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A rose by any other name: naming and re-naming biographical figures in Australian historical biofictions

Abstract:

Some recent definitions of biographical fiction emphasise its separation from historical fiction and that this distinction is indicated by the use of the protagonist's real name. In this paper I analyse novels by Australian authors Peter Carey, Steven Carroll, Robert Drewe, Richard Flanagan, Kate Grenville, and Alex Miller, that are based on the lives of figures from the past. Some of these retain the protagonist's name while others change the name but activate readers' knowledge of the historical subjects through different means. I argue that the name is not the only indicator in fiction that activates the force of biographical connections and, furthermore, that the insistence on these two components of the definition could exclude from relevant discussion novels based on the lives of real people that shed light on how history is constructed in fiction.

Biographical note:

Gabrielle Ryan has a PhD in Creative Writing, examining whether the Gothic is still a transgressive mode of storytelling in Australian women's historical fiction. She also holds a Masters of Creative Writing, Publishing and Editing, a Postgraduate Diploma in English Literature, and is currently studying a Master of Business (Arts and Cultural Management).

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Historical biofiction, biographical fiction, character names, historical fiction, postcolonial fiction

Introduction

The study of literature known as biographical fiction, or “biofiction”, has been gaining momentum over recent years, with a number of dedicated journals, books, and symposia, which pre-eminent biofiction scholar Michael Lackey enumerates in his introduction to *Conversations with Biographical Novelists: Truthful Fictions Across the Globe* (2019, p. 19). Key issues explored in these texts and fora include how to define biofiction and how it might differ from historical fiction since both take material from the archives and present it in the form of novels inspired by the past. Lackey defines biofiction as “literature that names its protagonist after an actual biographical figure” (2016, p. 3). For David Lodge, a biofictional novel is one that “takes a real person and their real history as the subject matter for imaginative exploration, using the novel’s techniques for representing subjectivity rather than the objective, evidence-based discourse of biography” (2006, p. 8). Unlike Lackey, Lodge does not specify a requirement that the “real person” retain their actual name, but he does suggest that interiority, or “representing subjectivity” can be held apart from something that is objective and evidence-based (2006, p. 8). This definition shares with Lackey’s an emphasis on how biographical novelists work with past lives – in Lackey’s account authors are “using rather than representing history and biography, which is one of the distinctive features of the biographical novel” (2019 pp. 6-7); they “do not pretend to give readers unadulterated historical or biographical truth” (2019, p. 7). Lackey writes that, for the biographical novelist, “[b]iographical and/or historical truth – these are subordinate to the more important goal of liberating the reader into the embodied wakefulness of a creating and creative consciousness, a consciousness that leads to new possibilities in seeing and being” (2019, p. 11). In contrast, for Lackey, readers of an historical novel have an expectation that it will be “an accurate representation of “the realities of that time” (2019, p. 8, quoting author Chika Unigwe).

In arguing for this distinction, Lackey uses the definition of the historical novel as developed by Georg Lukács in his important work, *The Historical Novel* (first published in Russian in 1937). For Lukács, according to Bryony Stocker, “the genre emerges after the French Revolution as a way of using individual experience to explain the wider struggle of the masses” (2012, p. 309), a definition that assumes it is possible to tell the past as it was, for the novel to be a means of “explaining what happened, why it happened and to whom it happened” (Stocker, 2012, p. 309). In seeking to differentiate biofiction from historical fiction, the “to whom it happened” is important. Lukács, when discussing the novels of Walter Scott, considers that the heroes are “middling” men who represent social trends and historical forces (1937/1983, pp. 33, 34); they are “always a more or less mediocre average English gentleman” (1937/1983, p. 33) and never an “eccentric figure” or ‘someone who falls psychologically outside the atmosphere of the age’ (Lukács, 1937/1983, p. 60). In contrast, for Lackey, biofiction has an emphasis on “an anomalous figure that evades determinism and originates a new way of thinking and being” (2021, p. 222), and “[o]f crucial importance in biofiction is agency” (2022, p. 13). He refutes assumptions that the biographical novel is a subgenre or version of the historical novel, claiming that biofiction came into being as a “reaction against and as a counter to the historical novel” (Lackey, 2022, p. 10), with the key distinction that the “historical novel emphasises how the moment (history) makes the human, while the biographical novel underscores how an autonomous individual can and does create the age” (2022, pp. 11-12). To

summarise the definitional distinctions between historical fiction and biofiction, according to Lackey: historical fiction has a representational protagonist who is constrained and determined by the truth of history, while biofiction has an anomalous protagonist who has significant agency and is named after a real archival figure. Historical novelists must represent the past accurately, whereas biofictional novelists can imagine other possibilities.

I contend, however, that this definition and these distinctions rely too heavily on Lukács' definition of the historical novel and do not reflect the significant scholarship on modernist, postmodernist, postcolonial, and historiographical metafictional versions of the form. Daria Tunca and Bénédicte Ledent, for example, assert that "both Lackey's and Lodge's claims [as quoted above] betray an objectivist view of history that is bound to raise more than one postcolonial eyebrow" (2020, p. 337). While an extensive consideration of these forms of the historical novel is beyond the scope of this essay (see Ryan, 2018, pp. 286-306 for further discussion), it is important to note that each of them veers from the strict, mimetic historical accuracy required by Lukács' definition and Lackey's distinctions. There are multiple ways in which the historical novel can be full of possibilities: Modernism's fragmented, experimental histories (Micir, 2017); postmodernism's emphasis on the impossibility of a single, knowable truth about the past and the need to construct stories rather than reflect them (Guest, 2020, p. 211; Hutcheon, 2003a/1988, pp. 114, 119; Hutcheon, 2003b, p. 39; Mantel, 2017; Slotkin, 2005, p. 222; White, 2010, pp. 160, 202, 212) and historiographical metafiction that "plays upon the truth and lies of the historical record" (Hutcheon, 2003a/1988, p. 114), foregrounding invention (Robinson, 2011, p. 43). Linda Hutcheon makes the departure from Lukács' definition clear when she writes that the protagonists of historiographic metafiction are "the ex-centrics, the marginalized, the peripheral figures of fictional history" (2003a/1988, p. 114). The blurring of these distinctions raises the question of how useful or important the distinctions really are, and what purpose they serve. Tunca and Ledent argue that "a set of strict criteria would lead scholars to exclude from the genre precisely the texts that most boldly experiment with emergent conventions" (2020, p. 339). Instead, Tunca and Ledent argue, "the postcolonial and the biofictional converge in their potentially revisionary approach to history, and that they may thus be placed in a fruitful dialogic relationship" (2020, p. 340). A similar logic can be applied to categories of historical or biographical novels.

One distinction that remains between historical and biographical fiction is Lackey's insistence that the protagonist of the biofiction be named after a real person, and it is this insistence that is the focus of this essay. I contend that this, too, is a counter-productive distinction, and that it may prevent the "fruitful dialogic relationship" that Tunca and Ledent mention above. Without this dialogue, we may be excluding from analysis key fictional interpretations of the past that could be read intertextually alongside recognised biofictions, to lay bare the creative decisions authors make in creating stories and representing the past and past lives.

What's in a name?

Why this broad insistence that the protagonist retain the name of the historical figure? What function does the name serve, particularly when Lackey clearly states that the biographical

novelist has the freedom to change facts (2017, pp. 8-9), in service of their own artistic vision (2019, p. 16)? For Lackey, it seems that the name anchors the protagonist in something that is real: ‘since the protagonist of a biographical novel is based on an actual historical figure, this grounds the narrative more firmly in the concrete and puts some limit on the authors’ freedom to construct whatever they want’ (2019, p. 16). Conversely, Lackey says, that with the historical novel, “the protagonist is an invented figure, even if it is based on a real person, so the author can do with the character what he or she wants’ (2019, p. 14). In my own crude summary of this proposed historical/biographical distinction, it seems that changing the name of your protagonist means you are writing an historical novel, as you now have an invented character, which gives you freedom, but you only have freedom within what the historical record allows. Keeping the name of your protagonist means you are writing a biographical novel, which gives you authority, *but* you have freedom to change anything else about the named figure’s life and world, even if it is historically inaccurate, because it is a metaphor serving the artist’s vision.

I argue instead that both historical and biographical novels negotiate this interplay between “real” and invention in similar ways that are not limited to the protagonist’s name, that do not constitute crossing from one genre to the other, and that are, in dialogue, instructive in showing different ways of representing the past. A key point to note is that the *name* is not the only way readers connect characters within novels to figures from the past: there are myriad ways in which a character can be made recognisable to a reader and that the potent force of biographical links can be activated. A comparison to Australian defamation law is useful here, as this framework may influence the ways authors from this region write biofiction about living people. While those writing about the dead may not be concerned about legal implications (as the dead cannot, by law, be defamed), the recognisability test used in this context offers a sense of the multiple ways readers might make connections between fictional representations and figures from history. In their *Information Sheet on Defamation Law*, the Arts Law Centre of Australia states that identification of the plaintiff is “most straightforward when the plaintiff is named, but other information may be sufficient. Even the use of a false name may not save you if the plaintiff can be identified by other means’ (Arts Law Centre of Australia, 2011, 2015 & 2016, p. 3). An example of this is the 1988 case of Amanda Lohrey’s *The Reading Group*, which was the subject of negotiations and an out-of-court settlement when former Tasmanian ALP Senator Terry Aulich claimed he had been defamed in the portrayal of a character called “The Senator” (Caterson, 2005), following which the books were pulped by the publisher. While it is not necessary to use a legal test to judge the veracity of works of fiction, this does suggest the possible recognition of an historical figure, even when they are not named as themselves, through other aspects of their life or biography – for example, by their place of birth or death, family members, notable achievements, personality traits, famous speeches, or historical contexts. The inclusion of one of these details on its own might be a coincidence, but where many appear in a text they can come together to create a portrait that points readers to a particular real person, whether living or dead.

In Lackey’s introduction to *Conversations with Biographical Novelists* he quotes author Ralph Ellison, who advises writers to change their protagonist’s name in order to “lie and disguise a historical figure” (2019, p. 14). But some authors change the name without going so far as

disguising the character – and, in fact, they often go to some lengths, within the text and beyond it, to draw a connection between the character and the real person. Even in the absence of the name, then, these characters are clearly connected to their historical counterparts. In what follows, I analyse Australian novels with varied relationships between their protagonists and the figures upon which the portrayals are based. Some have kept the name, while others have changed it: each writer negotiates differently the interplay between freedom and authority that comes with their creative decisions, and to different ends. The examples analysed here demonstrate that the “named protagonist” test does not adequately capture the complex relationships between these fictions and various figures from the past.

Keeping the name: Ned Kelly

In this section I consider two fictional representations, by novelists Peter Carey and Robert Drewe, of an iconic character in Australia’s history and mythology: the bushranger Ned Kelly. Both works use Kelly’s name for the protagonist and so fit within Lackey’s definition of biofiction.

The title of Carey’s *True History of the Kelly Gang* (2000) suggests it recounts what really happened: it evokes the title of a biographical account. And yet, of course, it is a novel. Carey, when asked about the historicity and truthfulness of it said, “I made it up” (Griffiths, 2015, p. 2). But historian Tom Griffiths disagrees, writing in response: “the thing is, he didn’t” (Griffiths, 2015, p. 2). Griffiths writes about Carey’s fascination with Kelly’s Jerilderie Letter (1879), and of other historical sources that allowed him to write a novel that is not all “made up”, that uses a narrative voice reflecting the historical Jerilderie Letter, and which bears quite close resemblance to real people and real documents and to Kelly’s real voice – in short, to history (Griffiths 2015, p. 2). For Griffiths, Carey is “playing with a past that he knows we know – indeed our independent knowledge of the “true” history provides the grounds for his game” (Griffiths, 2015, pp. 2-3). The presentation of the novel as a series of archives, and the addition of a fictional daughter, adds another layer to this game. In David Lodge’s account:

If you say at the beginning that all the letters are real letters, then there is a documentary element in the novel which persuades the reader to trust the story. If your priority was not to create this illusion of fact, of factually reporting this life, then you wouldn’t do it and you would be free to use your imagination and make your character do whatever you wanted them to do, whatever seems interesting. (Lodge & Layne, 2019, p. 128; cited in Lackey, 2019, pp. 16-17)

The Jerilderie Letter, now on permanent display in the State Library of Victoria, is so well-known that most Australian readers are unlikely to require Carey to declare that it is the basis for the novel: reviewers and readers will pick this up. Carey is relying on the “illusion of fact” bestowed not only by the protagonist’s real name, but by well-known historical details, to give authority to his novel, even while he claims freedom from those facts.

An earlier novel about Ned Kelly is Robert Drewe's *Our Sunshine* (1991). Drewe, like Carey, chooses to keep Kelly's real name in the novel. Reviewer Linda Funnell writes that the novel "gives us access to his [Kelly's] memories" and shows us "what it feels like to inhabit his very flesh" (Funnell, 2012, p. 1). But of course, it does not do that: it cannot, as neither Drewe nor his readers know what Kelly felt. For Lackey, this is exactly what biofiction is – a form that "implicitly concedes through its dramatization that it cannot accurately signify or represent the biographical subject because the author's subjective orientation will always inflect the representation" (Lackey, 2016, p. 5). If the biographical subject can never be accurately represented and is always a subjective version of the actual biographical figure, why is it necessary to insist that their real name be used?

Lackey discusses Ned Kelly and *True History of the Kelly Gang* in his recent book, *Ireland, the Irish and the Rise of Biofiction* (2021), addressing specifically the issue of naming. He says, "naming his [Carey's] protagonist after the actual historical figure is important, because it gives more credence to Carey's portrayal of the living conditions of the persecuted, the oppressed, the downtrodden and the poor" (2021, p. 217). He goes on to say that "Names matter, because what Ned has experienced is not a wildly concocted story of an over-wrought fiction-maker. It is a 'true history' of an actual person" (2021, p. 220). Here, the name is seen to anchor the work to the broader narratives of Kelly's life and actions. In these two novels based on the life of Ned Kelly, however, the force of the biographical elements deployed by the authors is so strong that readers would make the connection between character and historical figure, even without the name. Both novels focus on what reviewer Janet Maslin calls "Ned's side of the various skirmishes that form the basis of his notoriety" (2001), taking well-known stories and imagining what Ned's own account of them would be. The notoriety provides the basis for the reader's recognition of the character, as much as the name does. If Carey or Drewe had written a novel about a man named John Smith, for example, who was a bushranger, wore armour in a siege at Glenrowan and was hanged, most readers would still recognise Kelly. Here, the "bio" elements beyond the name make it impossible to separate fictional and historical representations. I argue that this connection would make such a novel as biofictional as those using Kelly's real name.

Changing the name: the Heide Circle and Weary Dunlop

Other Australian novels are clearly based on real people, despite the fact that names have been changed. Here I will analyse representations of members of the Heide circle of Modernist artists based in Melbourne in the 1940s alongside public statements of intent by their respective authors. The first of these novels is Alex Miller's *Autumn Laing* (2011a), about the relationship between Sidney Nolan and Sunday Reed. Miller has a great deal of knowledge of Sidney Nolan. In fact, he was inspired to come to Australia – alone from England as a 16-year-old – after seeing a photograph that he later discovered was taken by Nolan (Miller, 2011b). Although he has changed the names in *Autumn Laing*, Autumn is recognisably Sunday Reed, and Pat is recognisably Sidney Nolan: key elements of their early lives map almost exactly. But Miller makes a creative decision to swerve from Sunday's biography: he tells the story from the

perspective of an older Autumn, who in the novel is at an age Sunday never reached. In “How I came to write *Autumn Laing*”, Miller writes:

The woman whose voice I heard that day was no longer the Sunday Reed of history but was my own fiction, a prompt from my imagination, a fiction of how such a person might have become had she lived another ten years and had she decided to tell her story, telling it at a time of her life when she had nothing left to lose. (Miller, 2011b)

The phrase “no longer the Sunday Reed of history” allows Miller the freedom to do what he wants with his own fictional character. She is “no longer” the Sunday Reed of history, but as she could have been in an alternative future. Despite this, Autumn still bears a strong and recognisable relationship to the actual historical figure of Sunday Reed, and indeed Miller talks openly about Sunday as the inspiration for Autumn, ensuring readers make the connection, and essentially laying claim to the authority that the story that “really happened” gives to the novel.

Another novel based on Sidney Nolan is Steven Carroll’s *Spirit of Progress* (2011), which tells the story of a portrait of the author’s aunt done by Nolan. Like Miller, Carroll has changed the names. But, again, recognisably: once the reader knows the background story, it is easy to see that the characters are based on Sidney and Sunday, although they are called Sam and Tess. Through telling the story of his aunt in interviews about the novel (*The Book Show*, 2011), Carroll ensures readers know the story of his inspiration, and his own family connection to Nolan, thus enabling them to make the connection between the character of Sam, who paints the portrait of the woman in the novel, and the historical Sidney Nolan, who painted the real portrait of Carroll’s aunt. Carroll does this, even as he tries to get away from the fact that his story is based on real people – he is perhaps, in this way, trying to have the best of both worlds – the freedom that changing the name brings, and the authority that paratexts from the real historical archive bestow. In an interview for the ABC Radio National’s *The Book Show*, interviewer Peter Mares keeps trying to bring the book back to the real people, and Carroll keeps avoiding the comparison:

Mares: The young artist in the novel is clearly inspired by Sidney Nolan because the painting is a real painting, it exists and Sidney Nolan painted it, but you haven’t called him Sid, you called him Sam.

Carroll: I had no inclination whatsoever to try to write a biographical ... a character whom everybody knows, to actually create a kind of Sidney Nolan. I wanted it to be my own character, I wanted the freedom to move. And also I’m not a great fan of research and I would have had to do an enormous amount of research to actually call him Sidney Nolan, and I just wasn’t going to do that.

Mares: You do still borrow bits of his life though, don’t you? Sam in the novel has an affair with a gallery owner who we could see as the Sunday Reed character from Heide who was Sidney Nolan’s lover and so on.

Carroll: In broad-brushstroke terms, yes, you could say that. (*The Book Show*, 2011, 3:53-5:15)

Carroll seems to be intimating here that keeping a character's name places a greater obligation on the writer to get the character "right" (having to do more research), while changing it gives the writer freedom from that. Yet Mares' questions attest that Carroll's Sam is still recognisable as Sidney Nolan, and Carroll does not deny the connection entirely. According to Lackey's definition, what Carroll has written here is a historical, rather than a biographical novel, yet his statements indicate he is more interested in telling the story he wants to tell than in getting the history and biography "right". Attempting to define this novel as either "historical" or "biographical", then, seems less productive than examining how and why elements of past lives have been deployed within it.

Richard Flanagan's novel *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* (2013) similarly depicts a recognisable character with an altered name. In an interview with Flanagan, interviewer Michael Williams says that the figure of Weary Dunlop "looms large" over the novel, but when he asks if Dunlop is the model for the character of Dorrigo Evans, Flanagan says "Dunlop is too extraordinary a character for fiction. God gets the great stories. Novelists must make do with more mundane fictions" (Williams, 2013). Yet Flanagan never entirely disowns Dunlop or his influence on the story, and Williams is not the only interviewer or reviewer to articulate the connection between Evans and Dunlop (see, for example, Battersby, 2014; Goldsworthy, 2015; Koval, 2013). The association, once made manifest by writers or critics, can linger in the minds of readers, which gives the novel the authority of being "based on a true story" or on something that actually happened. This authority can exist even while writers do not want to be constrained by it; as stated earlier, changing the name of the protagonist allows them to have both freedom and authority. If that is true, then these stories, even though names have been changed, have something to tell us about our relationship to history and how it is rendered in contemporary fiction. If something that is "based on a true story" is true enough for us to take it seriously as a version of the past, what then does that mean for how we receive other stories about the past? If a little bit of "truth" is enough to bestow authority on fiction, how much truth do we take for granted in a story labelled "non-fiction" or "history"?

In these cases, as with the portrayals of Ned Kelly noted above, the biographical elements beyond the name make powerful connections between re-named protagonists and their historical inspirations; these cannot be wholly separated, and the novels' authors trade on being able to have it both ways.

Changing the name: Kate Grenville's colonial novels

I will turn now to Kate Grenville and a selection of her colonial novels: the much-discussed *The Secret River* (2005), its sequel *The Lieutenant* (2008), and her most recent, *A Room Made of Leaves* (2020). When read individually and in concert, these works show their writer returning to a similar moment in Australia's difficult past but using a range of creative approaches to blend fiction and biographical details, and with different impacts and effects. The novels demonstrate a progression of understanding over this time that reflects, perhaps, both an evolution of Grenville's own thinking and also a broader evolution of awareness in the

cultural debates around settler/Indigenous relationships and who has the right to tell particular stories.

The examples from Miller, Carroll and Flanagan feature a historical person who is well-known, who “has a history (a received understanding) that the reader is familiar with – familiar to the extent that it is difficult to imagine that figure and the historical context from which they emerge separable or their story different from how it is known” (Corby, 2020, p. 11). Grenville’s protagonist of *The Secret River* aligns more with another kind of engagement with the past – those biofictions or revisionary or postcolonial historical novels that take as their protagonists lesser-known figures (Corby, 2020, p. 11). Grenville’s ancestor Solomon Wiseman is a little-known historical figure, yet it is common knowledge that *The Secret River* is based on his life, despite the character having a different name. Like the writers described above Grenville has talked about this connection at length. She mentions it briefly in the novel’s author note, where she states: “One of my ancestors gave me the basis for certain details in the early life of William Thornhill, and other characters share some qualities with historical figures. All the people within these pages, however, are works of fiction” (Grenville, 2005, p. 336). She also discusses it in greater depth in her *Searching for the Secret River* (2006), which documents her process of researching her ancestor and writing the novel. Grenville’s own prominence ensures these and other paratexts will be widely consumed. Without these, readers would not have a sense of the complex interactions of fiction and invention in *The Secret River*, nor the strange doubleness of her protagonist as an example of both.

Use of the real name or otherwise, in this context, seems even less significant for readers than it might for figures with broader cultural familiarity. For Grenville, however, the choice to change her ancestor’s name was vitally important to the book’s development. In *Searching*, she discusses why she changed her protagonist’s name to William Thornhill, and what happened when she did: “changing the name changed my relationship to the character” (Grenville, 2006, p. 188). As with Miller and Carroll’s decisions, the change offered creative freedom to Grenville to make other alterations to the historical records: “my great-great-great grandfather had stepped out of the book now, taking his name with him. He had a story, the one I’d found in the archives, but it wasn’t the one I was telling” (Grenville, 2006, p. 188). What else, then, might re-naming change, or what might it lead to? What impact does it have when the biographical character steps out, but his loose “likeness” remains?

Grenville discusses how she picked and chose from Wiseman’s qualities in crafting Thornhill:

I left Thornhill with Wiseman’s quick temper, his tendency towards violence. ... But in building a picture of Thornhill as the family man, I went far beyond what I could guess about Wiseman. Thornhill’s deep love for his wife, his softness with her, his love for his children – none of that came from the Wiseman I’d met in the archives. (Grenville, 2006, p. 188)

Grenville admits that this made him softer, and that “once that softer part of his personality was drawn in, the violence he might inflict on the Aboriginal people took on a different quality” (Grenville, 2006, p. 188) – he became “a man who wasn’t altogether bad, but who did bad things, might feel something like remorse” (Grenville, 2006, p. 188). Hamish Dalley discusses

how *The Secret River* can be read as an apology from Grenville for her ancestors' role in the frontier wars, and Grenville herself has said as much (Dalley, 2014, pp. 45-47), but this apologetic mode may be undermined by a romanticism that has been read by some critics as an exercise in white exculpation (Dalley, 2014, pp. 45-46). Romanticising the character may, instead of apologising for the actions of her ancestors, be an attempt to make those actions understandable, relatable, or even justifiable.

Jo Jones, in *Falling Backwards: Australian Historical Fiction and the History Wars* (2018, pp. 80-132), dedicates a chapter to how this romanticisation of Thornhill, and his distance from the historical Wiseman, draws a veil over the truth of history rather than revealing it. She discusses the way in which Grenville talks about the stories of Wiseman being "passed down" in her family, and how this has had a 'sentimentalising effect' where "even the detail of Wiseman killing his wife becomes an example of the 'colour' or 'drama' within the family story, somehow distantly thrilling and encoding a casual misogyny" (Jones, 2018, p. 89). Grenville even describes the story of the death of Wiseman's wife (she died after he allegedly pushed her down the stairs) as "the best bit of the story" (Grenville, 2006, p. 5). Jones says that, from there, it was up to Grenville to "reassess the figure of Wiseman outside this comfortable chain of associations, addressing the likelihood that he was a man of extreme violence" (Jones, 2018, p. 89). Jones goes on to argue that Grenville does this: she reaches a point of feeling unsettled by what she is researching, but that, despite this, the form and content of the novel, and its protagonist, are settled and comfortable: he is given a hard-luck, hard-working back-story that asks the reader to empathise with his response to opportunities and challenges he is presented with in the colony (Jones, 2018, pp. 100, 101).

The portrayal also functions more broadly than at an individual level. Odette Kelada argues that there are elements in the novel, including the empathetic portrayal of Wiseman, through which 'shame can be converted to national pride' (2010, p. 6). She says:

This image of bravely protecting wife and child evokes pioneer imagery integral to Australian nation-making such as the battler and the anti-hero. When this is coupled with the reiteration of Indigenous people represented through "colonial" eyes the effect can be extremely troubling. (2010, p. 6)

Jones writes that "as comforting and familiar as this character may seem, the idea that he is representative of an 'Australian' type is historically and ideologically problematic" (2018, p. 100). She continues:

Grenville's adaptation of her ancestor, Wiseman – unknowable, amorphous, revenant – into the character of William Thornhill reflects a conceptualisation of subjectivity that is utterly different from that generated out of her earlier unsettlement. In the relationship between the narration and the central character, the text renders history as somewhat providential, arranged in painstakingly detailed explanatory patterns that account for human identity and behaviour such that causality can be traced from the earliest moments of individual subjectivity. As a result, Thornhill's decisions and actions are presented as wholly logical and explicable. (Jones, 2018, p. 101)

The freedom to do this, for Grenville, came from the simple act of changing his name, which allowed her to move away from the version of him she found in the archives. As with the portrayals discussed earlier, the character is constructed as both connected to and separate from this historical counterpart. It is, however, difficult to read Thornhill as completely separate from Wiseman, given that Grenville's research for the character of Thornhill came from researching Wiseman's life, that she draws the connection herself, and makes no secret of the fact that Thornhill is based on her ancestor. Following Lackey's definition, Grenville did not have to change Wiseman's name to have the freedom she sought – biofiction would allow for that in the way that historical fiction would not. That Grenville felt constrained writing Wiseman before she changed his name suggests something else: perhaps she was not ready to come face-to-face with a man of such extreme violence, knowing that she was related to him and had ultimately benefitted from his actions. Perhaps this 'softer' version of her ancestor made it easier to write him, to know him through writing? This approach, then, is not an exercise in truth-telling or facing up to the past, but rather another attempt to paint it in a justifiable, more sympathetic light.

In *The Lieutenant* (2008), Grenville's sequel to *The Secret River*, the character of Daniel Rooke is based on the historical figure of William Dawes. Grenville's approach to him differs from how she constructed Wiseman/Thornhill. In reader notes for *The Lieutenant* on her website, Grenville talks about how the story was inspired by "a couple of shabby blue notebooks stored in a London manuscript library", notebooks in which Dawes kept records of his conversations with the Gadigal people and, in particular, Patyegarang – the young woman called Tarang in the novel (Grenville, 2022a). Where *The Secret River* had a cast of representative characters who exemplified their society (Dalley, 2014, p. 46), *The Lieutenant*'s Daniel Rooke is "deliberately anachronistic, floating free from history as a cultureless, abstract hero" (Dalley, 2013, p. 45). Robert Goodman calls the novel "a fantasy on the life of William Dawes" (2020). In Dalley's view, what Grenville has done is depict the violence of the Australian settlement as something that was not inevitable, but that occurred because of the very human choices that were made: he argues that Grenville's novel shows that it is fallible choices rather than necessity or inevitability that determine the course of history (2013, p. 46). Dalley quotes Barthes in calling these moments "hinge points": "this choice is the key hinge point which structures the narrative and represents the "risky moment" that gives the novel its tension" (Dalley, 2013, p. 45). He goes on to say that "introducing contingency like this generates a proliferation of alternative or counterfactual representations, as each hinge point opens not only onto the past that did occur, but also onto pasts that might have occurred" (Dalley, 2013, p. 47). In Dalley's postcolonial analysis of the novel (2013, pp. 43-49), *The Lieutenant* appears to do everything that Lackey suggests biofiction is best placed to do – explore the life of a real historical figure, open up possibilities, present an anachronistic hero – but it could not, according to Lackey's definition, be considered biofiction because Grenville has changed her protagonist's name from William Dawes to Daniel Rooke. Although not everyone approves of Grenville's practice in creating alternative pasts in this way (Dalley, 2013, p. 48), it would seem that *The Lieutenant* has something to contribute to discussions about postcolonial historical fiction and biofiction, and to debates and dialogues between them. Separating these works from those classified as biofictions simply because the protagonist's name does not

match the archive risks losing fruitful opportunities to consider how they interrogate perceptions of the past.

This is further complicated by Grenville's most recent colonial novel, *A Room Made of Leaves* (2020). This fictional memoir of Elizabeth Macarthur asks similar questions in its rendering of past lives, yet because the protagonist retains Macarthur's real name, the work could be counted as biofiction. Similarly to Carey's *True History of the Kelly Gang*, the novel is told through a fake document, slipping, as Kerrie Davies explains, "into the space between hoax and history, the paradox of purporting to be true while declaring it is not" (2020). The novel is framed as the memoirs of Elizabeth Macarthur, which have been discovered and edited by Kate Grenville (Guest, 2020, p. 210). Grenville herself was surprised that some readers thought the memoir was real (2022b), recognising that "the game I was playing was almost too successful" (2022b). Reflecting on this process, she states: "I'd hijacked her [Macarthur] – to put it brutally – and imposed my own speculations on her" (2022b). Grenville here is acknowledging that the Elizabeth she created in *A Room Made of Leaves* is fictional, even though she bears the actual name of a real archival figure. Grenville's decision to use real names in the latest of her colonial novels extends beyond Elizabeth – among other historical figures, William Dawes appears again here, although this time with his own name, and not as Daniel Rooke (Goodman 2020). Here, Grenville is continuing her project of writing back against colonisation from a coloniser's perspective, with Elizabeth regularly expressing anti-racist sentiments that are of a modern sensibility (Guest, 2020, p. 213). Grenville used this modern sentiment to make Elizabeth more progressive than she actually was (Guest, 2020, p. 213), yet this time she did not need to change the name to do it. Charlotte Guest compares Grenville's Elizabeth to the figure appearing in Michelle Scott Tucker's biography of Elizabeth and says that, although Macarthur's early friendship with an Aboriginal woman is documented, it is also apparent that this friendly attitude did not continue (2020, p. 213). For Scott Tucker, "Elizabeth shared the colonists' general lack of insight about Aboriginal culture, affording it no credence or legitimacy" (2019, p. 235). Grenville has thus created a progressive Elizabeth, ahead of her time, when actually the real Elizabeth was more representative of her time. Guest says, "for Grenville to superimpose her own politics onto that of her protagonist ultimately does a disservice to history, as it presents a figure, a colonist, in a too-favourable light (2020, p. 213). Grenville made a similar choice with her earlier protagonist, William Thornhill, but if one of these novels is considered biofiction and the other is not because of the protagonists' names, then the opportunity to learn from this productive comparison might be lost.

What matters in these discussions is less whether the fictionalised protagonist carries the real name of their historical antecedent, but rather how the works interrogate key moments from the past and what such approaches reveal about the present. The doubleness of the simultaneous divide and connection between Thornhill/Wiseman, Dawes/Rooke, and the two versions of Elizabeth Macarthur demonstrates that the relationship between any historical figure and their fictional counterpart is more complicated than can be captured by the issue of the real name. It would be enlightening, I believe, to consider in depth how Grenville's depiction of real colonial and Indigenous people, and her creative choices surrounding this, has changed and developed in her colonial novels over this fifteen-year period. Such an analysis shows exactly why we should not exclude novels like *The Secret River* and *The Lieutenant* from the category of

biofiction, while including similar books by the same author, such as *A Room Made of Leaves*, simply because of the author's choice about what to name her protagonist. I argue that the author's creative choices in developing these complex protagonists speaks volumes about how history in general, and Australian history in particular, has been constructed.

Conclusion

When novelists work closely with the lives of figures from the past, they are making choices about which interpretation of history or biography to follow, to believe, to pursue, and even to create, whether they choose to use the figures' actual names or to change them. Their choices will be made in the service of their story as much as, and perhaps more than, to the historical record. It may be the case that writers feel more responsibility towards the historical record and the historical accuracy of their story if they name their protagonist after an actual biographical figure – certainly, most discussed here felt that they had more freedom once the characters' names had been changed. However, the naming of characters is only one of the choices that historical novelists make and, I contend, not the only one that determines whether or not a character based on a real historical referent is recognisable or how that recognition is deployed to interrogate understandings of the pasts. Furthermore, expanding the definition of biofiction to include fiction whose protagonists' names have been changed but who are still recognisable through context or paratexts, and placing these works in productive dialogue with historical fiction, will generate more opportunities to examine how history has been rendered, romanticised, changed, imagined, justified or exposed. If we throw out connections to the historical figure along with the name, we are discarding a valuable way to evaluate the practice of telling stories about the past.

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