

PIONEER LIFE COMES ALIVE

Three classic tales put voices and faces to Australia's remarkable pioneers, in this first of a two-part essay by literary critic **PETER CRAVEN**.

The reconstructed Durack family home in Western Australia is now the Argyle Homestead Museum.

Photo: Rod and Lyndal, Caretakers, Argyle Homestead Museum

What on earth are we to make of the pioneers who settled Australia and made it, for better or for worse, what it is? There is that meditative figure of Frederick McCubbin, pensive and stoical as it sits forever in profile, a stranger in a strange land, yet forever epitomising an older Australia of which we are the inheritors. This is worth bearing in mind as the country prepares to find out whether or not it wants to pass the proposal for an indigenous advisory Voice to the government and the parliament which we are told can in no way supersede it: Noel Pearson in his Boyer lectures drew attention to the different elements which made up the Australian inheritance and did not give an exclusive emphasis to the First Nations/Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history but spoke of the common law and the immigrant contribution. We denude ourselves of much of our history if we forget this. A convict colony that came to be in barely a century, one of the less bad, more progressive democracies on Earth.

That eminent man of the left Stephen Murray-Smith would always say our judgement of how we treated indigenous Australians needed to be set against international practice. This was congruent with Murray-Smith's exclamation when Geoffrey Blainey's stance on Asian immigration led some fraction of his academic colleagues to revile him. 'Ah, the tyranny of envy!' We need when we consider the history of the pioneering spirit to do justice to what Mark Twain meant when he said Australian history read like a series of beautiful lies. We should be on our guard against the tendency to invert this and simply believe in the Australian nightmare, which may in turn take the form of overemphasising ugly truths.

It is worth bearing in mind that Inga Clendinnen (1934-2016), that very theoretically stringent (as well as imaginative) historian took a dim view of the fictional representation of settlers waging war against indigenous people as it was represented in Kate Grenville's 2005 novel *The Secret River*,

which became a famous stage show too, directed by Neil Armfield. Inga believed we had to master the idiom of the past by thinking our way into its ways of seeing and not simply to assume that the settlers, say, were ourselves in fancy 19th century dress. Clendinnen knew all about the theory of the subject position and the rigour with which history must be imagined. The greatest writer apprehends history by imagining it and imaginatively re-creating it.

WE OF THE NEVER-NEVER

Of course, we love the classic accounts of the pioneer experience and Mrs Aeneas Gunn's *We of the Never-Never* is the first and in some ways the most inward of all of them. Jeannie Gunn was born in 1870, the year Bismarck unified Germany, and she lived to see John F. Kennedy inaugurated as president in 1961.

'A good mate's
harder to find
than a good wife.'

We of the Never-Never is a strange awkward book full of inverted commas for emphasis and bursting with enthusiasm for a new world of mateship which can accommodate a woman into its midst while intermittently indicating the deep poignancy of life and the raw strangeness of these men who considered a woman almost as a new species. She came from Melbourne in 1902 to the Northern Territory where her husband, always referred to as 'the Maluka', ran Elsey cattle station on the Roper River, nearly 500km south of Darwin. There are early scenes where one of his Scottish henchmen refuses to believe she could be got across a river and this in turn is simply a subset of his belief she has no place on the station at all and what are they

supposed to do with a creature who wants feather-stuffed pillows? All of this is conveyed in a radically stilted, awkward variety of point-of-view writing, a kind of improvised free indirect style which comes across as strange and oddly candid at the same time.

Jeannie Gunn was a kind of Mary Poppins.

Jeannie Gunn seems to have been some kind of born writer while never having learnt how to handle the kind of narrative she is writing. It does not matter because there is something very buoyant about the account of how she became one of the boys by being the only white woman for hundreds of miles. Because it is all done from life it is artless and totally credible.

Then the Sanguine Scot said that he would 'tackle the lubras¹ for her'. And in half an hour everywhere was swept and garnished and the lubras were meek and submissive. "You need to rule them with a rod of iron," Mac said, secretly pleased with his success. But there was one drawback to his methods, for next day, with the exception of Nellie, there were no lubras to rule with or without a rod of iron. Jimmy the water carrier and general director of the woodheap gossip explained that they had gone off with the camp lubras for a day's recreation.

¹ *Editor's note:* According to current dictionaries this 19th century term for an Aboriginal girl or woman is in current usage 'usually offensive' (*Merriam-Webster*) or more usually simply 'offensive' (e.g. *Collins*), but in earlier times it was less obviously so. *Wiktionary* indicates it is 'now racially offensive' (*emphasis added*).

She is funny about this sort of thing and she creates a sense of the Aboriginal women, as easy-going funsters who could not quite believe she was real, any more than the bushman could. It is a worm's-eye view of a young woman as a kind of innocent abroad who is also doing her best to manipulate the situation as she sees it by virtue of her own naivete and her nakedness in the face of every wind that blew. Again, there are the easy-going racketing Aboriginal women who think she is a hopeless weirdo.

Undoubtedly I made myself attractive to the blackfellow mind; for, besides having proved an unexpected entertainment I had made everyone feel mightily superior to the missus. That power of inspiring others with a sense of superiority is an excellent trait to possess when dealing with a black fellow, for there were more than enough helpers next day, and the work was done quickly and well, so as to leave plenty of time for merry-making. The Maluka and Mac were full of congratulations.

It is in some ways a totally weird world she evokes, not least because of the way she can relate or she can create, blow by blow, a bushman's sense of how his mate is sacred to him "passing the love of women":

"If the boss'll excuse me, me mate's dead-set against a woman doing things for him. If you wouldn't mind not coming. He'd rather have me. Me and him's been mates this seven years. The boss'll understand." The boss did understand, and rode across to the Warlochs alone, to find a man as shy and reticent as a bushman can be, and full of dread lest the woman at the homestead would insist on visiting him. "You see, that's why he wouldn't come on," the mate said. "He couldn't bear the thought of a woman



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Promotional image for the TV mini-series version of *The Secret River*.

Source: ABC iView

doing things for him and the Maluka explained that the missus understood all that.”

The mate holds out: “he’d rather have me” ... “A good mate’s harder to find than a good wife,” his gentle, protecting devotion increased tenfold.’

The contemporary, especially youthful reaction to which is to say “It’s a bit gay” is irresistible but not quite right. *The Never-Never* is a world of men without women—or rather, in practice, where the narrator is the only white woman—the rest are black or Chinese from whom intimacy could never be conceived of as coming. And, despite the fact that she is a typecast carer, it makes perfect sense that the dying man should want the care of the one person who is intimate with him, rather than the woman (the lady) of the station who symbolises tender loving care—and isn’t that the meaning of womanliness?

So *We of the Never-Never* is a kind of *bildungsroman*, if not a portrait of the artist then of the woman who defines herself against a world in which she is doing everything in her power to assimilate herself with and which welcomes her as a vision but also as a stranger in what she comes to see as a strange land (while doing her damndest not to be blinded by the irony).

There is a magnificent section about white justice and black justice:

The white man has taken the country from the blackfellow, and with it his right to travel where he will for pleasure or food, and until he is willing to make recompense by granting fair liberty of travel, and a fair percentage of cattle or their equivalent in fair payment—openly and fairly giving them, and seeing that no man is unjustly treated or hungry within his borders—cattle

killing, and at times even man killing by blacks, will not be an offence against the white folk. A black fellow kills cattle because he is hungry and must be fed with food ... and until the long arm of the law interfered, white men killed the black fellow, because they were hungry with a hunger that must be fed with gold, having been trained in a school that for generations has acknowledged "Thou shalt not kill" among its commandments ... Truly we British-born have reason to brag of our "inborn sense of justice".

Mrs Aeneas Gunn has to do a double take in order to get a moral perspective, but she gets one eventually. Still it is fascinating and a bit creepy that this young woman, just after Federation, can have to come to grips with what seem like better than average men riding out with a theoretical willingness

to pull a gun on a 'blackfella' who has done nothing but kill a bit of cattle at the time of a corroboree.

We of the Never-Never is characterised by the lyrical and impassioned outbursts in the midst of the mystery of moral confusion. The death of her husband Maluka who believes "Behind all Shadows standeth God" is rendered by "the silent hearts of the men of the Never-Never".

And as those great hearts mourned, ever and anon a long-drawn-out, sobbing cry went up from the camp, as the tribe mourned for their beloved dead—their dead and ours—our Maluka, "the Best Boss that ever a man struck".

Jeannie Gunn was a kind of Mary Poppins in a strange masculinist world which did not believe in white magic and the tribe that mourned it and half-obeyed it are then flung,



We of the Never Never film adaption screenshots.

half in fun, half with the pang of loss. It is a funny book with plenty of pathos and the only reason we think of it as some kind of classic is the vibrancy with which it displays the contradictions it rehearses.

It is sometimes remarked on that there are some books which can only be classics on the ground they represent and Jeannie Gunn gives us the dirt beneath the pastoral fingernails. *We of the Never-Never* is some approximation to an Australian 'novel' we shrink from.

The women stand with the girls, while the men drink and ignore them.

And it is interesting in this respect that the 1981 film *We of the Never Never*—which should by rights have been the best chance to revivify the book's status as canonical—does not quite do this despite the fact that it is filmed on location and gives us the full majesty of the gallop of the horses and the rich golden beauty of the territory as it's captured by the camera. Central to the difficulty of the film is that it doesn't solve the problem of how to dramatise material that is presented in the book via the effusion of the narrator's interior reaction rather than anything she directly says or does.

We of the Never-Never is a concerted lyrical act of recollection but an incident like that of the dying mate (and the mate that looks after him) needs to be opened out if it is to work as cinema. That is true of the death of the old Aboriginal who thinks he is dying of the curse that has been laid upon him.

When it was released, there were overseas reviews which thought the film's response to the indigenous characters was at once old-

fashioned and patronising. This was partly because the film follows the minimalism of the representation and partly because it attempts to circumvent it. There is an attempt to make Bet-Bet prominent and she is, of course, the central figure in Aeneas Gunn's *Little Black Princess* which was published before *We of the Never-Never*. But there is no real attempt to come to terms with the idea of a punitive expedition against the Aboriginals being countenanced by the heroic and civilised Maluka, though we do get Dandy—played by John Jarratt—saying the moment when the station hands celebrate King Edward by shooting into the air is 'our fault' in terms of the reaction, the delineated panicky reaction, it provokes among the blacks.

Angela Punch-McGregor does everything she can with Jeannie Gunn: she is hesitant, commanding, querulous, and brave but the film has the air almost of a quasi-documentary in the lyrical mode and this is because it does not consistently have the words and actions which will make for the full realisation of dramatic cinema.

Mrs Aeneas Gunn was writing to capture the broad strokes of the memory of her couple of years at a cattle station in the Territory, but the film wants specification without realising the degree of invention and fleshing out this requires. And when we do get it there is too little of it and it seems to be a footnote to the action rather than a re-imagining. It does not help that Arthur Dignam seems miscast as the Maluka where Sam Neill, say, might have been able to carry off this blatantly leading man role which has the added difficulty that he is represented in the book not only as the Master Spirit (that seems to be what his name means) but as one who is given the halo and the elegiac idealisation that comes with the intensely personal. Dignam is reasonable, thoughtful, reticent in a way that does not evoke a leader among gun-toting horsemen and the slenderness of the script does not help.

It is fine for Angela Punch-McGregor to talk about herself as a little wallflower who



This countryside was once part of the Durack family's cattle station in a remote corner of Western Australia.

Photo: Uve Kriemann

should have stayed in Melbourne, but the film has to fill in gaps that the book glides over in the way it performs a kind of exorcism of a rite of passage which in the book is full of gaps and blanks and silences. Why don't Jeannie and Maluka have a child, or try for one? Why is her isolation as a woman something she baulks at but is at the same time complicit with?

None of which is to deny that the film version, *We of the Never Never*, rather powerfully evokes the book's status as a set of mood pieces in quest of a storyline. We do feel the pang of the near desolation of being that conundrum of a thing—a woman—in a man's world that has no place for such a creature.

In terms of a putative Australian canon, *We of the Never-Never* can be taken as an allegory in terms of the Australian way of life and the way many women well into the middle of the 20th century were seen superficially as marginal to a circumambient mythology of mateship, where they in fact

had a centrality which stood in judgment on the masculinist values that domineered over it or excluded it.

The book is the 'novel' of an outsider who is in fact the emotive centre of a world that cannot locate her and which seems to be no place for her. Jeannie in film and book is coterminous with the *nom de plume* that was also her married name, Mrs Aeneas Gunn. It is a weird paradox: only women (or let us say largely women) read novels yet stories of roughing it pioneer-style in the bush are very much a man's prerogative and pastime.

We of the Never-Never uses a technique as a kind of overarching naivete which is a form of fictionalisation even though the publisher Random House reissued it as non-fiction. What it does not have, however, is that masterful sense of self-possession with which the Durack matriarch speaks in *Kings in Grass Castles*. None of which has stopped *We of the Never-Never* from selling a million or so copies in the 115 years of its existence.

But if we step back and allow politics and society a bit of leg room, this is a Federation book that captures the mood of a society that gave women the vote before anyone else. It is a *cri de coeur* and to use Joseph Furphy's phrase it is almost offensively Australian. But like Helen Garner long after her Jeannie Gunn captures a piece of subject matter: the women stand with the girls, while the men drink and ignore them. What could be more pioneering?

KINGS IN GRASS CASTLES

Mary Durack's *Kings in Grass Castles* (1959) is also an intensely imaginative piece of non-fiction though its use of fictionalising technique is at an opposite pole to Jeannie Gunn's in something the same way that Robert Hughes' *The Fatal Shore* has little in common with Helen Garner in *Monkey Grip* or *The First Stone*. *Kings in Grass Castles* is not a sustained exercise in self-portraiture with an unreliable narrator rendering self-consciousness with a shifting self-doubt and glimpses of an unloved revelation in the mirror. It is in fact a work of literature because it is such an epically realised work of history even though it transcends the genre of which it is a distinguished example by virtue of the grandeur which allows for vast tonal range, the variegation of the voices that blend into it, and its tremendous variety of colouration and tone.

Apart from anything else, this is the supreme pioneer book which delineates with great scope and detail the way in which Patrick 'Patsy' Durack establishes a vast empire of cattle stations, some of them the size of a smaller nation. There is a tremendous exhilaration in the way we see the Durack patriarch quest for gold and cross rivers and subdue Western Queensland and hit the Kimberleys like the revelation of the pioneering spirit writ epical and all-conquering. In one scene he says to a couple he wants to transit to grab land: "It's not a property I'm offering you. It's a principality."

In 1883 Durack and his partners launched an historic trek to take cattle from their properties overland to the Kimberley in WA. It took two-and-a-half years and they lost half their stock, but it opened up the area for cattle grazing and a port was established at Wyndham to service the district.

Patsy Durack says:
'It's not a property
I'm offering you.
It's a principality.'

Patsy the cattle breeder man of vast golden capital is 'a prince', if we are to invoke the Irish idiom that has become part of the older Australian vernacular. And the shadow of Ireland—the potato famine that reduced families to skeletons—is invoked together with the ancient Gaelic spirit of Brian Boru and Cuchulain and the crime by perfidious Albion of dispossessing a Catholic aristocracy from which Patrick Durack derived and from which he seems some kind of throwback.

But this rich and marvellous work of history unearthing a world of which we scarcely dream is also a tragic story and therefore in a paradoxical way a story of failure, whatever hubris it was that drove Patsy Durack to let his reach exceed his grasp. His beloved wife is dead and he is beyond tears and the blacks wailed and his Aboriginal retainer Pumpkin stays by him but at the end his beloved Mary, four years' dead, comes to him in dreams.

All little kings in their grass castles,
Mary, and the wind and the water
sweeping them away... Pumpkin,
the best friend I ever had.

Patsy Durack is left bereft although he has always believed in his wife's sense of a higher dominion despite the sorrow and humiliation (or rather as the deeper meaning which is continuous with it).

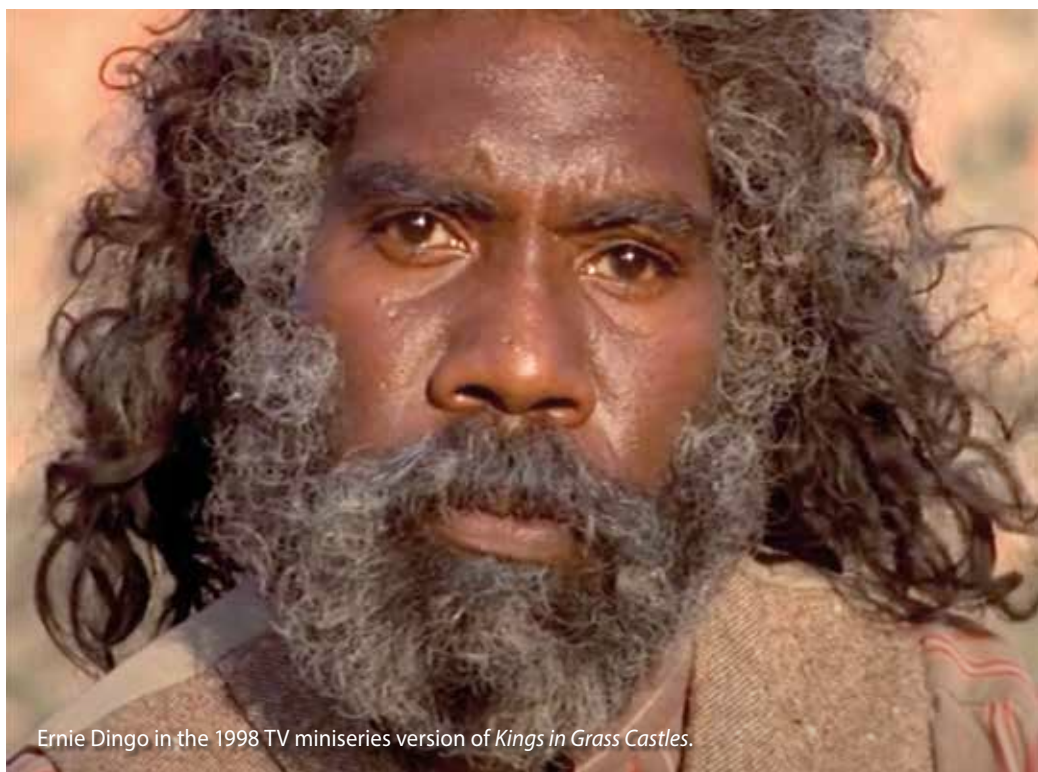
"That I who have spared so many from the humiliation of debt should be unable to meet my own is the greatest affliction the Lord could have sent me," he said. To which grandmother replied as always in terms of stress and trouble, "But affliction, you see, my dear, is the love of God. For how can you wear a crown if you have not borne a cross."

You do not expect to read the story of an Australian pioneer—utterly and eloquently articulate—who hears the call of the Sidhe (the 'fairy folk' in Irish mythology) and is also in love with a strong religious woman

who tells the beads of her rosary. There is a ruminative melancholy that co-exists with his *esprit de corps*.

It is a wholly convincing portrait of a great pioneering spirit, grabbing land as if there were no tomorrow.

The husband and wife commune in a world of complex and somehow contraindicated possibilities:



Ernie Dingo in the 1998 TV miniseries version of *Kings In Grass Castles*.

“But you got where you wanted, my dear,” Grandmother reminded him. “You’ve made money.”
 “Was it for the money then?” Grandfather asked. “Now that it has come I cannot be sure.”
 It puzzled his wife how a man who had done so much with such speed and efficiency seemed almost incapable, at this stage, of any action whatever.

There is a tremendous *brio* in the portrait by Mary Durack (1913-1994) of her grandfather Patrick Durack (1834-1898), which must be one of the greatest portraits ever written of an uneducated man who was always a man of great panache and style:

“Sooner or later we’ll all have to walk out of this country,” the pessimists predicated.
 “When I walk out,” said Grandfather, “I go in a four-in-hand, and I go a rich man. So help me God.”

Part of the perspective trick with *Kings in Grass Castles* is that it is a wholly convincing portrait of a great pioneering spirit, grabbing land as if there were no tomorrow—a figure, if you like, who might in his pioneering way, his old Australian way, be thought of as a great capitalist. But this delineation of his success and failure as an entrepreneur is liable to be read by the business layperson for all its other qualities, for its notation of a circumambient world. He sends his sons to Saint Patrick’s College, Goulburn, but he reacts almost like the high-handed patriarch he partly is when they suggest they might like to matriculate and go to university.

I had not in mind for either of ye the law or the classics for a career of which Dr. Gallagher has spoken to me but would have yere names associated with pioneering of new country as is in the blood,

dear children, and yere people always on the land as others are associated with professions such as doctoring and the Law which is not in yere blood...
 This is as I would have it, dear children, but if it is the will of God and the considered judgement of yere teachers that ye go for the professions then I will be standing down but at this time with all the arrangements to be made forgetting the cattle on the road and running the stations at the same time as my other business I must have Michael at the first chance.

This has a sweeping authority—never mind the spelling—which is a bit scary and it is also blackmail, but is there any figure in the annals of Australian history with a more distinctive voice?

Peter Craven, literary critic and commentator, co-founded the literary magazine *Scripsi*, and was founding editor of the Black Inc. *Best Of* annuals and of *Quarterly Essay*.

The second instalment of this article will appear in the Winter 2023 edition of the *IPA Review*. In it, Peter Craven completes his analysis of *Kings in Grass Castles*, then examines Judith Wright’s *The Generations of Men* (1959).

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