

Christopher Koch, *Out Of Ireland*: no more 'Hiding the Stain'

CHAD HABEL
Flinders University of South Australia

This paper investigates what Koch has called 'the Tasmanian tone,' reflecting the historical experience of the island once known as Van Diemen's Land. Koch has produced an ancestral narrative designed to overcome the legacies of historical amnesia and repressed ancestry, and to enable reconciliation with Australia's penal history. Here I wish to draw attention to a conception of 'post-colonialism' which discusses attempts to overcome historical trauma.

A major effect of the displacement caused by the system of transportation was the destruction of what we would call the family unit or kinship group. Whatever the individual circumstances, the Irish were displaced from the land and culture of their birth; few could afford to maintain contact with home and even fewer had any hope of returning. As Vincent Buckley puts it, 'Every generation of the Irish has had as one of its chief signs the phenomenon of interrupted lives, and hence interrupted memory-transmission. Families becomes dispersed, like leaves at the end of autumn, the 'family' remains, it is true, but as a denuded tree-stump, full of stay-put melancholy' (ix).

The legacy of absence heritage plays a significant role in Australia. While the ancient ancestral links of the Irish were severed during migration to Australia, descendants of transportees had a new, terrible shame to contend with – convict ancestry. Many turned to a kind of willed amnesia, a deliberate repression of Famine memory and a conscious rejection of convict ancestry. When we consider history and memory we often forget the gaps in between, the points where memory has been deliberately suppressed in order to avoid reliving psychic trauma or suffering the shame of having experienced it. In Tasmania, this was called 'Hiding the stain,' which Koch's narrator Barton feels, 'Fellow-Tasmanians will understand' (*Out Of Ireland*x).

This historical amnesia is all the more poignant if we consider Tasmania's painful history as a penal settlement. In his essay 'A Tasmanian Tone' Koch tells of a

remarkable attempt at erasing history. The respectable Hobart merchant who tears out his ancestors' page in the convict register is certainly engaged in such erasure (*Crossing The Gap* 113). This suppression of personal history has an analogy in the larger domain of national history.

After transportation ended and the settlement was disbanded in 1877, the Hobart city fathers told the local building contractors to go into Port Arthur and take what they liked. The place was gutted; and it's difficult not to see this as a symbolic act of hatred by the free settlers, who had fought to end the shame of being a penal colony. Tasmania (its very name having been changed from the one with such grim associations wherever English was spoken) was trying to erase its past (112).

In this paper I wish to draw an analogy between this type of complex history and the significance of ancestry for many of Koch's characters. I first discuss the differing social status of these characters, and how this relates to their ancestry. Then after one example of absent origins in *Highways To A War*, I focus on Langford and Devereux, and 'the Stain' which the Langford family sought to hide. Koch narrates this ancestral narrative to try and heal the legacies of the past.

Many of Koch's characters have significant ancestors. In particular, the beliefs and ideals of the members of the Young Ireland movement are complicated by the fact of their ancestry. This is especially true of Martin Fitzgibbon, a self-proclaimed patriot fighting for the people of Ireland, whose black mark on his family tree is 'that notorious John Fitzgibbon who became Earl of Clare and Lord Chancellor of Ireland: hater of Catholics despite his Catholic ancestry, and ruthless opponent of the 1798 rebellion. Martin is not proud of Lord Clare' (*Out Of Ireland* 300). Devereux believes that Fitzgibbon's Anglo-Irish ancestry will give him a greater chance of obtaining a pardon from the authorities: 'he was born to be a servant of English rule' (300). However, Devereux himself becomes defensive when his Irish ancestry is questioned: 'We of the Ascendancy have been long enough in Ireland to be Irish ... We are Irish in our affections, our loyalty and our pride, I do assure you, madame' (344). The English colonial surgeon Howard comments on Devereux's feeling:

He fights for a people who are divided, and so enfeebled by the Famine that they are almost broken. Little of their blood flows in his veins; he doesn't speak their language, but he sees himself as one of them in his heart ... I admire him for that, but I think he seeks to rid himself of an ancient guilt. Mr. Devereux's Anglo-Norman ancestors were sent to tame Ireland, and carried out much slaughter there, in the name of Queen Elizabeth. The case is similar with a number of his colleagues in rebellion. I believe these youthful gentlemen wish to atone for the sins of their forbears. (344)

This remark initially appears to trivialise Devereux's Irish identity and his political activism, by claiming that he seeks simply to absolve himself of the guilt of his ancestors' atrocities. This is an overly cynical approach, however, since Devereux feels strongly about his ancestry. Speaking to Howard's Irish servant Kathleen, he

claims, 'I love the people of Ireland above all else. I disown my English blood' (347). This conscious act of disowning underscores the fact that ancestry is not fixed or unchanging; to some degree, we choose our ancestors, and we certainly choose the significance with which we invest them. 'Am I now to have my ancestry held against me? And where would Ireland have been, without the Normans? We would have no towns. We would have no civilised arts. And no understanding of politics either' (528.) He seeks to accentuate the constructive, history-making aspects of his ancestry and downplays the 'ruthless tenacity' with which Ireland was conquered. Thus a fundamental contradiction exists in Devereux's ancestry: he is Irish but he is also noble. 'You have an Irish way of speaking, but you're still one of the quality— anyone can see that' (64). To a large degree, Devereux's problematic ancestry accounts for the basic rift in his personality, what he calls his 'double nature,' the two aspects of which are constantly at battle, producing mixed emotions and a type of indecisiveness.¹ Fundamentally, however, his ancestry underscores his social status and alienates him from the majority of the population.

Koch also narrates the ancestry of characters from the lower social orders. Most significantly, Kathleen's ancestry, even though it is not absolutely certifiable, shines in comparison to a reflection upon the character of Catherine Edgeworth, Devereux's earlier fiancée. Kathleen 'was truly a daughter of the soil of Erin: an O'Rahilly who may well ... be an actual blood relation of that wonderful Egan O'Rahilly who lamented the death of the Gaelic order, and who created the inspired form of *aisling* in which Ireland herself is the woman of the poet's vision' (582). This ancestry figures large in Devereux's mind and particularly his romantic vision of her; she becomes his own 'Dark Rosaleen' – and it is quite evident how, for him, Kathleen symbolises Ireland itself. While his conception of her is certainly romanticised, it is difficult to overstate the significance of her ancestry in Devereux's mind.

In addition to this, Koch illustrates another ancestral relationship standing in stark contrast to that of Devereux and Fitzgibbon. The convict overseer-turned bushranger Daniel O'Donnell proclaims his ancestry with pride and strongly identifies with the anti-colonial tradition he claims to represent.

– You may think that I bow before you, Devereux, as so many of our people do. I do not. I spit on you and yours, who were nothing but English robbers. And I bow to no man. I am a Ribbonman, and a descendant of kings. I am Daniel O'Donnell from Donegal, and a descendant of Red Hugh O'Donnell.

He lifted his long chin, and displayed the great red fan of his beard; head thrown back, he looked down his nose at me, with fatuous, alcoholic pride. He was not merely drunk, I saw, but mad ... (569)

Having been flogged too much apparently caused O'Donnell's insanity, and he is a prime anti-hero, considered by most a monstrous villain and a threat to civil order. Thus the validity of his ancestral identification is thrown into some doubt, especially when he vitriolically abuses Devereux on account of his origins.

It's one of our great leaders, and he speaks no Irish! But isn't it a Protestant you are, and one of the bloody quality? Well, I say you've never been Irish. Do you hear? Not you nor your ancestors, whom I piss on: the God-damned Old English who stole our estates, and destroyed and ruined our lords. Do you think I know nothing of that butcher Essex, sent by the bloody whore Elizabeth? Your ancestor, Devereux! Your pox-ridden English ancestor! (568)

Here, the sense of an epic battle between descendants of ancient enemies is, at best, romanticised and, at worst, psychotically deluded. O'Donnell's unqualified hatred of the novel's main character certainly does not arouse the reader's sympathy. However, we should not entirely dismiss his ancestral identification, because it is important to note that Kathleen stands alone in feeling some sympathy for him, even though he raped, kidnapped and drugged her. 'Dan is entirely mad, that's the truth of it. But supposing he had not been put in gaol and flogged, he might have been a better man – and one who might have fought for you, since he fears nothing. Being flogged by the English made him mad. It also put an anger in him that cannot be cured. Now, his soul may be lost' (547). This compassion and touch of empathy introduces a note of discord to the representation of O'Donnell as a vicious murderer. Kathleen may relate to him more easily because of her own painful experiences of the Famine and the fact that they are of the same class. O'Donnell and Kathleen are smaller examples of the convict 'Stain' Koch is exposing, and thus he engages social history.

Ancestry is also conceived of in terms of absence and amnesia in the character of Dmitri Volkov, from *Highways To A War*. Just before his death, he uncharacteristically declines a 'therapy session' of opium smoking, and draws Harvey Drummond aside to a cafe. Here he unburdens his heart, eventually speaking of a recent marriage break-up. When he tells of his origins, his ancestry assumes a larger significance than his nickname 'Count' might suggest: Mike comments, 'I reckon this grandfather was the start of Dmitri's problems' (363). His grandfather was a minor government official in Tsarist Russia, and so classed as noble and White Russian – when he fled the Revolution he took Dmitri's father, who was fifteen. Peter never overcame his sense of loss and dispossession, became active in political clubs aimed at overthrowing the Soviets, and also involved the family heavily in traditional Russian cultural practices, aiming one day return to the life he had lost. 'He made me remember it too – so I have always lived with memory of Holy Russia. Memory that is not my own: a dream. This is incurable, Harvey: it was introduced from birth!' (250).

The legacy of Dmitri's grandfather produces in him a fundamental conflict and dissonance which means that he can never feel at home in Paris, but he cannot return 'home' because it never existed for him. This is why he takes up a life as a war-photographer, and it also explains his strongly-felt hatred of the Communists in Indochina and all totalitarian systems. 'But Nazis are gone now ... So why do so many goddamn Western intellectuals not hate this other tyranny as much, which goes on liquidating millions?' (251). He is highly emotional on this topic, and it is apparent that, for the most part, his ancestry operates below the surface of his conscious mind.

Furthermore, his ancestral memory is entirely at odds with his life situation, and so it is not by any means a unified, steady, reliable memory. Nonetheless, it still motivates him to wander, and gives him the impulse to escape. Volkov's ancestry cripples him for life, as does Michael's, although for both of them their ancestral memory is composed of gaps and absence.

Effecting historical amnesia meant covering up the past at all costs, making a conscious effort to erase shameful ancestry. For Mike's father John, it meant locking up the Devereux journals and portrait in the storeroom and forbidding access to it. When adolescents Raymond and Michael are discovered 'prying' in the storeroom, Raymond fears for Mike, remembering the brutal punishments old John inflicted for 'misdemeanours' (43). The legacy of the convict days manifests in concrete domestic violence. Tasmanian himself, Barton understands what 'the stain' once meant for those such as Michael's father.

Convict stock ... the threat all Tasmanians secretly feared: it had come up through the fathoms of the years to violate him, to disgrace and diminish him: to enlist him in its squalid gloomy ranks forever. And he had wanted to simply reject it; he had locked it away and hidden it, as his father and grandfather had done. But he could not hide it from himself. It had always been there, like evidence of an hereditary illness. (59)

The illness metaphor is revealing, and explains the title of the diptych, 'Beware of the Past.' Dealing with the past may be difficult, but Koch suggests that we have reached a point where we should stop '[h]iding the Stain' and confront our painful history before it does any more damage to families like the Langfords. This is why he has Barton publish the Devereux journals, to do some justice to Michael's life, motivated by his memory of Mike's deeply-hidden feeling that 'sometimes ... I think I'm the son of someone better' (44). It is to overcome this sense of pain and injustice that Koch reunites Michael with his true, unacknowledged ancestor.

This reunification is effected through the creation of intertextuality between Mike's life story and his silenced ancestral narrative, using a fictional narrator. The narrative of Langford's life and disappearance is inextricably related to the story of Robert Devereux's transportation to Australia and the time he spent here. Apart from a brief author's note, Koch himself does not directly illustrate this relationship; rather, he creates a narrator who tells the story for him, and thus distances himself from the narrative. Raymond Barton narrates much of *Highways To A War*, telling of his childhood friendship with Mike and his travels to Asia to try and find him, and speak to his friends. Thus he also functions as editor, choosing which testimonies to include and when in order to create a sense of narrative momentum and character development. Barton constructs this narrative rather self-consciously, often revealing himself to the reader and even admitting that 'I might even take some of the liberties of the novelist – some, but not many' (65). Barton's editorial role expands in *Out Of Ireland*, where he edits Devereux's journal for publication, omitting certain parts and offering comments and translations in the editor's notes. Having Barton function as

narrator and editor creates authorial distance and a buffer zone between Koch and the text, such that we may analyse the narrator's motives and inclinations, as well as any bias or judgement in his position.

Significantly, Barton has quite a personal stake in the narrative. A childhood friend of Langford's who never had much adult contact with him, Barton is asked to execute his will and becomes the ultimate witness to his life and fate. His main task is to ascertain whether or not Langford is still alive, and this requires travelling to Asia and speaking to Langford's friends, making a last-ditch attempt to find him before finally pronouncing him dead. Of course, Barton never finds Langford, but the story of how he attempts to do so unfolds into the narrative of Langford's life. All Barton 'finds' is some of the reasons why Langford went into Cambodia, and he only begins to guess at his old friend's underlying motives in taking up a life as a war-photographer. Early in the novel Barton hints at Michael's impulse to leave Tasmania; 'He was the one who got away' (12). His determination to leave his place of birth and find a place in Asia is vividly illustrated when, in Singapore, his money runs out and he begins to starve, becoming seriously ill before eventually finding work – 'He felt at home here' (73). The way Barton tells it, Langford escaped Tasmania, and never really felt at home there. In his unconscious memory the island was always a prison, and his impulse to escape it is the ancestral legacy of Deveruex's captivity and eventual escape from his antipodean prison.

Langford's disappearance into Cambodia eschews any possibility of closure within the text of *Highways To A War*. The narrative trails off with no conclusion or climax – we are left sharing Barton's lack of comprehension of Langford's life, we feel an absence of meaning. This search for meaning in Langford's life becomes a central concern for Barton as an amateur historian, and he seeks to delve into the past to try and understand what historical forces shaped the life of his friend. This is how *Out Of Ireland* comes about; after the death of the last Langford brother, Barton publishes the journals uncovering the Langford 'family's ancient secret': the existence of an illegitimate convict ancestor (*Out Of Ireland* x). Barton's decision to publish the journals indicates a strong belief that to understand Langford we must understand his ancestry. Furthermore, Barton's motives are grounded in the hope of healing and reconciliation with the past, so he has undeniably positive intentions in revealing 'the Stain.'

The motivation to understand Langford comes from an abounding sense of loss and grief over his disappearance. This is first shown by his closest friends, particularly Jim Feng, but comes to be shared by Barton as well as by the reader. The central point is that he was never told his family history – it was consciously suppressed in order to cover the shame of its origins. 'No More Hiding the Stain' is the direct antidote to this suppression.

This paper reads *Out Of Ireland* as suggesting a way to move beyond the traumas of the past, to reclaim popular memory and to rewrite history with positive ends in mind. The fundamental step is to cast aside amnesia and investigate our ancestry: to overcome the shame of the convict brand, to stop 'Hiding the Stain'. Koch offers a form of ancestral identification that enables individuals to both reconcile with the past and move with purpose into the future.

Note

- 1 At Adelaide Writers' Week on March 9, 2000, Koch stated that ancestry was directly related to the duality or double-nature of the characters in his fiction. He suggested that the sheer multiplicity of one character's ancestors made problematic a coherent, unified sense of origins.

Works cited

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