

Revisiting the Digger Myth in David Malouf's *The Great World*

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The *Great World*, written in 1990 is David Malouf's sixth novel and is the first one to be published in the USA. The novel covers almost three-quarters of a century, which ranges from World War I to the stock market crash of 1988, in the lives of two Australian men and their families. It is a sweepingly ambitious tale of seventy years in the lives of the two men knitted roughly together by their POW experiences under the Japanese in Malaya. Malouf begins in the present with Digger Keen, a former flyweight boxer living with his idiot sister Jenny. Then he goes back to pre-war days for the boyhood of aggressive Vic Curran, orphaned by a brawl that claimed his hard-drinking father and adopted by the genteel Warrenders. Digger and Vic strike up a friendship as POWs after the Japanese casually overrun Malaya; but then when Mac, a fellow prisoner, is killed in a fight between Mac and one of his Japanese guards, Vic feels himself slip in another life- a life he never should have lived, marked on his return home by his loss of Lucille Warrender to a Yank and his marriage to her sister Ellie, his futile affairs, his lonely years wheeling and dealing in shaky financial deals. At the same time Digger, returned to the same Australian town, begins a 20-year involvement with Mac's sister-in-law Iris (whom he'd first seen in a vision in Malaya) and a profoundly uneasy friendship with Vic. Generations pass, bringing to new prominence figures like Warrender grandsons Greg and Alex (now Vic's business manager) in sharply etched scenes showing Digger's and Vic's lives as mere postludes to their wartime disillusionment.

Commenting about this novel, Don Randall has said that 'Australian identity, both individual and national, is shown to emerge through continuous negotiation between connectedness and separation (or loss). Australia, as modern nation and potential homeland, comes into being through transactional movements- between past and present, between Australia

and Asia, Australia and America, between public and private life, between individuals and their communities. Most particularly, the novel aims to show how contemporary Australia has been formed by participation in the Second World War. Much of the novel narrates the post-war decades, right up to the mid-1980s'.¹

As far as Malouf is concerned, he thought of history as the social and socially authorised form of memory, as we understand from his interview with Richard Kelly, referred to later in this discussion. It then becomes pertinent to seek and examine the ways in which memory becomes history and of what kind of history it creates. Philip Neilsen suggested that Malouf's primary focus is upon 'history that does not pretend to be empirically verifiable'.² This particular novel, elaborates itself in large part by assimilating the human events that remain below the consciousness of the historians. The novel asserts according to Buckridge, 'the ineffable value of 'ordinariness', in all its forms.'³ Again according to Rodgers, the primary aim of the novel is to capture the 'unrecorded life' which occupies a great part of the 'fabric' of our lives.⁴ Peter-Knox Shaw extends this line of thought further by saying that this novel attempts to undercut the grand narrative of the national myths by portraying 'the plain grind of everyday living' and by presenting a world of 'irreducible quiddity.'⁵

Malouf himself commented in an interview with Richard Kelly that his interest as a writer is in 'the unwritten history that fills most of time in the kind of wars that people are fighting every day in any society for their own small territory'.⁶ True to that statement Malouf begins his novel of unwritten history with a series of domestic skirmishes. The novel begins with the tales of the numerous 'wars' that Jenny Keen wages, and almost on a daily basis. The first of them was against the magpies. 'She had a war on with the magpies. She had lots of wars, but this was her fiercest and most continuous.'⁷

These were not her only wars. These were her open wars. She had to fight human intruders also. First of all she had to off the 'young fellers and their girls, for instance, who came into the

shop just to tease and make a nuisance of themselves picking things up and putting them down just to aggravate.' (GW p.6-7) But this was perhaps the easier of the human wars. The more difficult one was the one she had to fight against a host of human visitors (headed by Vic) of her jealously guarded brother, Digger. Digger, the name itself becomes very significant. We can see, as pointed out by Peter-Knox. Shaw that Digger is at the centre of a family conflict throughout his formative years that brings about the novel's main debate, and a major issue in this conflict is in the way the hero gets his name. According to Randall, 'Naming is the act that inaugurates the transactional relationship with otherness, with great world and all things in it.'⁸ Digger's name is of course significant as it coincides with the most tenacious archetypes of the Australian male. A term that, Richard White opined in his book *Inventing Australia*, had become significantly more comprehensive than the terms used earlier to that like, 'The Coming Man', the 'Bushman', or the 'Bondi life saver'. The term 'Digger' also was used as the nickname that the Australian troops took for themselves during the First World War. Also it was a term that Geoffrey Serle, has described as being richer in connotation than its English counterpart, Tommy.⁹

Digger soon became a synonym for Aussies. According to the historian, C.E.W. Bean, in the First World War, the national type faced 'the one trial that ... all humanity still recognizes- the test of a great war.'¹⁰ After this trial, the digger emerged as the national hero. He stood for all that was decent, wholesome and Australian. He not only embodied Australianness, but also became its greatest protector. Undoubtedly, at the core of this concept were the male prowess and physicality, but also included a range of moral attributes. Boys (in Australia) were drilled in school, cadet corps and forced from 1911 to take part in compulsory military training. The result was that with the landing of the ANZAC troops in 1915 in Gallipoli, the already formed myth was given a name, a place and a time. According to L.L. Robertson 'Australia could not wish for a more inspiring scene in which to make her European debut as a fighting unit of the Empire.'¹¹ Richard White states, that 'whatever characteristics the diggers were credited with, they returned to Australia as the upholders of what it meant to be Australian. It was through them that the Australian identity could

be given a heroic, legendary core, and they offered themselves, and were used, as custodians of nationhood'.¹²

However, it would be pertinent to ask, how much should be believed of the Digger myth at face value? Despite the many social and political abuses to which the legend has lent itself over the years, few doubt, however, that the populist myth has held much of value twined in with its noxious aspects. In a well-balanced account of the legend, Geoffrey Serle said 'It remains for the historian to explain, reinterpret and popularize the crucial role of the digger in the Australian tradition and place it in truer perspective for the next generation.'¹³

In the light of the above statement, Peter Knox-Shaw opines that the digger stereotype is so deeply woven into the texture of Australian society that it supplies a fair guide to that other history, that record of ordinary life that Malouf sets out to trace in *The Great World*. The analysis that Malouf provides in the novel is sustained by a deep suspicion of the prescriptive and confining character of national stereotypes, such as he has voiced in an interview:

I'm always, I think, impatient of things that get closed off and finished and only believe in things that are still open and moving in some kind of way. A couple of examples - I hate all those notions about Australia that tell us what Australians are like, that this is our national character, that this is what is central to the Australian mind. I feel comfortable with the notion of Australia as a place that is still in the process of being made.¹⁴

Coming to the novel, we find that Malouf puts his opinion into weaving the story and takes a critical look at the stereotype of the digger. In the story of the novel we find that the Australian war experience began as a frenzy of exchange and transportation. It was as if the 'movement, from one continent to the other, of a million articles of no great worth or use' (GW p. 43) - but a million articles that quickly decipher their status as invested objects, as the previously unrecognised underpinnings of identity. Malouf says 'Transactions. Deals. They took up so much energy,

endangered so much feelings, you might have thought they were the one true essential of a fighting man's life, of tenacious, disorderly civilian life inside the official military one. (GW p. 43) There is a great deal of exasperation about the fact that more than the opportunity to fight as heroic soldiers proving their valour and manliness, the Australian troops became more of a 'cargo cult'. As Malouf describes in the novel 'Each man was weighed down with twenty to forty pounds of it (cargo) and staggering; his shirt pockets stuffed, and such lighter articles as bottle openers, penknives, screwdrivers, metal cups and water-bottles dangling from the straps of his pack or his belt loops or from a thong from his neck.' (GW p. 44) Many of them did not even get a chance to fight to prove their worth, for the surrendered came quite suddenly 'Others, newcomers mostly but some old hands as well were still talking about the big fight they would be in, tomorrow or the day after, that would finish the little buggers off... By eleven o'clock it was official. In a meeting with the Japanese commander, General Yamashita, the commander of the Allied Forces, General Percival, had signed an unconditional surrender. (GW p. 43-44)

Malouf's post war Australia is marked by war experience. It was not possible for the war generations to return to the imaginary nation, 'the nation constituted retrospectively, by the rupture and rapture of trauma. The national "home" is the place one recognizes only after being torn away from it'.¹⁵ The question that the novel puts forward now is, how does one live in this new world of post-war Australia? There are two ways, and these two ways are represented by the two principal characters of the novel, Digger Keen and Vic Curran. The former is a country boy, a stolid ferryman and storekeeper with an astounding memory. The latter is Digger's friend, orphaned from a poor mining family and brought up in Sydney by a prosperous factory owner and poet, one of whose daughters he eventually marries. Digger and Vic are unlikely companions. We find that Digger remembers and contemplates, while Vic forgets and acts. Digger is a man of acute sensitivity but few words, a very honest and unambitious loner. Vic is a striver; boastful and insecure, he's a con man and an entrepreneur. Vic's friendship with Digger comes as a result of his own relentless efforts; Digger wants nothing to do with Vic.

Yet they are bound together- both of them are after a truth that they have in common. They had met during World War II and for three and a half years together as Japanese prisoners of war in Malaya and Thailand. It had become a shared experience that established an undeniable intimacy. Malouf feels the personal knowledge that most individuals have of history comes from family stories. In the first section of the novel, the story of Digger's youth unfolds between Vic's visits to the Crossing; and the contrast between the two mature men (for the visits run right up to the present) picks up the conflict in the Keen family itself. Digger's set ways cause Vic to react on something 'prim and old-womanish about Digger. "These are just the sort of things," he thought, "that mothers must say. Looking just like that, too. Half-horrified, half-impressed." This side of Digger was a source of amusement to him.' (GW p.34) In contrast Vic seems to undertake 'activities, out there among the cannibals.' (GW p.35) The narration of these activities would elicit disbelief and even disapproval from Digger at times.

According to Peter Knox-Shaw, the two heroes presented as pointedly opposite types from the very beginning of the novel. This contrast increasingly dominates the text and gives fresh scope to the opening debate, and it is worth tracing the ways in which the digger stereotype persists through the novel. The hunger for excitement that urges Billy's son to leave home and volunteer for the Second World War is sublimated, however, into a desire for the great world. It almost becomes an urge to assimilate experience beyond his ken which carries further his mother's impulse to acquire and extend. Interestingly we find a successor to Billy Keen, not in Digger but Vic, who is a far more complex character, shares with Billy one notable attribute, that of physical self-containment that turns down relation.

The seeds of diggerism are clearly evident in Vic from the moment he decides to shape his destiny as a child. If his name means victory, then his victories are achieved at the cost of eternal dismissal. It is only through the Warrenders that he arrives at some kind of a peace. Over here Vic tries to erase his past with the new found luxury and the economic affluence. Yet the essence of

the realism of the Great World is that it does not allow an easy way of wiping out of the past. Even long before Vic enlists, he had set up an ideal notion of self-containment, emphasizing on the impossibility of there being any link with the past. This belief however proves to be misleading, as what really sustains Vic through his years of captivity is a strong faith in continuity, though he is not ready to admit it even in his dreams. Again we find that though Vic claims to pay no heed to memories, he becomes a compulsive collector of objects that open an avenue for the future.

Amongst all these things that Vic hangs on to, the most important is a length of thread. This is a crucial yet unacknowledged indulgence to Digger's philosophy of line. And ultimately by the end, Vic becomes a proponent of 'line'. But while Digger makes his thread of rationality with his remembrance, Vic, on the other hand, builds his sense of self with more material things. That is perhaps exactly why the digger image that we see in Billy Keen, and also in Vic, is challenged by Malouf by the highlighting of a different and richer form of heroism- a kind of heroism built on suffering. While in this heroism there is nothing that cannot be largely found in the digger myth, like its egalitarianism and mateship, yet it cannot be denied that Malouf's presentation is a bit unique, and at times at loggerheads with the general notions about the legend. In fact the belief that the digger myth has supplied an instrument for racism has been noted by a number of critics like Russel Ward and Richard White. Ward speaks of the way the image of the digger is used as a prop for 'a lily-white egalitarian, Australian democracy' and how it lends itself to a 'tough, sardonic contempt for coloured people and foreigners generally.'¹⁶ Richard White, too, in his book has given examples of how the legend had been exploited to uphold an ideal of racial purity.

The idea that Australia was young, white, happy and wholesome, and in constant need of protection, had been established before the Great War. The digger legend intensified the obsession with virile youth and defensiveness...The 'White Australia' policy effectively kept out the 'Yellow Peril,' and remained a fundamental principle of Australianness.¹⁷

Malouf, for his part, demonstrates this bias, while at the same time sensationalizes the hero's relation to it. Malouf felt that the post war (or for that matter, even pre-war) Australia, is predominantly represented by the Keens, Currans, the Warrenders and other such exclusively Anglo-Celtic names found in Digger's list. This white version of Australia only really discovers itself through its war experience in South-east Asia. But the 'other' version of Australia, represented by the Aboriginal people does not get much concern. Yet a major reason why Digger sets himself apart from the other characters of this novel is the fact that he is the only character of the novel who forms a close, personal and transformative relations with the black Australia. In one of the novel's most animated episodes where Digger works for the country show for eighteen months before joining the forces, serves as a symbol of his idea of the great world. Despite all these experience and insight Digger ultimately enlists in the Army. From this episode we find that though Digger begins like the average, cocky, white Australian male, who goes up to to fight up the black, he subsequently joins the troupe as a co-conspirator. Unlike Jim, he is able to understand clearly that the white Australian masculinity is associated in a deeply arrogant, yet anxious and adversarial attitude to the Aborigine. Yet he fails to generalize effectively from his experience with the blacks. Sadly enough, despite his greater clarity, he cannot restrain himself from participating in that game.

Yet the very fact that Malouf makes Digger come in contact with the blacks and travel with them, even gain a new perspective makes the 'other history' get acknowledged if not brought into the foreground. Rather than denial, if we take our cue from some other novels of Malouf, like *Fly Away Peter* and *Remembering Babylon*, we may see this differential treatment as an example of autocriticism. According to Peter-Knox Shaw:

Unlike many of his legendary namesakes, Digger is happier to assimilate than oppose. In choosing to treat an experience of war that has less to do with conflict

than with subjugation, Malouf in *The Great World* rids the digger myth of its triumphalist associations. 18

Malouf shows that the battle in which both Digger and Vic becomes engaged is an elemental one. It's one of survival. In conclusion we may say that in post-war Australia, Digger becomes the living memory of the war and its legacies. It is interesting that the character, who, at least initially, exhibits the stereotypical characteristics of the digger, is not named Digger in the novel. The character who is named Digger, becomes an archive made of flesh and blood. His principle of memory, which is almost akin to prayer, is a spiritual union with all that has happened in time. 'He wanted nothing to be forgotten and cast into flames. Not a soul. Not a pin.' (GW p. 179) We find that through this novel, Malouf has not only challenged the myth of the digger, but has given it an alternative, broader and an inclusive perspective in his literary attempt to define Australianness.

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