Book Review

Ashley Barnwell and Joseph Cummins, *Reckoning with the Past: Family Historiographies in Postcolonial Australian Literature*. London and New York: Routledge, 2019, 131 pages.

Geoff Rodoreda and Catherine Noske[1]

"Reckoning with the past" is not a term invented by the authors of this book nor is it particularly new. But in recent years, in book titles and in political campaigning, the term has become more closely associated with troubled national pasts. It is used, for instance, in connection with Nazism in Germany (Bammer), sectarianism in Northern Ireland (Smith), slavery in British history (Evans), dictatorship in Chile (Siavelis), and Apartheid in South Africa ("Reckoning"). Australia's colonial past (and its colonialist present) is now brought into a company of critical scholarship on violence, memory and denial in the recounting and storying of nation with this book. For Barnwell and Cummins, reckoning involves uncovering, confronting and revising "the lingering, haunting aftermath of colonial injustice" (1). Reckoning, then, is a specifically postcolonial process that includes "a measurement, a settling of accounts, sometimes even the avenging or punishing of misdeeds" (3).

The focus in this book is not on Australian history generally but on ten books, exemplars of contemporary Australian narrative prose, for their "multifaceted account of Australia's development as a nation from the perspective of the family" (3). And, in a fresh approach, we are invited to read such literary works of family storytelling as *historiography* rather than merely as *historical fiction*. The difference in focus is significant because it invites the reader to consider such texts not only for their content but also for how they reveal history as constructed, as processed and produced out of stories of the past.

Reckoning with the Past is published as part of Routledge's Memory Studies series and as such is invested in applications of memory studies in reading the literary works it focuses on. It is an interdisciplinary work, combining the perspectives of a sociologist (Barnwell) and a literary scholar (Cummins) to invoke nuanced connections between the work of writing and the work of national reckoning. The textual construction of the family becomes a microcosm through which Australia's processes of developing nation can be examined, questioned, and challenged. In each of the novels or memoirs discussed, the protagonist or the writer emerges, in various ways, as a kind of family historiographer "who does the work of imagining the family, and, in the process, reimagining the nation" (3). Ten books were chosen for this study on the basis of three criteria. Each work had to be "intergenerational in scope, namely, examine the transmission, remembering, or forgetting of family memories across multiple generations" (13). The works also had to deal with the practices of historiography, and, across the selection, they had to "offer insight into differing cultural experiences of reckoning" across Australia's settler-colonial and migration histories (13).

[1] Notwithstanding personal biases and subjectivities, we have sought to write a scholarly review of this book for this journal. Readers may need to know, however, that Catherine Noske spoke at the official launch of this book at the Association for the Study of Australian Literature's annual conference in Perth in July, 2019. Geoff Rodoreda was also a conference participant and present at the launch.

Chapter 1, titled "Dredging up Family Secrets," considers Kate Grenville's widely discussed and popular novel *The Secret River* (2005) alongside a Richard Flanagan novel that has received less scholarly attention than his other works, his first novel *Death of a River Guide* (1994). Major debates of the 1990s and 2000s, around reconciliation, a national apology and frontier history, provide a context for Grenville and Flanagan's engagement in these particular novels "with themes of denial and forgetting in both national and family histories" (16). The authors argue that Grenville and Flanagan offer two different modes of reckoning with the past, respectively that of empathy and of witnessing. Such a mode of reading, as well as the pairing of these two texts for such a reading, yields fresh and valuable insights into each novel. At the same time, it establishes the manner in which the historiography implied within reckoning is multiple and multi-faceted, a theme which continues across the work as a whole.

Chapter 2, "Confronting the 'Double Fold of Silence'," focusses on two Indigenous-authored life writing narratives, *Kayang & Me* (2005) by Kim Scott and Hazel Brown as well as Sally Morgan's *My Place* (1987). The "double fold of silence," used by Barnwell and Cummins as a framework for analysis here, is what Aboriginal writer Jackie Huggins is said to have encountered in exploring her own family's history (39). The first fold of silence is that of the state, its destruction and silencing of Aboriginal societies, cultures and knowledges across two centuries of colonisation. The second fold (of the same cloth) of silence, according to Huggins, is that encountered within Indigenous families whose members cannot bear to speak of the humiliations and terrors of the past (39). Morgan as well as Scott and Brown are read, concisely and incisively, for their negotiation of this double fold in their reckoning of family pasts.

Chapter 3, titled "Belonging across Generations," switches attention to stories of migration and immigration in a look at three novels that illuminate "the historic and contemporary links between Australia and China" (54): Brian Castro's *Birds of Passage* (1983) and *Shanghai Nights* (2003), as well as Alex Miller's *The Ancestor Game* (1992). It is in this chapter that Barnwell and Cummins are able to explore more fully the procedures and problematics of constructing family histories, given that a "family historiographer" is a major character in each of these texts (55). Through such historiographers, Castro and Miller are said to reveal how both memory and material evidence of the past are always fractured and partial, and that imagination is often needed to "flesh out the incompleteness of history" (55).

In Chapter 4, "Returning to Homelands," the authors focus on two narratives not set predominantly in Australia but in Europe: Christos Tsiolkas' *Dead Europe* (2005) and Christopher Koch's *The Many-Coloured Land: A Return to Ireland* (2002). The impulse behind these works "is that of the diasporic subject's return to the European homeland" (73). In the case of Tsiolkas this is mainly Greece and continental Europe; in the case of Koch it is Ireland. While the diversity of the texts read is a strength of the work as a whole, the logic of pairing texts and authors, plausible and productive in previous chapters, seems to have come unstuck here. Perhaps this is because *Dead Europe* is a novel while Koch's book is a travelogue or memoir, so that the comparative work of family historiography across different narrative genres in the one chapter—here the focus on a fictional protagonist, there on an Australian author as traveller—is less productive. Maybe, however, it is because Koch's author-centred travelogue of a visit to Ireland "is so dominated by nostalgia as to block out the trauma of Australian and Irish colonial histories" (76). For Barnwell and Cummins, Koch's various reflections on Australia in parts of his memoir participate in an "erasure of Indigenous Australians [that] is baffling" (83), leaving them to concede that "Koch fails to reckon with his past" (82). If this be so, why analyse this text in this volume? Actually, because Barnwell and Cummins are at

least able to show that "family history narratives can also be used to rationalise and obscure" otherwise unsettling and haunted national histories (83).

Chapter 5, "Listening to the Ghosts of the Past," deals solely with Andrew McGahan's *The White Earth* (2004) and offers a wonderful final case study in opening up the question of the future, the work that reckoning with nation might do. The authors ask: "how can present and future generations learn from the past? And how can we reckon with our inheritance?" (92). Reading the novel through this lens, the chapter concludes with an insightful reading of "The water hole as ear" (103). In the novel, the boy-protagonist, William, develops an infection in his ear, hindering his ability to listen to and make sense of conflicting stories of his family's past in relation to the pastoral property he is set to inherit. Barnwell and Cummins draw a clever connection between William's pus-ridden ear and a water hole on the property that hides "the murky secret history" of the family's violent usurpation of the land from Aboriginal owners (106). William's ear becomes "the miniaturised water hole and the organ through which its secrets can be known or ignored, […] the portal that amplifies the fusion of familial, ecological, and national secrets that define the post-colonial haunting … [The] water hole is the ear through which the past can be heard" (107).

Reading to explore and consider holes in the national story—or, as Barnwell and Cummins call them, "the shadows that haunt the nation's celebratory metanarrative of settlement" and multiculturalism (113)—is established with this book as an essential ethical stance for non-Indigenous Australian readers. Thus, in approaching historiography, and the questions of both creative and social practice it holds implicit, there is a consciousness of positionality. Rather than seeking to read contemporary Australian narrative prose through frameworks that are predominantly temporal (post-Mabo), thematic (Sorry novels, reconciliation narratives) or theoretical (postcolonial), Barnwell and Cummins offer an alternative lens. Reading particular historical novels, life stories and memoirs as family historiographies allows for a textual analysis "that unites intimate and national scales" (114), offering a mapping of the "connections between family memory, national history and Australian landscapes" (113), where other methods of reading and analysis might not. 'Reckoning with the past' becomes a form of memory-work that needs to be done again and again.

Works Cited

Bammer, Angelika. *Born After: Reckoning with the German Past*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2019.

Evans, Judith. "Bristol, the Slave Trade and a Reckoning with the Past." *Financial Times*, 9 August 2018. https://www.ft.com/content/032fe4a0-9a96-11e8-ab77-f854c65a4465. Accessed 11 March 2020.

"Reckoning with the Past." Nelson Mandela Foundation. https://www.nelsonmandela.org/content/page/reckoning-with-the-past. Accessed 11 March 2020.

Siavelis, Peter M. "Reckoning with the Past." Review of *The Pinochet Effect: Transnational Justice in the Age of Human Rights*, by Naomi Roht-Arriaza, *The Review of Politics*, vol. 68, no. 2, 2006, pp. 334-36.

Smith, Margaret Eastman. *Reckoning with the Past: Teaching History in Northern Ireland*. Lexington Books, 2004.

Geoff Rodoreda is a lecturer in the Department of English Literatures and Cultures at the University of Stuttgart, Germany. His monograph, *The Mabo Turn in Australian Fiction* (Peter Lang, 2018), won the Association for the Study of Australian Literature's inaugural Alvie Egan Award 2019, a prize for the best first book of literary scholarship on an Australian subject.

Catherine Noske is a lecturer in Creative Writing at the University of Western Australia, and editor of *Westerly* Magazine. She has been awarded the AD Hope Prize from the Association for the Study of Australian Literature, and has recently released her debut novel *The Salt Madonna* (Picador, 2020).