

# Australia's secret or not-so-secret past

The Secret River, by Kate Grenville, Text Publishing, 2005

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Australian author Kate Grenville's recently published historical novel, *The Secret River*, is a serious work and one that reveals some important truths about Australia's past.

At a time when the early history of British colonisation of Australia is being revised and rewritten to justify the bloody dispossession of the Aborigines (see "What is at stake in Australia's 'History Wars'") Grenville's attempt to tackle the complex issues surrounding this period is impressive and a marked development on some of her earlier novels.

The book's title is taken from "the secret river of blood in Australian history," a phrase used by anthropologist W. E. H. Stanner in his 1968 Boyer Lecture to describe the brutal acts of genocide against Aboriginal people by British colonisers and the subsequent historical silence about these shameful events.

Grenville, however, has explicitly deleted the word "blood" from her title and said that she did not want to give "a wrong impression about the book". While she appears to have wanted the emphasis placed on the "secret" and not the "blood", her novel contains some graphic examples of the blood that was spilt during this time—Aboriginal and European alike.

Grenville bases her story on the experiences of her great-great-great grandfather, Solomon Wiseman. While the characters of the novel are fictional, the story accurately portrays real events.

Set in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, *The Secret River* details the conviction and transportation of William Thornhill, his pregnant wife Sal and young son to the colony of New South Wales, "for the term of his natural life". Thornhill was arrested and found guilty in England for attempting to steal a "few pieces" from a load of valuable Brazilian timber.

Grenville takes her readers on a journey through Thornhill's early life in England, where he was born and raised in poverty, and then across the world to the newly established British colony in Australia. The book captures the harsh and cruel existence for working class people in late eighteenth and early nineteenth century London as Thornhill learns from an early age how to survive through theft.

Despite the misery and degradation, he meets and falls in love with Sal, the daughter of a "lighterman" who transports people and produce by barge up and down the River Thames. Taken on as an apprentice by his father-in-law, Thornhill is hopeful that his life is about to improve, but London is hit by a particularly cold winter. The Thames freezes over and he is again out of work and also involved in helping to care for his Sal's dying mother. Hard times see him, Sal and their newborn son Willie, forced to move from hovel to hovel. He tries to keep the family alive by stealing but is caught, found guilty and transported to Australia.

Life in the colonies is almost as harsh, but after only four years Thornhill is issued a pardon, following the intervention and recommendation of an emancipist and settler Thomas Blackwood. He introduces Thornhill to the concept of "taking up land" along the Hawkesbury River, where they work together transporting produce to Sydney town, not far away.

Settlement of "free land" on the outer reaches of the colony was encouraged by the crown as a way of establishing crops, providing for the local settlers and driving out the Aboriginal population.

Thornhill is seduced by the notion of owning land and becomes convinced that he can secure a prosperous life for his family on the lush riverside. The land, however, is already inhabited and the local Aborigines see no reason to leave when the settlers move in, build

fences and huts and begin to plant crops.

Grenville's novel dramatises these events and carefully draws out the concerns, hopes and fears of the settlers, and, most importantly explains, what was at stake. The economic imperative to make it, for the Thornhill family, was one of life or death. Returning to London, although discussed, is never really a viable alternative. The family is economically bound to Australia and cannot leave.

Likewise, the Aboriginal people have nowhere else to go. While this is their land, the concept of private ownership is completely alien to them. They continue to live as before, until the two societies clash irrevocably.

This conflict, of values and cultures, is stark and well portrayed.

The atmosphere created in *The Secret River* is one filled with fear for the settlers, as they strive to survive in a land that is unfamiliar, and at times desolate. The sense of alienation and isolation dominating the life of the Thornhill family, particularly for Sal, now with four young boys, and always a baby in tow, is palpable.

Grenville creates some memorable and striking juxtapositions. The Aborigines, hitherto living in a primitive communist society, hunt for food as needed, do not build fences around property, which is communally owned, and spend time participating in rituals involving song and dance, story telling and playing. The settlers, on the other hand, labour from dawn till dusk, clearing land, planting crops, building fences and huts, resting only occasionally.

Insightful references are made about the life and value system of the Aborigines. Thornhill notes: "[T]hey did not seem to have to work to come by the little they needed. They spent time every day filling their dishes and catching the creatures that hung from their belts. But afterwards they seemed to have plenty of time left for sitting by their fires talking and laughing and stroking the chubby limbs of their babies."

Grenville then elaborates: "By contrast, the Thornhill household was up with the sun, hacking at the weeds around the corn, lugging water, chopping away at the forest that hemmed them in. Only when the sun slipped down behind the ridge did they take their ease, and by then no one seemed to feel much like fun and games. Certainly no one seemed to have energy to spare for

making a baby laugh.

"On the point of sleep the thought came to him: the blacks were farmers no less than the white men were. But they did not bother to build a fence to keep animals from getting out. Instead they created a tasty patch to lure them in. Either way, it meant fresh meat for dinner.

"Even more than that, they were like gentry. They spent a little time each day on their business, but the rest was their own to enjoy. The difference was that in their universe there was no call for another class of folk who stood wading up to their thighs in river-water for them to finish their chat so they could be taken to their play or their lady friend. In the world of these naked savages, it seemed everyone was gentry."

Grenville has a good grasp of the factors underpinning these differences—between primitive communism of Aboriginal society and the new capitalist order—and a humane appreciation of the tremendous difficulties facing those caught in the inevitable conflict.

Herein lies the importance of *The Secret River* and its compelling examination of the inevitable conflict between small settlers defending "their" hard won "private property"—their only chance of survival—and the Aboriginal people who also stood to lose everything.

By sympathetically and honestly portraying the lives of small settlers, and exposing the economic imperatives that they faced, Grenville is able to show how they were also victims of the new social order and were, in turn, used as a battering ram against the Aboriginal population and to establish the colonial outpost of Australia.

Grenville's novel, which is well written and with moments of lyricism and poetry, is an important contribution to our collective understanding of this process.



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