Maurice Halbwach argued this in his influential book *On Collective Memory* (1992) — eventually precipitating new crises of identification. This idea plays out when two Australian writers reconstruct family narratives which also belong to collective memory: Koch, using adventure genre to voice the sublimated anxieties of his characters, especially men with ancestral stains; and Keneally, redeeming his characters by depicting their diverse ethnic, religious and class conflicts, in the Australian and trans-national interest.

Koch and Keneally make good choices for the explication of Habel's argument. Koch referred directly to the tension generated by European ancestral memories juxtaposed on an Australian consciousness and a new landscape, both alienating and somehow resonating, in his essay 'The Lost Hemisphere' (1986), and he alludes to ancestral narratives in his later works. His author's note in *Out of Ireland* (1999) admits that John Mitchel, on whom he based his protagonist Robert Devereux shared the name and ancestry of his great-great-uncle of the same period. Thomas Keneally historicises Hugh Larkin 'from whom my wife and daughters are descended', and his grandfather's uncle John Kenealy, a Cork Fenian amongst the last of the transported convicts incarcerated in Fremantle Jail, in *The Great Shame*.

The book contains six chapters, its schema complicated by the breadth of the ancestral theme and Habel's need to move back and forth between the major works. In his introduction, Habel defines ancestry as 'a familial link across three or more generations' thus enabling a broad view that accepts determinist as well as elective and imaginative connections. He describes common metaphors — trees, rhizomes, roots and regrowth — then rapidly moves into open territory to explore cognitive mapping; literary criticism including genre studies of adventure and historical fiction; diasporic studies; archetypal mythology; the stigma of the 'convict stain' and cultural theory, especially postcolonial and nationalist; and the history wars. In Chapter 1 he interrogates the idea of history as a vehicle for ancestral narratives, seeing historical fiction as less delimiting, using Robert Hughes' *The Fatal Shore* (1986) and Keneally's *The Great Shame* (1998) as examples.

Chapter 2 argues that the device of the 'lost document' in Keneally's *Bettany's Book* and Koch's double novel *Beware of the Past* draws attention to the historical importance of recovering ancestral narratives. Failure to do so can cause wounds that deliver pain and loss through generations. Chapter 3 asserts that ancestral and national narratives inevitably mesh in identity formation, highlighting the way Keneally

explores historical revisionism and reconciliation in *Bettany's Book* (2000), trauma, memory and diaspora in *Schindler's Ark* (1982), the convict stain as 'failed project' and a 'nation stillborn' in *Bring Larks and Heroes* (1967) and comic reconciliation in *The Playmaker* (1997). 'Chapter 4: Ancestry Beyond Nation' suggests Keneally's *The Great Shame* and *Bettany's Book* offer more complex hybrid ethnic identifications. Keneally's study of diaspora in *The Great Shame*, Habel argues, 'challenges and extends the concept of nation'. In Chapters 5 and 6, Habel connects Koch's preoccupation with absence and dislocation to perceived anxieties about manhood in protagonists' of his diptych, *Highways to a War* (1995) and *Out of Ireland* (1999). In conclusion Habel warns against the inherent dangers of ancestor worship but sees its scholarship as a reconciliatory tool offering 'dialogue and healing'. The book concludes on a hopeful note, reinforcing the importance of reworking national histories in literature to take account of imperial subjectivities, lost ancestral narratives, and complex hybrid identities.

Habel's references to nineteenth-century Irish history assist the reader to contextualise Keneally's and Koch's fictional reconstructions, particularly the politics of the Young Irelander events. He is adept at summarising plot and character, drawing attention to the diverse experiences of the Australian Irish diaspora and its members' multiple identities. Koch descends from Irish and German immigrants, for instance. Wisely Habel does not attempt an epistemological study of whether suppressing traumatic and shameful memories favours the *tabula rasa* idea of descendents hearing stories about trauma, or whether they directly experience atavistic psychic pain. He does, however, draw attention to the way that their works emphasise the profound effect of famine on Irish convicts and refugees. Like Graham Huggan, he underlines the way contradictory desires to acknowledge and purge Irish ancestral and national narratives create conflict.¹

His assessment of Keneally as the more radical writer is of topical interest. Ken Gelder's and Paul Salzman's *After the Celebration: Australian Fiction from 1989-2007* (2009) suggests that while Keneally addresses important subjects of social justice, readers are invariably addressed as 'a white, middle-class and perhaps somewhat complacent recipient of this [his] received wisdom'. Peter Pierce takes them to task for this in an *ABR* review. Habel contributes to this debate. Keneally has been more prolific than Koch, and is apparently more accessible to interested scholars but Habel's assessment of their corpus is of great contemporary interest.

The difficulty of comparing and contrasting the development of Keneally's oeuvre over sixty years with Koch's seven major works over a shorter period may challenge some readers, particularly without an index. The narrative unfolds in enjoyable fashion, but its broad scope and descriptive rather than relational table of contents, make revisiting the book a challenge. Questions arise about use of the term 'tomorrow's ancestors' applied repeatedly to Keneally's movement from an ethno-symbolist model of interpretation in earlier books, to a hybrid that doesn't privilege one ethnicity. The term, borrowed from Québécois nationalists, who used it to convey their determination as progenitors of their race, suggests an atavistic model for ancestral memory. It may be difficult for some readers to accept that in *Highways to a War* Langton's recklessness as a photo journalist in the Asian theatre of war springs from the suppression of masculine ancestral wounds. Habel underlines the irony of

¹ See Graham Huggan, 'Cultural Memory in Postcolonial Fiction: the Uses and Abuses of Ned Kelly', *Australian Literary Studies* 20.3 (2002).

Keneally's title for *Bring Larks and Heroes* (1967); protagonists Ann and Halloran lose their chance at the gallows to produce 'tomorrow's ancestors'. Keneally, he says, presents this as a failed national project. But Habel's research extends beyond mere biological ancestral, embracing extended families and historical figures that are part of Irish collective memory, fitting comfortably with Gilles Deleuze's and Pierre-Félix Guattari's rhizome theory. Indeed, Habel is interested in this metaphor.

Habel harnesses the work of a number of nationalist and postcolonial theorists to thoroughly contextualise his conclusions, so that this reader arrived at a new understanding of ancestry identity formation in historical literary fiction at a particular time, when genealogy had run its course. Arguments about the narratives of survivors of trauma and the effect on their descendents of suppressing shameful memories make acts of narrative restitution of national, familial and historical importance. Habel emphasises that Koch's and Keneally's reconstruction of Irish-Australian settler stories, particularly those aligned with 'convict stain', validates ancestral narratives, placing them in a broader humanist framework as well as allowing the recuperation of memory. *Ancestral Narratives* provides a welcome resource for researchers interested in Keneally's and Koch's work, and offers a useful framework for understanding intergenerational narratives as identity formation.

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