

## **"I Dreamed of Snow Today": Impediments to Settler Belonging in Northern Queensland as Depicted in a Selection of Recent Fiction.**

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In 2001, Geoffrey Blainey argued that "a high proportion" of non-Indigenous Australians have developed a sense of place, "of feeling at home" in their country, that "has in part been created or manufactured". Though historians have contributed to this, he says, "Painters and writers have done most to create it" as "They tried to provide a sense of belonging, and a sense of continuity and history" (*Boyer Lecture* n. pag.). Several recent Australian novels - each with some historical basis - are set in Queensland's north and offer contemporary perceptions of the area's history from settlement to the end of the twentieth century. Published the year after the Mabo Decision, and Prime Minister Paul Keating's "Redfern Speech", David Malouf's 1993 novel, *Remembering Babylon*, is a fitting point to commence exploring depictions of settler society's relations to northern Queensland. Three other novels included in this study are Alex Miller's *Journey to the Stone Country* (2003), and *Landscape of Farewell* (2007), along with Gordon Smith's *Dalrymple* (2006). In these stories northern settlers struggle to cope - physically, psychologically and emotionally. The difficulties for settlers in developing an attachment to north Queensland, and their sometimes extreme responses, illustrate the powerful interaction between place, belonging and identity.

The enervating tropical climate is depicted as a formidable impediment for settlers as its challenge to their physical capacity alters their self-perception. In *Dalrymple*, the Cardwell butcher rescues a desperately ill Dalrymple, explaining, "it's heat-stroke.... he's been driving himself too hard" (179), while Dalrymple laments, "*I am a little old man, all skin and bone*" (182). In *Remembering Babylon*, the heat thwarts schoolteacher George Abbott who had resolved to uphold "the duty he felt to his own high prospects" (44). However, "Defeated by the dullness that glanced back at him", he feels "a slow rage take hold of him" (45) as he fails to engage his pupils. The climate forces these characters to reassess their ability to endure physical hardship, which results in a diminished sense of self and, in Abbott's case, resenting the north.

The climate also challenges settlers by its violation of European seasonal patterns. The north does not offer four recognisable seasons, and the absence of this pattern deprives settlers of a stable element in their lives. As *Remembering Babylon*'s narrator notes, "You had to learn all over again how to deal with the weather" (9), and in the relentless heat settlers yearn for European winters. For Jock McIvor:

The land here never slept. If only he could wake one day and find it, just for a day, under a blanket of snow! What he missed were the marks of change. The crying, high up, of curlews flocking to a new season, to some place thousands of miles to the north where it had been winter and was now breathing the freshness of spring, brought an ache to his heart (76).

In *Dalrymple*, Philip Sellheim writes in his diary, "*I dreamed of snow today. Cold white snow. And grey skies. In the midst of this eternal and infernal sunshine and heat I kept myself cool by dreaming*" (30). This yearning for the seasons of "home" illustrates how place imprints itself upon the psyche, and how difference is an impediment to belonging.

Difficulties also arise in the values assigned to light and dark. The abundance of light disturbs settlers and the values by which they organise their world. According to Herman and Vervaeck, "Time and space on the story level are usually studied in terms of dualisms such as light versus dark, high versus low, open versus closed", with "high, light, and open" typically "preferred to dark, low, and closed" (220). While this might apply in European settings, in the tropics the intrusion of "relentless sunlight" (Malouf, 175) must be curtailed and settlers must learn to appreciate darkness. Ellen McIvor recalls how Jock "had wanted them to go to Canada", though "Australia seemed the larger choice. There was land there and sunlight (she could not wait)" (74). "[S]unlight she had longed for all her life, or so she believed, in the dismal world she had grown up in" (74), yet in north Queensland she "saw the last of [Jock's] youth burned out of him" in a land "which, for all the fierceness of its own sunlight, dashed out the last of sunniness in him" (75-6). In *Journey to the Stone Country*, Elizabeth remarks that early settlers "did everything in those days to keep the daylight out of their houses" (99). In northern Queensland, where "light" can be destructive, and "dark" denote comfort and protection, settlers must reassess European modes of thought.

The land presents an inscrutable complexity between light and dark, and provokes conflict for settler identity by complicating the desirability of light and dark. *Remembering Babylon*'s narrator observes that, "Even in full sunlight" the land "was impenetrable dark" (8). For

Gemmy, who washed up on northern shores at thirteen and has spent seventeen years living with the Aborigines, this is "a world that [is] alive ... and dazzling; some of it even in the deepest shade throwing off luminous flares, so that he had to squint and cover his eyes ... but he cast the light only in patches for Mr Frazer" (67-8). In *Dalrymple*, the expedition party "lay sleepless beside a roaring fire because of the chants and stick music in the dark surrounding jungle" (36). Darkness is particularly problematic for settlers when associated with skin. Whereas the Aborigines' dark skin can tolerate the sun, the settlers' whiteness cannot, and the sun's effects confront them with their vulnerability in the north. In *Remembering Babylon*, when cousins Janet and Lachlan meet again after many years, she notices "His hands and forehead ... were scabbed from the sun.... She was conscious of the sunspots on his hands, the scabs; like her own, like her father's – the wrong skin for this country" (186).

Settlers must also adjust their concepts of space, for to be "under" in the tropics is not to be oppressed but to find relief from heat and glare. Negative European connotations of "under" are evident in Gemmy's disturbing recollection that, in his childhood "he had been one of an army of little shitty creatures... whose job it was to crawl about in the low place under the machines in a timber mill" (146). George Abbot finds relief when he steps from "fierce heat....into the half-darkness under" a house "floating six feet above ground on its stumps" (84-5). The settlers do not understand this house, which "evoked a sense of raw inadequacy in them" (84). "If it had information to give away", they "couldn't fathom it. It was in a language they could not read" (83). The odd house that provides shade beneath the floor disturbs them and exacerbates their sense of displacement.

Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin write that settlers "faced the problem of establishing their 'indigeneity' and distinguishing it from their continuing sense of their European inheritance". The settlers' "new experience, if couched in the terms of the old, is somehow 'falsified' ...at the same time as its value, judged within Old World terms, is considered inferior" (134). The settlers in these novels assess the north by European standards and adjudge it wanting or aberrant. In *Dalrymple*, Albrecht Feez's confusion is evident when he asks: "What are we, George, you and I? Are we unwilling émigrés who yearn for home, or are we Australians now and forever, putting down roots in this hot and horrid place?" (23). *Remembering Babylon's* narrator tells how "the very ground under their feet was strange" and "It was disturbing ... to have unknown country behind you as well as in front" (8-9). However:

Most unnerving of all was the knowledge that, just three years back, the very patch of earth you were standing on had itself been on the other side of things, part of the unknown, and might still, for all your coming and going over it... have the last of mystery upon it.... Good reason, that, for stripping it, as soon as you could manage, of every vestige of the native; for ringbarking and clearing and reducing it to what would make it, at last, just a bit like home. (9-10)

Psychological dislocation and lack of understanding inhibit settlers from identifying with the north, and lead them to perceive and define it in negative terms. In *Dalrymple*, Feez says of his town: "There's not much to tell. There's a pub there. It's not licensed of course" (11). Embarking on an expedition, Dalrymple tells his party they will "not have any fruits or vegetables" (25) and, as the expedition proceeds, remarks that "there is not another white man ahead of us for a thousand miles" (27). Thomas Hood perceives the trees as "devoid of colour", and makes the now clichéd observation "that it isn't natural for trees to shed their bark and not their leaves". With perhaps anachronistic insight, Dalrymple charges Hood with "looking at [the land] with English eyes" (31). Mr Frazer, in *Remembering Babylon*, also recognises that his fellow Britons' negative attitudes are born out of inaptly applied standards. He writes:

*I think of our early settlers, starving on these shores in the midst of plenty they did not recognise, ...which they could not, with their English eyes, perceive, since the very habit and faculty that makes apprehensible to us what is known and expected dulls our sensitivity to other forms, even the most obvious. We must rub our eyes and look again, clear our minds of what we are looking for to see what is there. Is it not strange... that if the land will not present itself to us in terms that we know, we would rather die than take it as it is? (129-30)*

Young Lachlan Beattie, though, is contemptuous of the land, and denigrates all that his cousins find interesting. "Nothing here was good enough for him" (55):

The bush – it wasn't even country – was of no interest to him, and Janet saw... that the things they had been saving to show him, all their little treasures and secrets, were in his eyes poor – she had not seen till now just how poor. She felt humiliated .... Everything she and Meg knew, and he did not, was not worth the knowing. (55-7)

However, construing the north negatively can be a protective strategy. The narrator notes that "It did not occur" to Janet "that [Lachlan] might be protecting himself; that his refusal to enter into *their* world might be a fear of losing, more than he had done already, the one he had left and was heartsick for" (55). According to Elleke Boehmer:

Settler colonials saw themselves as essentially cultural migrants, overburdened with values and attitudes which belonged in an older or other world.... Lacking meaningful connection with their surroundings, they seemed constantly to be working around absences – of cultural roots, of home, or of a sense of location in the here and now. (204)

Concomitant with the loss of a familiar environment is a loss, almost too frightening to confront, of certainty about identity. Adhering to European standards as the benchmark of normality and denying the tropical north legitimacy and worth enables settlers to preserve a sense of self.

Some characters further insist on European pre-eminence by creating illusions of it. In *Dalrymple*, Monsieur Pene remodels the Rockhampton environment to approximate Europe by creating a garden as a venue for a traditional European "family promenade". "I am doing my best", he proclaims, "to bring a little bit of Europe to our town" (113). In *Landscape of Farewell*, settlers establish homes and gardens, unaware of the Aboriginal man, Gnapun "observing their enterprise and seeing that it is their intention to change everything and to leave no sign of the old world" (192). In *Journey to the Stone Country* the Bigges endeavour to create English pastoral vistas in the tropics. Though Ranna Station is surrounded by "Ancient forest gums and casuarinas", they plant "within its perimeter of fence ... English shrubs and trees" (150-2). However, these ersatz Europes can never effectively occlude the environment, nor compensate for the home settlers miss.

The McIvors' difficulties relating to the north illustrate how place is fundamental to identity. Their conceptions of self were shaped by their relations to Scotland, but in the tropics they find little affirmation of those selves, for "In all their lives till they came here, they had never ventured ... out of sight or earshot of a village steeple that...was always there when they looked up" (9). The powerful interaction between loss of place and loss of identity is evident in Jock, as thinking of his homeland "brought an ache to his heart ... and for days afterwards he would be rough-tempered" (76). Ellen recognises that "They were in a place where there were no sureties of any kind" (78). Her clothing symbolises her loss, as "Occasionally,

washing an old frock with a pattern of larkspurs, all their lively colour gone to grey, she would experience a little pang at the thought that she might never again see one" (77). Like the larkspurs, Ellen has lost her colour in the harsh environment, for "it was easy here to lose yourself in the immensities of the land, under a sky that opened too far in the direction of infinity" (110). The McIvors find it difficult to feel any sense of belonging to a land that has little in common with "home" and is insensible to their loss and insecurity.

Malouf accentuates these difficulties by confronting settlers with a white man who has lost his British identity. Gemmy adapted to Aboriginal ways because he encountered the land when he was "Young enough to learn and to be shaped as if for the first time, he was young enough also to forget" (26). Gemmy considers himself to "belong" to Aboriginal "tribal life" (27) and "had been with them, quite happily ... for more than half his life: living off the land, learning their lingo and all their secrets" (39). His presence directly confronts the settlers with Aboriginal ways and relations to place, but Aboriginal ways are anathema to them. George Abbot's abhorrence is clear in his observation that the life the natives lived "was merely degenerate, so squalid ... that it inspired nothing but a kind of horror at what human nature might in its beginnings spring from, and in such a place so easily sink back to" (51). Settlers cannot countenance Aboriginal ways of relating to place, as this would be a debasement of fundamental aspects of their identity.

Settlers endeavour to cope with displacement by excising manageable sections of land to create secure spaces in which to reinvent home. In *Remembering Babylon*, north Queensland compels the McIvors to revise their attitudes to space, "because there was too much space, up here" (111). The value they placed on open space in Scotland diminishes when they are faced with a surfeit of it, and so they enclose themselves within their twenty acres. However, while they manage to bring their land under control, they cannot wholly insulate themselves from the surrounding wilderness. Though settlers' land ownership is confirmed by colonial authorities, on the frontier legal entitlement is only an abstract concept. "In the dark hours," explains the narrator "when you no longer stood there as a living marker with all the glow of the white man's authority about you," the features and boundaries marked on the map "reverted to being a creek-bed or ridge of granite like any other, and gave no indication that six hundred miles away, in the Lands Office in Brisbane, this bit of country had a name set against it on a numbered document, and a line drawn that was empowered with all the authority of the Law" (9). The settlers' land is distinguishable from that surrounding it only

by the marks of their efforts upon it, and legal borders cannot prevent the "natives, tribes of wandering myalls who, in their traipsing this way and that all over the map, were forever encroaching on boundaries" (9). Boundaries must be made material, by fences and walls, to keep out what is feared and unwanted. However, when the McIvors take Gemmy in, this ambiguous figure breaches settlers' security by bringing within their boundaries the wild indigeneity they strive to exclude, and so they are "forever out there pacing the line and looking for signs of trespass; except that there was no line and the trespass too might be no more than a shadow" (71).

As a European living among Aborigines, Gemmy inhabits both sides of the cultural boundary and so destabilises the settlers' division between European civility and Aboriginal primitiveness. Anthropologist Robert Ardrey says of occupied land that "its position and borders will be learned. And if one shares it with a mate or a group, one learns likewise whom to tolerate, whom to expel" (37). Gemmy, "who had the mangy, half-starved look of a black" (3), brings a "blackening touch" (179) that provokes fear, confusion and a sense of threat in the settlers. Jock's neighbours believe he has:

brought them to the very edge of [threat]... a world where what was cleared and fenced and in Jock's own terms reasonable – all their education, their know-how... and the shotguns they carried – might not be enough against – against what? Some vulnerability to the world that could only be measured ... by the dread it evoked in them. (105)

Gemmy's aberrance is evident in the opening scene, as he suddenly appears before the McIvor children "out of a world over there, beyond the no-man's-land of the swamp, that was the abode of everything savage and fearsome... of nightmare rumours, superstitions and all that belonged to Absolute Dark" (2-3). Though Gemmy "had come flying at the fence 'as if an airmy o' fiends were aifter him" (6), it is only when he leaps "up onto the top rail of the fence" that he assumes a threatening form. Poised, hovering, on the fence, he has the potential to violate the settlers' barriers and come crashing into their world. "Of course, it wasn't him you were scared of", but "the thought that next time it might not be him" (42). Gemmy demonstrates that maps, boundaries, fences and barriers cannot guarantee settlers' safety, nor enforce their possession of the land.

To strengthen their sense of ownership and gain some control over place, settlers assign names to it. Naming subdues the land by claiming its features and rendering them

recognisable. Like the imposition of boundaries, naming distinguishes features in the land and divides an intimidating whole into individual components, rendering it less inscrutable. Anglicising the landscape through names mitigates the effects of dislocation by imposing the familiar upon it. In *Remembering Babylon* young Lachlan determines that "As soon as he was old enough ... he would get up an expedition .... He would discover two or three rivers, which he would name after some of his acquaintances, and a mountain to which he might give his aunt's name... or the name of some place in Scotland" (60). In *Dalrymple*, Dalrymple and his party denigrate "strange Aboriginal words" (32), and dismiss Aboriginal naming power, arrogating it to themselves. Hearing the Aborigines who are accompanying him refer to places in their language, Dalrymple asks, "what is Maal Maal?" When one of the men replies, "That be this fella's name, boss. This river be Maal Maal", his patronising response is: "Oh well, you can keep calling it that, if you like" (82). Henry Stone discloses his ambition to master and possess the land as he proclaims:

my self appointed task, gentlemen... is to name every feature and record its exact position. The more significant the feature the weightier the name.... Rest assured, my friends.... You shall all live on in posterity. (28-9)

However, anglicising the land subsumes it within the colonial power's culture and impedes settlers' ability to develop an attachment to place, as Britishness is given pre-eminence whilst the land's distinctiveness is ignored and denied.

The sparsity of settlement and the vast distances between settlements and southern centres mean that isolation and loneliness are also impediments to settler belonging. Roads, however, are antidotes to loneliness and isolation. In *Remembering Babylon*, a few years after his arrival in the settlement:

Lachlan Beattie had been one of a Government road gang that was surveying the country to the north, preparing the way for a highway that would run, a thread of dust, through all the little burgeoning leap-frog settlements, sleepy harbour towns, gold-mining camps, scattered dwellings round a railhead or timber- or sugar-mill, between Brisbane and, fifteen hundred miles further on into the tropics, the last of Governor Bowen's little far-flung struggling ports; across canelands ... rainforests, dried-out, sparsely-forested cattle country with nine-foot anthills, and a hundred flash-flooding creeks and wide mangrove-fringed streams. (195)



In establishing a road network that connects the north's scattered spread of scanty settlements, Lachlan participates in transforming a collection of small colonial outposts into a cohesive society.

Nonetheless, settlers' severed connections with home and heritage disrupt their ongoing narratives of self. Sociologist Richard Jenkins examined the interaction between time, space and identity, noting that "time is bound up with space in one's experience of self and others", and that "a sense of time is inherent within identification because of the *continuity* which ... is entailed in a claim to ... identity" (48). "Continuity", he says, "posits a meaningful past and a possible future" (48). In these stories, many settlers have lost the connection to a continuum of occupation that legitimised their presence. At "home", their sense of self was affirmed by centuries-old accumulations of landscape development. Ellen McIvor recognises that "There had been a comfort in crowdedness and old age grime and clutter that she only appreciated when it was gone" (110). Her grief at being distanced from that heritage is evident as she explains how:

It was the fearful loneliness of the place that most affected her – the absence of ghosts. Till they arrived no other lives had been lived here. ... She had not understood, till she came to a place where it was lacking, the extent to which her sense of the world had to do with the presence of those who had been there before, leaving signs of their passing and spaces still warm with breath – a threshold worn with the coming and going of feet, hedges between fields that went back a thousand years, and the names even further; most of all, the names on headstones, which were *their* names, under which lay the bones that had made their bones and given them breath. They would be the first dead here. It made death that much lonelier, and life lonelier too. (110-1)

Home provided the historical, environmental and social groundwork of identity, and the absence of any such signs in the north leaves little for settlers to relate to.

Therefore, settlers strive to establish normality in their new environment. Ellen believes "the way back to normality [is] through habit" (79). She ensures there are "Three meals on the table, plates drying on the rack, a wash on the line" (78). Through routine, Ellen imprints a pattern in time, creates familiarity and predictability, and so develops an incipient north Queensland heritage for her family. Dalrymple recognises that the absence of settler history will only resolve itself over time, stating that "It is for our children to become locals ... not

us. They are the ones who will be content, who will not look to the other side of the world for comfort. [We] shall put down the roots and they shall flower" (Smith, 23).

*Remembering Babylon's* settlers, however, resist integrating north Queensland experience into their self-narratives, for doing so could corrupt their identities. As being white and British is integral to their identity, they protect any diminishment by resisting their northern experiences. Gemmy - "a parody of a white man" (39) - stands as a warning to them. He "had started out white....he had been like any other child, one of their own for instance" but, they wonder, "had he remained white?" (40). As "they looked at their own children" they wondered: "Could you lose it? Not just language, but *it*. *It*. For the fact was, when you looked at him sometimes he was not white.... The whole cast of his face gave him the look of one of Them" (40). George Abbot feared that "what they were dealing with, in Gemmy, might be closer to them, to *him*, than he knew" and was "choked by the stench of the suggestion" (179).

As they come to the north with fresh narratives of violence, settlers are predisposed to fear Aboriginal people, which impedes a sense of belonging. In *Dalrymple*, the narrator states that Lt. Smith "had reason to fear any approach by the natives of this area – previous reports had stated that they had been openly aggressive to every white man that had been here" (50). In *Remembering Babylon*, Lachlan has clearly imbibed such narratives, as his response upon first sighting Gemmy is that he is "A black! That was the boy's first thought. We're being raided by blacks. After so many false alarms it had come" (2). Gemmy "made real what till now had been no more than the fearful shape of rumour, though the rumour lately had had a name and number to it: Comet River, nineteen souls" (42). Such stories reinforce fear of the dark Other instilled in settlers long before they came to the north, and Gemmy's presence "brought you slap up against a terror you thought you had learned, years back, to treat as childish: the Bogey, the Coal Man, Absolute Night" (42). For the settlers, Aborigines are the manifestation of both the frightening "Other" of childhood narratives and the perpetrators of violence in recent, real events.

This inclines settlers to perceive every shadow as potentially harbouring danger.

*Remembering Babylon's* Aborigines are mostly silent, almost invisible presences of which settlers are nevertheless acutely aware and afraid, for "Even in broad daylight, to come face to face with one of them, stepping out of nowhere, out of the earth it might be, or a darkness they moved in always like a cloud, was a test of a man's capacity to stay firm on his own two

feet" (42). "Once or twice" when Gemmy was out with Mr Frazer, "he saw blacks who were unfamiliar to him standing frozen in the brush", "On other occasions he saw nothing but felt the presence of watchers.... Mr Frazer saw nothing at all. Even when they were meant to be seen" (68). Smith also employs images of silent, invisible Aboriginality, with the narrator describing "Wild native men armed with spears [who] lurked behind trees" (9), or "natives [who] moved noiselessly into the bush" (33). The land that enfolds the Aborigines within its dark and unknown reaches is thus a source of fear.

The settlers' fear is so potent that they cannot risk a breach of their defences, and pressure is brought to bear on those disposed to trust the Aborigines. The leader of the band of strangers in *Landscape of Farewell* recalls how he came north and welcomed the Aborigines into his home, "Against the cautioning of his neighbours that they were not to be trusted" (182). Dalrymple's Sellheim expostulates, 'They're murderous, treacherous, thieving, dirty, and primitive', and the narrator explains:

The massacre of the Fraser family at Hornet Bank Station on the Upper Dawson River two years ago had upset every white person in the region. There had been eleven whites murdered at Hornet Bank. 'Young William Fraser had the right idea,' continued Sellheim who had once worked at Banana and knew the local aborigines. 'He shot four females. One for his dead mother, and one each for his murdered sisters. That is the sort of justice our black friends understand.' (33)

Smith's Dalrymple has an understanding that invasion and dispossession are the source of Aboriginal aggression, and "In a way his sympathies were with his black foes who were merely defending their land" (36). "I've been thinking" he says, "of those daily attacks by the Juru and I now reckon that they were never going to harm or kill us.... I realize they were warning us off – almost pleading with us to go away.... Had they wished, they could have attacked us as we slept.... They could have killed us easily" (39-40). Still, he embarks on a new expedition with eleven Native Mounted Police whose task is "to protect the new settlers from the fierce aboriginal tribes whose territory they were invading" (61). As Aboriginal violence and retaliation validate settlers' fear of the dark other, and the land is alive with the threat of violence, death, and rejection, settlers feel no sense of stability or belonging.

As Aborigines defend their territory, settlers look to secure by violence the land they have claimed. They do not feel comfortable while Aborigines inhabit the same space, so the

Aborigines are repulsed. In *Dalrymple*, Ernest Henry insists that the exploration party prepare their weapons to repel any Aborigines they might encounter (37). In *Remembering Babylon* Aboriginal threat exists in "a world over there, beyond the no-man's-land ... that was the abode of everything savage and fearsome" (2-3). "From the beginning", says the narrator, "there were those among them for whom the only way of dealing with blacks was the one that had been given scope elsewhere", which is, as Ned Corcoran demands, that "We ought to go out...and get rid of 'em, once and for all" (62). "The rest....did not essentially disagree with him", and considered it "the quickest way; the kindest too maybe, in the long run" for "They had seen what happened to blacks in places where the locals were kind. It wasn't a pleasant sight" (62).

Malouf and Miller depict the horror of settler violence against Aborigines, of whom Gemmy is considered one. In *Remembering Babylon* the adult Lachlan tries to find Gemmy, but is disturbed to hear of:

a 'dispersal' ... by a group of cattlemen and two native troopers, too slight an affair to be called a massacre, and no newspaper had got hold of it. The blacks had been ridden down and brought to earth by blows from a stirrup iron at the end of a stirrup leather.... The remnants of the clan... had scattered (196).

In *Journey to the Stone Country*, old Panya, deeply distressed, recounts a story of how George Bigges and Louis Beck "hunted [her] people" when she was a child (338). Hidden, Panya and her friend watched "them men murderin [their] people in the moonlight" (339). After they "finished the killings", says Panya, "they lit a fire and brewed up a quartpot of tea and they sat on a ironbark log and ate their damper and beef, laughing and talking, them bodies laying all around" (339).

This violent extirpation of Aborigines is fortified by effacing their presence. In *Dalrymple*, George proclaims "that we're the only people other than Leichhardt who will ever have been in these tropic lands" (27). His statement dismisses Aboriginal priority and allows him to claim the land without regard for the Aborigines he will dispossess. Settlers, distressed by the loss of home, familiarity, and identity, defuse the threat posed to their land possession by denying Aboriginal occupation. Ellen McIvor claims that "no other lives had been lived here" (110) until settlers arrived, denying the obvious truth of Aboriginal presence, evident in the Aborigines that visit Gemmy at her home (93). Disconnected from her heritage and the

security it afforded, and attempting to forge a niche in a land she cannot understand or relate to, for Ellen to confront her complicity in Aboriginal dispossession is too problematic. By eradicating the impediment of Aboriginal presence through violence and denial, settlers obviate the need to confront their role as dispossessors that would jeopardise their place in the land.

With so many problems adapting to a strange, hostile environment, little in the north seems to welcome these settlers or invite belonging. They struggle in a hot, humid climate that forces them to re-structure their customs and self-images as it robs them of energy and demands that they revise even their deepest attitudes. They find little that corresponds to what they have learned to regard as natural or familiar in the landscape. They have no heritage to affirm their place in the land, and isolation and distance compound their displacement and loss. For the settlers in these novels, life is physically, psychologically and emotionally exacting and their perseverance under such conditions arouses admiration. However, the dispossession, murder and effacement of Aboriginal people soberly tempers this. Reflecting a contemporary angst over the shame that attends Australian settlement, most prominently expressed in the "history wars" of the late 1990s, each author acknowledges the fraught beginnings of European settlement in northern Queensland. Malouf addresses both the stoicism of the first settlers, and their role in Aboriginal dispossession. So too does Miller, who also explores the implications for settler society in northern Queensland today. Smith, however, endeavours to ameliorate the conflict generated by European settlement by attributing to Dalrymple's character a somewhat anachronistic percipience of the impact of settlement upon Aboriginal people in the north. As Max Otto observes in *Landscape of Farewell*, "Passing the baton of truth from our own generation to the next has always been a perilous affair" (20).

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