

Paul Sharrad: *Thomas Keneally's Career and the Literary Machine*. Anthem Press, London and New York, 2019. 270 pp. \$145.00 ISBN: 9781785270970 (hardback). Ebook also available.

This is a most unusual literary study in that, offering more than textual analysis (in which it also engages), it maps the trajectory of Thomas Keneally's career successes, and his very strange eclipse in the Australian literary firmament. It asks a very uncomfortable central question: how possible is it in Australia to earn a living as a literary novelist, and is it feasible, without a solid capital base, to gain a wide enough readership to survive as a professional writer? The answer is a qualified yes. A lot of subsidiary questions flow from each of these and they lead the author to some less than flattering insights into the way in which the Australian literature machine has operated and probably still does, and suggests its parochial nature.

This book made me think hard about my own reading habits in relation to Keneally's opus: about my original excitement in reading *Bring Larks and Heroes* and *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith* (favourites on tertiary syllabi among my colleagues for many years) and the ways in which I have cherry-picked my way through his novels subsequently, preferring the Australian books, especially if they deployed the matter of Ireland (my special interest). It seems, Irishness aside, that many of my colleagues have, unbeknownst to me, done something similar, whereas the nimble-footed novelist has worked extraordinarily hard, as a matter of survival, to build an international readership by exploring topics outside the national interest (but always directly or tangentially related to its current concerns). This juggle of writing the national story while also seeking broader international acclaim is one of many tensions within the corpus that Sharrad identifies: between writing for money and writing for literary recognition; between experimentalism and old-fashioned epic narratives; between pitching to middle-brow taste rather than highbrow; and not wanting to have to choose between being both a serious writer and one who tells gripping narratives often via comic excess.

Keneally peaked early in his career with two modernist novels (*Bring Larks and Heroes*, 1967, and *Three Cheers for the Paraclete*, 1968) winning Miles Franklin awards in successive years. Max Harris, a reputation-maker in the pre-Whitlam era, acclaimed the former novel as receiving a 'universally rhapsodic response' (28) and Charmian Clift, influential columnist, declared 'I am ravished. Oh, sir, we've all been waiting a long time for you' (28). What was sought was an antipodean James Joyce and for a while, his religious and existential angst and his tendency to embody misrule would seem to be qualifications enough for this role in Australian literature. He would entrench himself in the following decade as perhaps the successor to Patrick White and lay a claim to be the literary voice of the nation, until perhaps other writers like Malouf, Winton and Carey became contenders for that mantle.

If winning a Booker McConnell Prize (Sharrad exposes the chicanery of publishers' attempting to 'noble [unduly influence] judges' 107) trumps parochial success, he would subsequently mount that dizzy height with *Schindler's Ark/List* in 1982, gathering a bookshelf or two of other prestigious prizes (like the Royal Society of Literature Prize in 1973) along the way. Sharrad's study looks at the ways in which prizes like those mentioned create their own momentum independently of reviews and sales, themselves utterly different ways of measuring literariness or writerly 'celebrity.' Such prizes also, Sharrad properly if somewhat cynically notes, reflect the lustre conferred on their brand by an ethical novelist of Tom Keneally's calibre and gravitas.

But international renown, and a shift in Keneally's subject matter towards American and European narrative content as well as historical novels, exacted a cost at home, alienating readers and academic and mainstream commentators. Sharrad seems to suggest that his move into the historical novel was a commercial decision, but it can also be seen as a way of sustaining his aptitude and taste for morally complex stories, and of building on his fondness for telling compelling, morally-toned stories. 'Faction' would become his *métier*, and 'found stories,' true stories that often fell into his lap accidentally (like the Schindler story told to him in the course of replacing a battered briefcase in Los Angeles, or the Eritrean famine which he learnt about from students in Armidale), proved a seam he would prospect for many decades.

This is an exhaustively researched study that delves into newspaper files, Keneally's own archives, the novels and other writings, literary fashions, the wider publishing industry, and a body of scholarly writing on the book trade and even celebrity. It examines from many perspectives the ups and downs of literary authorship, its unpredictable outcomes, and the many contingent factors that make for success and failure (like changing regional copyright agreements and new rules in that regime, transformations in the nature of prizes and what they value, unplanned-for rises in printing costs, reviewers with diametrically opposed value systems, astute reading of a *zeitgeist* that might hit nerve-endings only for a few short years, changes in literary taste, harsher critical judgments from the home team, the costs of archival and on-the-ground research which eat into even generous prepaid royalties). Each chapter introduces new elements of the immensely complex field that is a study of a literary career: what it means to wear the mantle of voicing the nation, or more specifically the minority voices of the nation (in particular the working class, Irish, and Aboriginal); how Keneally learned to ride significant shifts in literary fashion and cultural power in the last quarter of last century and early this century; the economics of writing as a career compared with other professional salaries; how he (and his wife who acts as a *de facto* business manager) have had to negotiate advances, contracts, changing publishers as well as a myriad of other marketing skills; and how the works themselves acquire a reputation among different stakeholders, and not only nationally but transnationally.

What Sharrad makes abundantly clear is how hard-working Tom Keneally is, producing as many as two exhaustively researched books most years, and as well taking his responsibility as an *éminence grise* seriously and donating his time and name to many causes. He is generous to a fault: reading other people's manuscripts, devoting time to the Australian Republican Movement, the Australia–China Council, the Literature Board of the Australia Council, as a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, teaching script-writing and creative writing, consulting and acting in films, performing as a 'celebrity speaker' or sage on the national and international stage. As a public 'conscience' and suffering attempts to co-opt him for secondary causes, Keneally (in the roles of 'good bloke' and 'prophet' 112) was inevitably tempted to invest energy in time-consuming events (like Rotary barbeques and school prize-givings) rather than in his primary calling—writing novels. His very geniality—a public persona that displaces the angst-ridden novelistic personae—draws people. Characterising him as 'the jolly leprechaun of Australian literature' (3) without benefit even of 'scare quotes' is a bridge too far for this reader and needs to be expunged from the next edition. However, Keneally's big-heartedness and benignity warrant the nation's collective affection, though as Sharrad points out, over-exposure has its downside and can lead potential readers to feel they already 'know' the man and do not need to read the works.

Many of his novels, and more so after *Schindler's Ark*, by their nature require much research, some of which has been done by members of his family, so what emerges is a portrait of a

frenetically busy, well-buttressed (by his family), curiosity-driven professional who, since the early 1960s, has been extraordinarily productive, not only as a novelist and short-story writer, but as a dramatist, film- and tv-scripter, non-fiction writer and essayist, consistently and stubbornly, despite the market-place and the views of literary critics in Australia, holding on to the idea of a literary career.

This is an important and unique study in the Australian literary context. Few writers' careers would serve so well as a test-case as Keneally's does. He writes prolifically, in many genres, on different subjects (though thematic coherence and consistency is discernible), pitching successfully to appreciably different audiences, and has done so for over 50 years (and he is not yet retired as a writer). It is a sobering read for those of us who engage in criticism to register how, even at the height of his career, Keneally is less than self-assured, and how hard it is for the creative among us to override the self-doubt which constitutes their critical value to us as human beings and collectively as the nation or global citizenry. I think we can take from this study that the literary machine (including publishers, critics, reviewers, curriculum designers) is a cruel master that does not necessarily value or nourish the creative artists who sustain it. It is certainly a book that has sent me back to re-value this writer and rediscover him in the knowledge that I have been inducted by Sharrad in the machinations of critics, reviewers and the publishers, all of whom confer value on these artefacts. And what a pleasure it is to be reading the neglected Thomas Keneally again, and adding to my big stock of his novels by buying books I missed.

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