Historical novels challenging the national story

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Historical novels dealing with the colonial past have always played a key role in constructing popular understandings of the national story in Australia, whether by reinforcing its legends or challenging them. In recent debates historical fiction’s claims to authority have been perceived as competing with the work of historical scholars. By considering two such novels of the 1970s, Jessica Anderson’s *The Commandant* and Thea Astley’s *A Kindness Cup*, this essay offers a historical perspective on some questions of the relationship between historical novels and historical scholarship.

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Since Marcus Clarke published *His Natural Life* in serial form over the years 1870 to 1872, historical novels dealing with the colonial past have played a vital role in constructing popular understandings of the beginnings of white settlement in Australia. Such popular understandings of the ‘national story’ matter because they live on in popular memory, because they are the versions that are repeated in the media, taught in schools and represented in public commemorations. Before the emergence of a strong historical profession in Australian universities in the years after World War II, novels and other literary and cinematic representations of the past held sway.¹

As Bridget Griffen-Foley has recently argued in relation to the career of the popular writer, Frank Clune, there was a certain novelty about the study of Australian history when he began in the 1930s, both in the academy and in literature.² While Clune and his contemporary Ion Idriess specialised in historically-based tales that were ‘nationalistic, nostalgic, romantic and heroic’,³ other novelists of the 1930s such as Brian Penton and M Barnard Eldershaw felt a sense of mission to write well-researched

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2 Bridget Griffen-Foley ‘Digging up the past: Frank Clune, Australian historian and media personality’, *History Australia* 8 (1), April 2011, 132–133.
3 Ibid, 151.
and truthful versions of Australian history – even if this meant debunking favoured myths such as that of the heroic pioneers. Foremost among these critical novelists at mid-century was Eleanor Dark, who was motivated to write her novel *The Timeless Land* (1941) in reaction against celebrations of the sesquicentenary of white settlement in New South Wales, which were silent about frontier violence and the convict system.

On the basis of her reading of archival documents, and with little secondary material available to her, Dark significantly redefined the issues around convictism and Aboriginal dispossession. Beginning her novel from the perspective of Aboriginal people observing the advance of 'ships with wings', she offered a new history, one from the inside looking out, ‘a stunning imaginative leap from the ships to shore, to the view from the edge of the trees’. It received predictably negative reviews in the nationalist *Bulletin* and in *Country Life*, yet it was warmly welcomed by many educated readers, including historians Manning Clark (who said it inspired him to write his history of Australia) and Brian Fitzpatrick (who congratulated her on her critique of the convict system), and anthropologists A P Elkin and Phyllis Kaberry, who approved her accounts of Aboriginal life. The *Timeless Land* was later adopted as a school text and proved to be a milestone in the popularisation of Australian history through fiction.

By the time Dark’s trilogy was complete in 1953 the novelists were no longer the only voices to be heard, but shared their sense of mission with a new class of professionals, the historians. The historians of the 1950s and 60s, however, gave little space to Aboriginal history in the general books published to cater to the growth in Australian history courses. Ann Curthoys points out that Max Crawford’s *Australia* (1952) and A G L Shaw’s *The Story of Australia* (1955) had little to say about Aboriginal people, and ‘articulated the increasingly common view that there was no serious resistance from “the aborigines with their primitive culture”’, while in the 1960s the work of younger historians such as Douglas Pike, Manning Clark and Russel Ward ‘contained little more than a few scattered references’. What they *were* interested in was convicts and settlers, subjects which were compatible with popular understandings of heroic pioneers, even if Clark and Ward tended to emphasise the

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6 Ibid, 375.
criminality of the convicts and the anti-authoritarianism of the itinerant bush workers.

During the post-war decades, historical fiction flourished. Most of these representations reinforced the prevailing ‘national story’ of heroic pioneers and oppressed convicts. Catherine Gaskin’s 1954 success with Sarah Dane (based on convict Mary Reibey who became a successful business woman) sat at the top of a large heap of historical romances, many of them brought out by such local Australian pulp fiction publishers as Horwitz. The doyen of the genre was E V Timms, who began his Great South Land Saga in 1948 with Forever to Remain. He was unable to complete all 12 volumes before his death, but his wife finished The Big Country in 1962. This was exactly the kind of historical fiction that would lend itself to popular TV series about white Australia in the 1970s: Against the Wind, Peter Weir’s Luke’s Kingdom and All the Rivers Run (which was based on Nancy Cato’s novels of the River Murray).

The late 1960s and 1970s also saw an increase in historical novels that challenged such heroic myths. These tended to be works of literary fiction rather than popular titles. Patrick White had produced such critical historical fiction with his 1957 novel Voss (based on Leichhardt’s expeditions) and, in 1976, returned to the use of historical material with A Fringe of Leaves (based on Eliza Fraser). Thomas Keneally’s first novel, Bring Larks and Heroes (1967), featured rebellious Irish convicts, a far cry from the oppressed wretches or brutalised criminals of popular legend. Always partial to historical fiction, he next produced The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith in 1972, based on the story of the Aboriginal Governor brothers, who cast themselves as bushrangers in northern NSW in 1900. This novel’s emphasis on the irony of a bloody running battle between ‘half-caste’ Aboriginal men and white Australian settlers, at a time when Federation was creating a new nation, strongly suggested contemporary parallels at a time of renewed Aboriginal claims to civil and land rights. Yet his critical perspective on historical and current events did not prevent Keneally from re-circulating stereotypes of caste in his attempt to portray an Aboriginal rebel hero.8 Sometimes novels which challenged one aspect of popular mythology inadvertently reinforced others.

My subject in this article is a pair of historical novels also published in the 1970s: Thea Astley’s A Kindness Cup (1974) and Jessica Anderson’s The Commandant (1976). Both novels, like Keneally’s, challenge the politically loaded area of the ‘national story’ as it stood at the time: Astley

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confronts an instance of the ubiquitous cover-up of colonial violence against Aboriginal people, while Anderson revisits the story of the cruel commandant of the Moreton Bay penal station to explore how it might have become a legend.

Before moving on to look at these novels in more detail, I need to acknowledge the current context of public debates about history and fiction within which this analysis will inevitably be read. The subjects of convictism and Aboriginal dispossession have at various times been highly contentious events in the Australian ‘national story’, and in the decades since the publication of *The Timeless Land* they have been extensively researched and analysed by historians as the profession expanded and developed new theoretical frameworks and research methodologies. Debates about the significance of Australia’s convict past recur, though in the early decades of the twenty-first century they no longer have anything like the weight of disputes about Aboriginal dispossession. With the ‘history wars’ drummed up during the Howard government (1996–2007), frontier violence became the subject of acrimonious ideological debate between the so-called ‘black armband’ historians of colonial race relations and those who would deny that Aboriginal dispossession had been violent in its execution and catastrophic in its results. As well, with the increasing presence of Aboriginal historians and social analysts, there have been heated debates about the ownership and appropriation of indigenous stories and voices. In this context, the work of historians about invasion and settlement – but also that of novelists, film-makers, artists, critics and curators – has been subjected to intense public scrutiny.

With these enormous changes in white Australians’ perceptions of colonialism, as well as enormous changes in the history profession, Kate Grenville’s 2005 novel about convict settlement and Aboriginal dispossession on the Hawkesbury River, *The Secret River*, met a less welcoming reception than had Dark’s *The Timeless Land* 60 years earlier. It was most fiercely criticised, not by defenders of the heroic white pioneer myth, but by some eminent professional historians, Inga Clendinnen and Mark McKenna. The issues in dispute centred on the rival claims to authority of history and fiction, and revisited issues of historical accuracy, the value of ‘empathetic’ identification with persons in the past, and the

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9 Macintyre ‘History’, 140–141.
differing aims and writing strategies of novelist and historian – as lucidly and judiciously discussed by Tom Griffiths.\(^\text{11}\) These contentions between novelist and historians demonstrated just how much is at stake for writers of both persuasions attempting to shape public opinion about race relations. To a certain extent it was a territory dispute – indeed, Clendinnen says as much, when she envisages historians and novelists, having formerly ‘jogged along their adjacent paths’, now in conflict as novelists with ‘imperial ambitions’ ‘have been doing their best to bump historians off the track’.\(^\text{12}\) Parallel paths have become a single crowded track, and competition for space is fierce. This need not be the case: as Griffiths argues, ‘history and fiction are a tag team, sometimes taking turns, sometimes working in tandem, to deepen our understanding and imagination’.\(^\text{13}\) Yet one wonders whether current pressures on historians to ‘write history that people want to read’ (the title of Ann Curthoys and Ann McGrath’s recent book), especially in the tight Australian book publishing market, has indeed crowded novelists and narrative historians onto the one, competitive, track.

While the practitioners of both these arts claim to offer new understandings of a colonial past that is constantly – and necessarily – under revision, their different disciplines produce different kinds and levels of truth. History and fiction are distinct disciplines, with their own methods and capacities. Yet most historians today would agree that the writing of history requires literary skills as well as rigorous research. And historical novelists who explore archival documents without knowing the contexts for understanding them that historians provide are tempting fate. Historians and novelists may use research differently, and explore different narratives. Clendinnen goes further and claims, contentiously, that their differences are categorical: while fiction has a primarily aesthetic purpose, she argues, history’s purpose is primarily moral.\(^\text{14}\) In elaborating this distinction, her argument slides from ‘purpose’ to the notion of the writer’s contract with her readers. Readers must be able to trust the truth of what the historian tells them, while they have no such expectations of the novelist, she claims; rather, they expect to be ‘delighted’ by the novelist’s imagination. This is a strangely anachronistic distinction between aesthetics and morality, one which would not be shared by historical novelists who challenge popular understandings.

\(^\text{11}\) Griffiths ‘History and the creative imagination’.  
\(^\text{12}\) Clendinnen ‘The history question’, 16.  
\(^\text{13}\) Griffiths ‘History and the creative imagination’, 74.5.  
\(^\text{14}\) Clendinnen ‘The history question’, 34.
of the national story, even though they reserve the right to select and interrogate their historical sources.

The novelist’s imagination goes to work on what we can ascertain about ‘what was’, but then so too does the historian’s, for facts are not self-explanatory. Some ideal combination of fact and imagination is one common ground between historian and historical novelist. In an article about his own research for *That Deadman Dance*, a novel about his people, the Noongar of the Albany area of Western Australia, Kim Scott considers Clendinnen’s claim that there is an absolute difference between the purpose and methods of history and fiction. In the process he writes appreciatively of her attempt to include indigenous perspectives in her book about first contact in the Sydney area, *Dancing with Strangers*, and also of Tiffany Shellam’s work, partly inspired by Clendinnen, on Aboriginal–white relations on the south-western frontier, particularly her attention to indigenous language and stories. Scott points out that when Shellam writes that spending ‘more time on imagining people’s motivations is a worthwhile activity; we see possibilities and choices rather than inevitabilities’, the skills she is recommending are those essential to the novelist. As a novelist himself, Kim Scott, who is interested in the period of the so-called ‘friendly frontier’ of earliest contact history, states that his concern is ‘not what was, but what might have been, and even what might yet be’. To try to imagine the motivations of people distant from oneself in time and culture is not necessarily to project onto them one’s own values, as Clendinnen rather uncharitably claimed is the practice of historical novelists.

Another common ground between novelist and historian is the contemporary cultural and political context in which both operate. Turning to the 1970s, Thea Astley’s *A Kindness Cup* and Jessica Anderson’s *The Commandant* each poses questions which derive from a cultural context shared with the historians who were their contemporaries. Political concerns that animated the late 1960s – opposition to Australia’s participation in the Vietnam War, the revived Aboriginal Rights movement with the 1967 Referendum, and the women’s liberation movement – continued to gain force as new brooms swept through social and cultural arenas during the Whitlam Federal Labor government of 1972–1975. The early 1970s was a period of creative political and cultural conflict. It was during the 1970s that intellectuals began seriously and concertedy to question the processes by which both

16 Clendinnen ‘The history question’, 23.
colonialism and convictism had been cleaned of their stains during the twentieth century. Academic historians began the new research that would re-shape our understanding of both convictism and Aboriginal dispossession. First came new work on Aboriginal history – Rowley’s *The Destruction of Aboriginal Society* (1970) and Geoffrey Blainey’s *Triumph of the Nomads* (1975) were followed in 1981 by both Henry Reynolds’ *The Other Side of the Frontier* and Lyndall Ryan’s *The Aboriginal Tasmanians*. Revisions of convict history produced John Hirst’s *Convict Society and its Enemies* (1983), followed by work on convict women by Kay Daniels and Portia Robinson. In literary studies, J J Healy’s *Literature and the Aborigine in Australia* (1978) and Laurie Hergenhan’s *Unnatural Lives: Studies in Australian Convict Fiction* (1983) traced the same concerns. Novelists of the 1970s, as I have suggested, shared the historians’ revisionary return to these subjects. The questions they asked of their material were in many respects different from those of the academic historians. But they shared a desire to use history to illuminate contemporary culture, to explore the presence of the past. They shared an urgent concern to question the basis of legends and to listen for the stories that had been suppressed.

Jessica Anderson’s *The Commandant* is set in the Moreton Bay penal station in the year 1830. According to Tamsin O’Connor’s account of the historiography of Moreton Bay, there has been a ‘zone of silence’ around the penal station opened in 1824 and the foundation of white settlement of what would in 1859 become the colony of Queensland. A convict beginning did not sit well as a preface to triumphalist popular accounts of the colony’s growth and success. O’Connor demonstrates that until the mid 1970s, silence about Brisbane’s convict origins was broken only by early historians’ occasional attention to the station’s commandants – in particular the notorious Patrick Logan – rather than to the system they operated. The first academic contribution to the history of the Moreton Bay penal settlement, she writes, did not appear until 1982 (W R Johnston’s *The Call of the Land*), although it was preceded by a 1975 collection of documents. Only after that did academic historians set about researching the convicts themselves as well as the penal system.

17 Raymond Evans ‘The country has another past: Queensland and the history wars’, keynote address, Australian Historical Association Conference, University of the Sunshine Coast, 30 June – 3 July 2009.


19 Ibid, 128.
Jessica Anderson’s novel of 1976, *The Commandant*, is, then, a challenge to that silence, although of course it does not figure in O’Connor’s historiography. Yet Anderson undertook significant research, using primary as well as secondary sources as the basis for her novel. Her title suggests that it follows the secondary sources available to her, in focussing on ‘the commandant’, Patrick Logan, who was in charge of the Moreton Bay penal station for three years until his death there in 1830. Yet this title is somewhat misleading about the novelist’s focus.

Jessica Anderson’s working title was ‘The Mercy of her Company’, referring to Logan’s young sister-in-law, Frances, whose arrival at the station to help her sister, Logan’s wife, inaugurates the narrative. Most readers have regarded Frances as the main protagonist, rather than Logan, as she is (in Anderson’s words) the ‘main carrier of the story’, ‘my witness and commentator’.20 Frances is an invented character – one of the few – because the novelist needed someone who was both an opponent and a subordinate to Logan, in order to ‘work it out as a drama’.21 Frances’s oppositional perspective on the penal system draws out the compromises made by other characters, as she is torn between her rather abstract, radical principles, her loyalty to her sister and her revulsion against Logan’s attitudes and actions. She also, inevitably and horrifically, becomes complicit in brutality when a convict gardener is flogged on her account, and complicit in concealing the ‘incurable knowledge’ of this brutal punishment.22

Logan himself only becomes the focus at the climax of the drama, when he rides out from the settlement on an exploratory expedition and meets his death. To the extent that he is the subject of the novel, the novelist is less interested in the brutality of his regime – though that is certainly evident – than in the circumstances of his murder. His character is straightforward: he is a soldier-administrator. The only mystery about him is his disappearance. Logan is presented always through the eyes of others – his family, his subordinates, the convicts. It is they who experience conflicts over conscience and compassion – or, for the convicts, hatred and revenge – that constitute the drama of the story. These multiple perspectives help the novelist to avoid ‘the traps of melodrama or easy moral outrage to which so many convict narratives fall victim’.23

21 Ibid, 7.
Anderson heard the story of Logan as a child growing up in Brisbane in the 1920s:

Logan’s murder was one of the local legends. And the legend says that he was murdered by escaped convicts. Or that the blacks, as they were called then, had a hand in it, but that it was instigated and planned by the convicts. A revenge killing. Convicts certainly contributed to that legend ... But convicts are great liars. They were as bad as novelists.24

She chooses to leave both possibilities – convicts or Aborigines – open, but also to problematise Logan’s possible motives in riding out alone to his almost certain death. What’s more, she dramatises possible reasons for the varying reports of his death that she found in the archives, and the official decision that it was ‘the blacks’ and not escaped convicts who killed him. Here the novelist is reading sources ‘against the grain’, as historians often have to do. Anderson said she had enjoyed working on this novel more than any other, because of the research involved: ‘I liked the searching out of the story, lifting it gradually out of the past’, she told an interviewer.25 Her phrasing suggests the sense in which she regarded the story as something whose shape she has to search out in the historical materials, rather as an archaeologist might ‘lift’ parts of a body or a vessel from its burial place.

In this novel, convicts are minor characters, and ‘the blacks’ are only ever observed from a distance. Anderson’s subjects are those who wield power, and their dependants. She commented that ‘Authority’ is one of the themes that interested her: ‘who has it, how well or how badly they use it – who accepts it and who resists it. Especially who resists it and how’.26 In this same interview she drew attention to the way ‘the governors and commandants – Darling, Logan, Clunie – can be seen as the politicians of their time. There was a power structure, and if we understand ours, to some extent we can understand theirs. There was the same kind of plotting and manoeuvring and scrambling for place.’27 The exercise of authority in domestic as well as public arenas is part of this: Anderson’s emphasis here on the interconnections of private and public is feminist, as is her interest in the way the women wield their limited power.

Her focus on the officers and their female relatives creates a narrowly focused but complex drama. The novel creates a powerful sense of

27 Ibid, 6.
claustrophobia, of the settlement as a prison for all concerned, the gaolers as well as the gaoled. Moreton Bay was so isolated from settlements in the south, the imbalance between the administrators and around 1000 convicts so extreme, and their confinement to the penal station so complete (because they lacked horses), that it functioned like a natural prison, as Tasmania and Norfolk Island did. Anderson does not romanticise the convicts, but shows how Frances is disabused of her youthful idealism about remedying their plight, and dramatises their interactions with those in power (including the women for whom they are required to carry out domestic tasks) as they try to gain favours, or exact some small revenge. Through Frances’s sexually naïve perspective, the novel also hints at networks of sexual exploitation among convicts and gaolers.

There is a possible connection between these themes in the novel and academic historians’ interest, in the 1960s and 1970s, in deviance and criminality as forms of social protest, and ‘history from below’. The broader context for these interests was ‘the revolutions and struggles for political and economic emancipation of colonial and semi-colonial countries, which drew the attention of governments, international and research organisations, and consequently also of social scientists, to what are essentially problems of historic transformations’.

Major Australian studies of convicts, transportation and the penal system were still to come, and they in turn would later be transformed by a Foucauldian analysis of the transition from spectacle to surveillance as a mode of punishment. As a novel completed in 1975, The Commandant shows evidence of engagement both with contemporary debates in Australian politics about power and institutions, and with some central issues in the historiography of convictism. The novelist set out to tell a story, to explore a popular legend. She achieved, I suggest, both a perceptive account of the workings of power, and a contribution to changing understandings of white Australia’s past.

Two years previously, Thea Astley had published A Kindness Cup, which addressed the historical past of Aboriginal massacres in North Queensland. Charles Dunford Rowley’s landmark trilogy, The Destruction of Aboriginal Society, had begun to appear in 1970, establishing a new focus on frontier violence, which influenced current debates about Aboriginal land rights. This was the context of public debate in which Astley made her first attempt to dramatise such historical events and their legacy. A Kindness Cup takes its impetus ‘from an actual incident at The Leap, Queensland, in the second half of the nineteenth century; but this

cautionary fable makes no claim to being a historical work’, Astley wrote. ‘Liberties have been taken with places and times and the author happily admits possible anachronisms’. Here, already, is a significant difference from Anderson’s enterprise – this is to be, not a realist novel furnished with carefully researched details of place and period, its story ‘lifted from the past’, but a ‘cautionary fable’. Naming her enterprise in this way announces the novelist-as-moralist addressing her contemporaries, and indeed the emphasis of the story is on the white citizens of the imaginary town of The Taws: both the men, police and townsmen, who massacred a group of Aboriginal people, and their opponents.

The present time of the novel is around the year 1900, a reunion to celebrate the town’s pioneering history, ‘Back to The Taws’ (Astley could never resist a pun). The events of twenty years before, leading to the massacre and the subsequent Commission of Enquiry which absolved the perpetrators, are revealed in flashback, in fragments. The present drama centres on Tom Dorahy, the former schoolteacher, who returns for the reunion. He is consumed by a desire for retribution against the murderers, a desire which he pursues against the wishes of Lunt, their white victim. Lunt is a gentle soul, a man whose attempt to protect the Aboriginal people camped on ‘his’ land almost brought about his death. He has always refused to accuse his attackers. Dorahy persuades Boyd, the newspaper proprietor, to publish an account of those past events, but the word gets out before the newspaper does, and Boyd’s offices are burned down.

In the final scene of the novel, Boyd addresses the crowd at the gala celebration in the Town Hall. Echoing the local politician’s self-congratulatory speech, he tells them the story that was destroyed in the fire:

I was going to tell you all of a humbler soul than those who waged battle in the Separation League, a humbler spirit than those who fought to use coloured labour cheap, a meeker spirit than those who waged unceasing war against the blacks. I am referring to Charles Lunt who is with us in the hall this evening.

In telling of the massacre, when local vigilantes killed six Aboriginal men and drove a terrified young mother to jump off The Leap with her baby in her arms, he oversteps the mark. The crowd breaks out into arguing and shouting, for ‘it has been told things it did not wish to hear’. And Charles Lunt accuses Boyd: ‘Damn you, damn you!’ He rushes outside, followed by Boyd and Dorahy, where the local thugs brutally attack them. Lunt is knocked

30 Ibid, 149.
unconscious, and left for dead. The other two ‘find themselves hauled by enemies who seem all clenched fist and boot to the private darknesses at the side of the hall where the gristle of their argument is stretched and torn’.31

This brutal final scene echoes the violence of the earlier attack on Lunt, when he was beaten and tied to the dead body of his murdered Aboriginal friend, and the subsequent massacre. Dorahy’s revenge is as impotent as his protests were twenty years earlier. More than that, it appears to have produced yet more violence. As a ‘cautionary tale’ the novel suggests that violence breeds yet more violence, that there is no way out of its vicious cycle. It would seem to warn readers against Dorahy’s kind of righteous anger as a response to the horrors of ‘dispersal’ and dispossession which accompanied ‘successful pioneering’.

Astley denied any claim to produce a historical work but, like Anderson, she addresses a powerful legend of the past. The Leap incident to which she refers seems to have been a composite of many variant stories about Aboriginal people being driven off a cliff by whites on a punitive raid.32 The very ubiquity of this story indicates its symbolic significance among popular images of past Aboriginal–white conflicts. Astley’s other main documentary source is the transcript of a report of the Select Committee on the Native Police Force (1861), which pre-dates the incident at The Leap. Such blatant anachronism notwithstanding, Astley was one of the first novelists to deal with such material. Unlike Keneally, she chose not to attempt to present Aboriginal characters as actors in the drama but rather constructed a story about interactions among white men. She would later return to issues of Aboriginal–white relations in It’s Raining in Mango (a 1988 bicentenary year publication, appropriately enough), this time in a fictional form that allowed her to attribute voice and subjectivity to Aboriginal characters. The Multiple Effects of Rainshadow (1996) developed this approach further as she dramatised the long-term consequences for both blacks and whites affected by a violent incident at Palm Island in 1930.

A Kindness Cup dramatises white society’s capacity to suppress knowledge of its crimes against Aboriginal people, highlighting the violence, and abuse of the rule of law, that this suppression involves. In the fictional town of The Taws, knowledge of the massacre is deliberately silenced, just as in the penal station depicted in The Commandant the flogging and sexual exploitation are not overtly acknowledged. The

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violent past is full of guilty secrets, denials and cover-ups. Another point of comparison between these two historical novels is the use of a principal character whose opposition to the status quo is fuelled by an indignation that is powerless to combat it, and in fact leads to more violence. In their different ways, each novelist is exploring the ambiguities of guilt and its often unintended consequences. Guilt about the historical past on the part of the dominant white middle class thus emerged as a major theme in serious fiction in the early 1970s, decades before accusations of political correctness and black armband history were hurled about so indiscriminately.

It is surely significant, as well, that both these women novelists, in the decade that saw a major resurgence of feminism, explored white settler legendary stories through the subjectivity of female or feminised protagonists who experienced revulsion against the brutal mistreatment of fellow human beings. Yet neither of them shirked from considering the extent to which these protagonists were themselves implicated in the violence and its cover-up. While neither Anderson nor Astley attempts to explore the subjectivity of those who are radically ‘othered’ by either convictism or colonialism, each undertakes the possibly more challenging exercise in empathy of imagining the mind-sets of the murderers and tyrants and those who are intimately connected to them by ties of family or community.

It is impossible to gauge with any accuracy the influence of critical historical novels like these, which challenge popular myths of the past. They will never reach as large an audience as the romantic pioneering sagas, in print and on screen, that still dominate populist versions of settler Australia’s past. Nevertheless they reach generations of students as well as general readers of fiction. A Kindness Cup was on the New South Wales Higher School Certificate list for many years and still appears on some secondary school reading lists (the current ACT English syllabus, for instance). Astley herself once suggested that all fiction has its use-by date, and I think in relation to this novel she is right. Her later historical novels, It’s Raining in Mango and Multiple Effects of Rainshadow, spring from more recent concerns with the continuing impact of colonial race relations for both Aboriginal and white characters. They carry less of the baggage of white guilt than her earlier ‘cautionary fable’. But A Kindness Cup made a

33 Thanks to Alice Healy for directing me to the relevant sources from the Teaching Australian Literature database. Available from: http://teaching.austlit.edu.au.
significant impact on Australians’ imaginations in the 1970s and 1980s. *The Commandant* has had no such widespread influence, although the fact that it is again in print, in the Sydney University Press Australian Classics series (2009), should ensure that it will continue to find new readers.

In conclusion, I would reiterate the point that the work of both the historian and the historical novelist, as they explore the presence of the past, is given direction by major issues in contemporary life. In the early 1970s issues of power and authority, oppression and exploitation, were urgently debated in Australia in relation to race, gender and class. Such public debate was given fictional form in novels like those I have considered here, while at the same time professional historians were carrying out the sustained research and analysis that greatly extended public knowledge of these matters – and often showed up the limits of the novelists’ imagining. My contention is that it was the work of critical novelists in the 1970s to challenge popular understandings of Australia’s white settler past by dramatising the brutality of the penal system and the violence of Aboriginal dispossession. They speak more directly than do historians to those contemporary concerns with power and its abuse, complicity, responsibility, guilt and its consequences, whether they tell a ‘cautionary fable’ or, like Anderson, employ ‘the oblique, ironic voice of fiction’.

But, then and now, critical novelists share with historians the impulse – for some it is a moral imperative – to own the past, whatever injustices were perpetrated there and to question the accretions of legend and obfuscation around past events.

About the author
