

## Re-writing 'Leichhardt' in Recent Australian Fiction

Geoff Rodoreda

In 1957, Patrick White created a template for the character of the explorer in modern Australian fiction. White's Voss was modelled primarily on Ludwig Leichhardt. Although Voss explores more the "country of the mind," rather than the land, we nevertheless learn that Voss views the country as "uninterrupted space," which is his "by right of vision."<sup>1</sup> He "[stares] imperiously over the heads of men, possessing the whole country with his eyes."<sup>2</sup> The irony here is that Leichhardt himself possessed very poor eyesight, and was unable to become a marksman. His poor eyesight is also keyed in Sidney Nolan's illustration of a bespectacled Voss for the book's cover. Nevertheless, Voss is textually positioned as the kind of Australian explorer who establishes colonial space through his imperial gaze, and this claim to space is presented as *absolute*. It is not space that allows *place* for others. Voss's two Aboriginal guides merely become "loyal subjects [...] of his new kingdom," they cannot be conceived of as land owners.<sup>3</sup> In the fiction, there is no recognition of the possession of newly acquired space by the explorer as an act of *invasion*; there is no contest for the possession of land.

Significant political and cultural changes in Australia over the last 40 years have led to a reconfiguration of the explorer figure in fiction. In short, settler-Australian (non-Aboriginal) fiction writers have been re-writing Voss – or "deconstructing Leichhardt," as Andreas Gaile puts it.<sup>4</sup> That is, the image of the benign, enlightened explorer embodied in the figure of Leichhardt (or Voss) is now being critiqued. I'd like to suggest two phases of postcolonial 'deconstruction' of the explorer in the Australian literary imaginary.

In 1988, the year of the Bicentenary in Australia, an explorer figure emerged in fiction to counter the *terra nullius* worldview of the imperial Voss. Mr. Jeffris, created by Peter Carey in his novel *Oscar and Lucinda*, was *not* modelled – as White's Voss was – on sophisticated, liberal-minded explorers like Leichhardt, but on the altogether more controversial figure of Thomas Mitchell.<sup>5</sup> Mitchell was not averse to shooting Aborigines while mapping his way through the bush. Jeffris, in Carey's novel, idolises Thomas Mitchell. He copies out Mitchell's journal and even buys clothes to dress up like his hero. Jeffris replicates Mitchell's no-nonsense approach when he finally gets his chance to become an explorer, leading the expedition through bushland to bring Oscar's glass church to Bellingen at the end of the novel. He shoots a number of Aboriginal people along the way. Here, then,

the explorer is seen as a violent invader of territory, a key player in the dispossession of Aboriginal people from their land.

In 2004, we meet the explorer Quiet Giles, the literary creation of Peter Mews in his novel *Bright Planet*.<sup>6</sup> The *Bright Planet* is a ship commissioned to sail upriver, inland from 1840s Melbourne, to search for an inland sea. As soon as the explorers disembark into bushland near Melbourne they immediately become disorientated and begin “to wonder where their destination might lie.”<sup>7</sup> Such an inauspicious beginning for a group of explorers sets the course for the party’s ultimate folly into the Australian interior.

Part of the problem for Mews’ explorers is their impaired sense of vision, when vision is supposed to be the distinguishing characteristic of the competent explorer. (Perhaps they are a little like the short-sighted Leichhardt.) Moreover, the expeditioners remain in such “a state of altered consciousness,” due to the taking of various drugs, that they become incapable of seeing anything properly.<sup>8</sup> Giles’s drug of choice is laudanum. He knows his senses are deranged “but only in this manner [can] the journey continue.”<sup>9</sup> As he writes in his diary the words recede before his eyes, “blurring and disappearing”<sup>10</sup> If exploration is primarily a visual activity, in which the “explorative gaze [...] is understood as a mode of appropriation,” then Giles’ inhibited vision serves to mock the grand trope of the imperial gaze of the explorer.<sup>11</sup>

Beyond this critique of the imperial gaze, the explorers in Mews’ novel are portrayed as trespassers on land that is already owned by others: Aboriginal people. Aboriginal characters are not central to this novel but they are indispensable to the plot, as their actions – in particular, their attacks on the ship – are causal to the incapacity of the expedition to remain intact and on course. Through switches in narratorial perspective, Aboriginal characters are given agency. What is revealed is an Aboriginal world of communication, family activity and savvy engagement with the invader.

So what is the trajectory of this character development of the explorer that I’ve traced here in recent Australian fiction? I would argue that Carey’s Jeffris is a literary production of the discourse of the “new Australian history,” the 1970s/80s revision of history that helped overturn the myth of the quiet, peaceful settlement of an empty land.<sup>12</sup> This new history told stories, instead, of violent dispossession, of massacres on the colonial frontier. The historian Richard Broome has described much of this history as being “in the tradition of victimology.”<sup>13</sup> That is, this history mostly described white-settler *oppressors* and black *victims*; it tended to shut out space for more ambiguous readings of frontier engagements. So the violent Mr. Jeffris is an explorer of his time, i.e., of the 1980s.

Peter Mews, in 2004, presents explorer-figures who mix and meddle much more with Indigenous people. In the end, while the floundering explorers disappear into a world of unreality, the Aboriginal inhabitants remain on as “the marauders who [...] dogged the expedition.”<sup>14</sup> As Mews explains in an interview, “the local inhabitants [...] are controlling the story, in a way, because they resist, at every turn, the colonial imperative.”<sup>15</sup> The explorers in Mews’ novel, then, are post-Mabo explorers. They have been created *in the wake of* the 1992 Mabo High Court decision, a legal decision which officially recognised that Indigenous Australians already owned – and had already explored and discovered – the whole continent before any European set foot in the place. From Peter Mews’ post-Mabo vantage point, the European explorer has nothing new to discover, and he becomes, in the end, a superfluity against the backdrop of a much broader Aboriginal historical experience.

## Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> White, Patrick. *Voss*. 1957. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960, 446, 189, 29.

<sup>2</sup> White, 155.

<sup>3</sup> White, 189, 191.

<sup>4</sup> Gaile, Andreas. *Rewriting History: Peter Carey's Fictional Biography of Australia*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2010, 141.

<sup>5</sup> Carey, Peter. *Oscar and Lucinda*. London: Faber and Faber, 1988.

<sup>6</sup> Mews, Peter. *Bright Planet*. Sydney: Picador, 2004.

<sup>7</sup> Mews, 14.

<sup>8</sup> Dooley, Gillian. “Batmania.” Rev. of *Bright Planet*, by Peter Mews. *Australian Book Review* 261, (2004): 43.

<sup>9</sup> Mews, 79.

<sup>10</sup> Mews, 80.

<sup>11</sup> Ryan, Simon. *The Cartographic Eye: How Explorers Saw Australia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, 9.

<sup>12</sup> Attwood, Bain. “Introduction. The past as future: Aborigines, Australia and the (dis)course of History.” *In the Age of Mabo: History, Aborigines and Australia*. Bain Attwood, ed. St Leonards: Allen and Unwin, 1996: vii-xxxviii, xv.

<sup>13</sup> Broome, Richard. “The Statistics of the Frontier.” *Frontier Conflict: The Australian Experience*. Eds. Bain Attwood and SG Foster. Canberra: National Museum of Australia, 2003: 88-98, 94.

<sup>14</sup> Mews, 294.

<sup>15</sup> Mews, Peter. “Bright Planet.” *Book Talk*. ABC, Sydney: 18 June 2004. Radio. n.p.

Geoff Rodoreda grew up in Sydney, worked as a journalist in Adelaide and Darwin, and moved to Germany in the late 1990s. He is currently a lecturer in the English Department at the University of Stuttgart, Germany.