

THOMAS KENEALLY

A Celebration

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Edited by Peter Pierce for the

Friends of the National Library of Australia

With contributions by Peter Pierce, John Molony, Brian Matthews and Marie-Louise Ayres

Friends of the National Library of Australia Inc.

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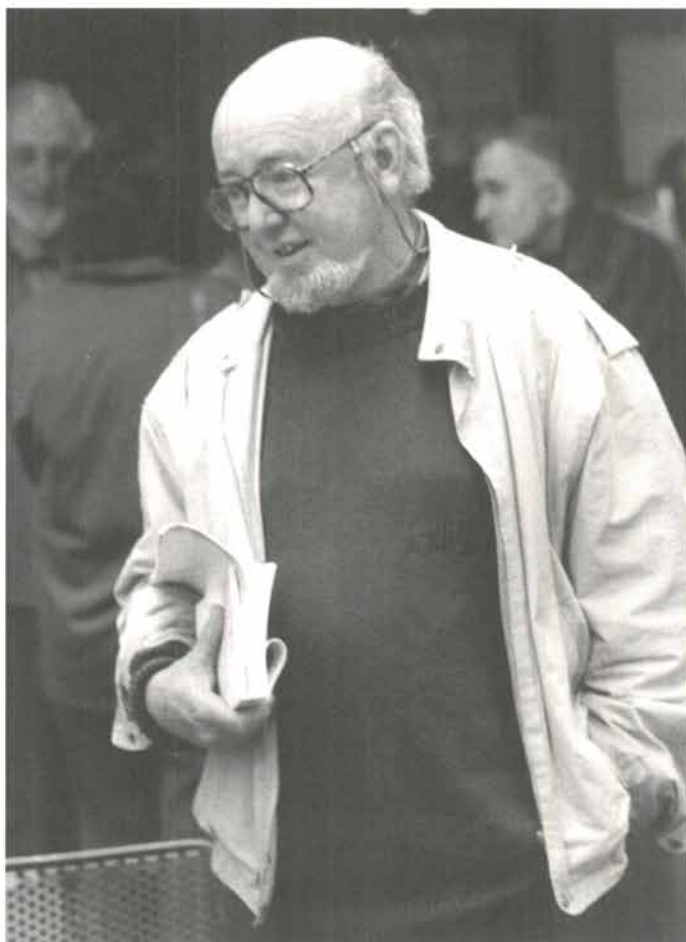
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Virginia Wallace-Crabbe (1941–)
Portrait of Thomas Keneally taken during Writers' Week at the Spoleto Festival, Melbourne, 1989
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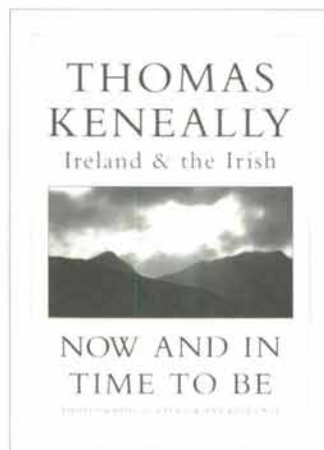
From *Now and In Time to Be*

I was alone on the cliffs near the fishing village of Ballycotton, Cork ... Ballycotton is a stereotype of the Irish fishing village. Steep streets where Irish families of modest means might spend a week every summer in some tidy guesthouse called the *Aisling*. A high sea wall raised like a muscular forearm against the ocean, and—though not quite the currachs of Aran—risky-looking fishing boats, rowboats in one or two cases, in others rickety trawlers equipped with radar, nosing out to make free of the sea. An off-harbour island, a peril-to-shiping one with a heavy surf and a lighthouse on its bare, green apex.

Ballycotton fronts a glowering sea, spotlit only here and there by light through the sort of clouds which aren't going to let anyone declare an unambiguous day.

My reason for starting here is that this is the sea my grandparents took to when they—separately—chose to launch themselves on the longest journey of the Irish diaspora—Cork to Australia. These were the cliffs—between here and Cobh—they last saw, and only then if the weather was good. I don't know the answer to any of these questions: did they look back on them from the deck of whatever class they sailed in with a frightful grief, or with a mix of wistfulness and exaltation? Was their young blood really geared up for the longest possible dosage of sea then available to them? Did they think they'd be back to the dear, familiar sights and faces so often invoked in songs of emigration? ...

On the other hand, were they pleased to see the last of it: the tribalism, the recurrent want, the contumely of being one of Britain's sub-races? Or did they harbour both sets of feelings? In any event, these cliffs were the last they would ever see of Cork or Ireland.





Thomas Michael Keneally, aged 15 months, at Bronte Beach, Sydney, c. 1937. Courtesy Thomas Keneally.

Tom, or Mick?

John Molony

Thomas Michael Keneally was born in Sydney on 7 October 1935. He was known as Michael to his mother and to others as plain Mick until well into his adulthood. Perhaps this came about because his father, Edmund Thomas, was known as Tom and one Tom in the family was deemed to be enough. Keneally described his grandmother, a woman of the Macleay River, as 'dumplingsque'. He said that his father, having recited the 'Our Father' on his deathbed, then paused and remarked to the young priest hovering solicitously over him with the Holy Oils at hand, 'Well Gerard, I think I'm bloody rooted'. Such proved to be the case.

This utterly true observation of his dying father remained fixed in the mind of the son. He hesitantly concluded that such a vibrant spark of immortality could not be, perhaps even would refuse to be, quenched lightly. In later days it seemed to the son that, somehow, the spirit of the father had to be 'out there somewhere' and that 'it's hard to believe that all goes' away at death.

As an author, Keneally has spent a good part of his life struggling with spirits who refuse to be quenched, or go away without a struggle, including the Jews of the Shoah. Perhaps he has a premonition that he will also be a refuser in the end. But to accept that conclusion is to take a vital step towards an opening into the infinite. It also entails an embracing of self and Keneally knows that such a clasping encompasses the bad as well as the good. Great authors must pass over that bridge.

The family lived briefly at Kempsey, which formed the basis for one of Keneally's finest books, *A River Town*. In his early childhood, they moved to 7 Loftus Crescent, skirting the railway line in the Sydney suburb of Homebush. In these places, the seeds of early

Australia were sown deeply into the fibre of the boy. The river towns were vital threads in New South Wales' lifelines for over 100 years and Homebush was part of William Charles Wentworth's domain, thus connecting Keneally with the great shaper of primitive Australian nationality. The Horse and Jockey, a hotel near the Keneally home, recalled Wentworth's racecourse.

After service with the RAAF in the Middle East in World War II, Keneally's father worked in his brother-in-law's small business. The family lived upstairs in a rented flat and there was one other child, John, whose later and successful profession was medicine—to the delight of his older brother. In short, the Keneallys lived in modest circumstances but, given the opportunity to receive a good education for a moderate fee, the sons were able to take the first steps away from Catholic Irish semi-serfdom into the beckoning world of the professions.

Mick's closest mates in his final year at the Christian Brothers St Patrick's College, Strathfield, were Patrick Downie, David Viney and Gerald Walsh. Keneally did not hesitate to pass his hours of study helping Pat, who was born blind. Among others, Viney and Walsh also shared in the incessant hours of reading aloud to Pat, but Mick, the closest neighbour to him, undertook the greater share. He did not give a thought to such devotion to a mate. It was something one did.

Medicine and engineering were regarded as first-rank professions at St Patrick's, which meant that mathematics and science were emphasised in the curriculum. However, a remarkably gifted teacher of English, Brother James Athanasius McGlade, took the Leaving Certificate class in 1952. Keneally treasured the poetry of Gerard Manly Hopkins and hoped there would be a question on him in the Honours English paper. Instead, the general question, 'Poetry is image. Discuss' left him no room to 'expatiate on sprung rhythm'.

Keneally was awarded honours in English and History and won a Commonwealth scholarship. The scholarship, however, was not required for students who entered the seminary at Springwood to study for the priesthood. Viney and Walsh also won Commonwealth scholarships, the latter gaining a first in History. Pat obtained a good pass and became the first blind boy to pass the Leaving Certificate at a Catholic school in New South Wales.

Within this small group—known to Viney and Keneally as the ‘Celestials’, probably because of their alleged unworldliness—the trials of growing to adulthood were softened by the strength of the bonds that held them to each other. Viney was set to become, briefly, a Cistercian monk, then university graduate and Commonwealth public servant. Walsh found his metier at Sydney University and an academic life ensued. Pat qualified at Sydney University to become a social worker in the state public service.

Mick had to grind out his own path and he admitted that he was like a rabbit blinded by headlamps. In his memoir, *Homebush Boy*, Keneally contrived to construct a set of plausible circumstances that, interpreted by him, seemed to indicate that he had little option other than the priesthood as his high path in life. They included, apparently decisively in the end, his deep attraction to, and admiration for, a local girl who chose the life of a religious sister. She made her decision at the same time as Mick was agonising over whether he would go to the seminary. What choice did he have?

The reality was simpler. Mick was reared in an Irish Catholic home in which priesthood was accepted as a normal way of life and no higher ideal than its adoption was held out to boys in Christian Brothers’ schools. Imbued with a vast sense of curiosity, Mick was also a dreamer and an idealist to whom the thirteenth was ‘the greatest of centuries’, even though it had lacked one important love of his life—rugby league. The Latin of the Mass and Catholic ceremonial attracted him and he was a regular Mass-goer, even on weekdays. None of this turned him into a pious hand-wringer.

Keneally admitted that sexuality or, more properly, the need to control its expression posed no insurmountable obstacle and that marriage was a concept worked out in practice in 'the hutch-like aroma that exudes from homes where real, squabbling families live'. Aged sixteen, to forego that outcome and breathe the 'cold clarity of air' in a celibate state was no burden. But above all, in the impressionable teenager there was abundant honesty and a lack of guile that prompted him to be straight in his dealings with those around him. Some might have called it simplicity but, when coupled with an instinctive urge to do the right thing by others, as shown in his devotion to Pat, there were powerful motives prompting him to choose the priesthood.

These things need to be weighed in the balance when considering the final outcome of Keneally's seeking priesthood. Seven years later and within days of ordination, Keneally's structured life collapsed at its centre. Relatives and friends had to be told by telegram that there would be no First Mass celebrated by Father Keneally. It is impossible for others to plumb the depths of the ensuing misery, the shame of being what the old Irish derisively but sorrowfully called 'a spoilt priest', the undoubted grief of his mother—whose pride in her son had increased as he approached ordination—and the sense of uncertainty in being forced to turn back to a world that he had relinquished as a teenager.

These new and radical circumstances seemed to demand that Mick become Tom because, as he said, he had 'to make up for the failure I'd been in the seminary' and that 'one of the things that happened was of course Michael had been a total failure'. 'Total' and 'failure' are strong words and both are falsely used. Mick had taken a dreadful battering and yet he had persevered through seven long years in the seminary. In the end, he had decided that priesthood was not to be his path through life. He would make a go of things in another way and to do that, he had to summon up great courage and not become 'terminally depressed'.

Much else besides remained in Mick's survival of the cataclysm—his integrity, his thirst for justice, his sense of humour and his empathy for others, especially the weak. They were all there in the newly named Tom and without them there could never have been Thomas Keneally, the author. It is useful also to remember that Tom never lost Mick's love for rugby league, that other tribal religion of much of the Sydney working classes.

Having worked in odd jobs as a teacher and contributor to various publications—including the Sydney *Bulletin* for which he wrote under a pseudonym, 'Bernard Coyle' (Coyle was his mother's maiden name)—in 1964 Thomas Keneally published *The Place at Whitton* under his own name. I read and enjoyed it but my review of it in a newspaper did not please Tom. In it I said, in effect, that he would never become an author with a universal appeal until he 'wrote the priesthood out of his guts'. In other books, some remnants of the priesthood theme survive in a muted and at times beautiful way, but there were other stirrings.

Back in 1952, under the tutelage of the polymath Brother McGlade, Tom had studied and enjoyed History. Eventually the promptings to History that had been shaped at school proved irresistible and Tom was to be seen in the Mitchell Library of New South Wales reading the faded pages of the *Sydney Gazette* and the *Sydney Herald*, later the *Sydney Morning Herald*. The fruits of Tom's research appeared crimsoned with blood from whippings and blackened with horror on the gallows in the pages of *Bring Larks and Heroes*, published in 1967. John Ritchie, legendary teacher of Australian History in the History Department at the Australian National University, paid the highest tribute to Tom's book. He made it obligatory reading for his first-year students saying, 'Where else would students ever get a more vivid and truer idea of those early days?'

The criticism that some of Keneally's finest work is too close to history poses a false dichotomy unless it is argued that fiction is only real in another world. More importantly,

it makes impossible to sustain the proposition that historical fiction can be fine work exactly because it has a firm basis in reality. *Bring Larks and Heroes* relied as much on historical sources as did *A River Town* which was ‘fed directly from the pages of the *Macleay Argus* and the *Macleay Chronicle*’. What can be made of *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*, *Schindler’s Ark*, *Towards Asmara*, *The Great Shame* and that magnificent evocation of pastoral Australia, *Bettany’s Book*, if their roots in history are pulled out? His two more recent works have been explicitly historical and *The Commonwealth of Thieves* has already taken its place in the forefront of historical accounts of our early colonial period. The millions around the world who have either read *Schindler’s Ark*, and/or seen the film based on the book, have not paused to make negative judgements about a work from which, in either form, they came away enriched.

In any event, the judges have spoken with a Booker Prize and two Miles Franklin Literary Awards, together with a clutch of other literary prizes. Six universities have given Keneally doctorates; he has held chairs at the University of California and New York and lectured in Drama at the University of New England in 1968 and 1969. In other ways, he has paid his dues to his profession and particularly with his chairmanship, and then presidency, of the Australian Society of Authors (1987–90) and his membership of the Literature Board (1985–88). No prize has yet been devised for the thing that ennobles all Keneally’s work. He never stoops to debase a fellow human being.

In public life, Keneally became prominent as the foundation chairman of the Australian Republican Movement. In its early days the movement failed to gauge the popular will, which resolutely opposed passing the creation of a president into the hands of politicians of whatever stripe and, much less, into those of a prime minister. When the day came for a decision, the movement could not break from those to whom allegiance to a republic was a sham. The result was inevitable—a postponed republic. Throughout all this turmoil,

Keneally remained true to his dream, retained his dignity and never engaged in the bitter acrimony that came to mark the republican debate.

In August 1965, Keneally married Judith Mary Martin. They had two daughters and are now grandparents—to Tom's clear delight when he gazes fondly on a grandson who 'runs around the living room belting a football and yelling'; a form of entertainment probably not encouraged in the 1940s in the small lounge of 7 Loftus Crescent. Publicly, Tom has acknowledged his debt to Judy as his aid and partner in meeting the demands of a public life. He decries the thought that he has 'crushed her as Germaine Greer says Mr Blair has crushed Mrs Blair' and says that they have reached 'that glorious stage where we understand each other so well that there's not a cross word'. One suspects that the missing word which makes this account true is love.

In the end, there remains a disjunction between the young Mick and the now ageing Tom. Tom worries about Australia while, to Mick, it was scarcely more than the little world of Homebush–Strathfield, his mates and his rugby league team. Tom worries about whether Australians will become 'a nation of waiters', whether tribal and ethnic hatreds will destroy us, and to what extent trusting the market to trickle down a bounteous overflow will uplift the genuine battlers at the bottom of the ladder. He gives no indication as to how he votes, but the road from Loftus Crescent to an AO at Yarralumla is perilous and rarely trodden by the Irish whose roots are in Kempsey and in such places of the deserving poor. Nevertheless, Tom stands full of abhorrence at the treatment of refugees by a government which has cut the whole territory called Australia off from being part of a welcoming world. Mick would have cheered at Tom's rejection of such monstrous behaviour.

In the normal course of events, the young Mick would have come to a biblical age and still have been able to stand and say the creed of his ancestors. In the 1950s, some

awfulness took place in or about the stupendous edifice of St Patrick's College standing on the cliff above the beach at Manly. The result was that another and darker hue was cast on the 'I believe' of Tom Keneally. He was asked in 2002 'Do you believe in God now?' Tom replied 'I don't believe there's a personal intervening deity,' and went on to regret that he had probably become a 'deist', which he admitted was 'a terrible thing to be'. Yet, the pull is still there in the strength of his 'childhood upbringing' and the tribal bonds. Thus he doesn't know whether he will call for the priest on his deathbed but admits that 'It's quite possible'. As a result of this uncertainty about whether he will be a refuser or a head-bower, who accepts ultimate and irrevocable obliteration, Tom Keneally (perhaps it is Mick) hopes that Father Eddy Champion will last long enough to make that final league a viaticum. In the meantime, what Tom has given to us will do well enough, but only for now. We trust that there is more to come.

From *Bring Larks and Heroes*

In no time, the gangling trees had them cut off from the town. Halloran was impressed by the sly antiquity of the place. Glossy shrubs, smelling like a cemetery a week after All Souls, took the spotted light on their tongue and tipped it brassy in his tracks. Rocks smelt of dry age. Here all things went on easily, mercilessly germinating, convinced of their own inevitable survival. For some distance, he was more aware of hostility than he was of Ann. It seemed that in these poor scrubby woods, all his judgements on what a forest should look like were being scarcely tolerated by the whole pantheon of the gods of this, the world's wrong end ...



‘Do you want to walk, Ann?’ he asked her, implying that she probably didn’t want to. ‘We can find a shady place here and rest, because you need a rest.’

‘I need a seabreeze, Halloran darling. It isn’t far to the seabreezes.’

Halloran went on to say many trite things for a man who fancied himself as a poet. Just as they separated, he said, ‘My bride in Christ’.

But, by the time they had crossed over the hill and come, slipping in the leaf-mould, to a dry stream-bed, Halloran felt again, as he had earlier in the day, that they were patently man and wife. It was about a quarter of a mile behind them that a rather Calvinist deity and the House of Hanover were the names by which contracts and marriages, baptisms and hangings were solemnized. Four hundred yards from the town, on untouched earth, they seemed as much fated, each to each, as two people in a fable.



Thomas Keneally addresses the National Press Club at the Hotel Canberra, January 1968. Courtesy *The Canberra Times*. Federal Capital Press Pty Ltd.

Thomas Keneally's 'Human Comedy'

Peter Pierce

Thomas Keneally's stories have been part of the lives of Australian readers for more than four decades, and of the lives of an international readership for almost as long. He was first published pseudonymously, as 'Bernard Coyle', in the *Bulletin* in 1962. His most recent book is another account of the origins of European settlement in New South Wales, this time in a work of non-fiction, *The Commonwealth of Thieves*. In 1967 it was Keneally's imagining of that penal colony at 'the world's wrong end', in his third novel, *Bring Larks and Heroes*, that won him the first of what would be successive Miles Franklin Literary Awards, and earned the book a season as the latest 'great Australian novel'.

I can remember the thrill of my first encounter with Keneally's work, not only with that book, but also through reading an excerpted chapter of the one that followed it, *Three Cheers for the Paraclete*. This novel drew on Keneally's experiences while he trained for the Catholic priesthood at St Patrick's Seminary in Manly in the 1950s. Here was an author who not only vivified Australia's past, making it momentous—by turns strange and terrible, comic and tragic—but who was also concerned with matters of an individual's conscience when beset by institutional authority. He wrote with a passionate clarity about issues of moral choice, some of whose outcomes could be mortal. This was the case for the self-doomed lover and poet, Marine Corporal Phelim Halloran, in *Bring Larks and Heroes*.

This was an author whose creative spirit, notwithstanding its early brilliance, never sputtered out, but renewed itself in a plenitude of story. Keneally can sometimes seem the nearest that we have to a Balzac of our literature; he is in his own rich and idiosyncratic

ways the author of an Australian ‘human comedy’. Consider the oeuvre: two novels set in Antarctica; a dozen or more concerned with war, in Europe, Africa, America, Asia; tales of hijacking and of the Holocaust; portraits of Joan of Arc and of Lincoln, of those who have been deemed saints and of others who were heroic and flamboyant scoundrels, such as Oskar Schindler or the American Civil War general (and much else besides) Dan Sickles. Keneally’s work has told of the Irish diaspora, an American and Australian story in the grand narrative, as well, in miniature, of the ancestral heritage on both sides of his family. This diaspora was the subject of *The Great Shame* where—as, increasingly, in the most recent decade of his career—he has turned his gifts as a novelist to the writing of history. Of course, he had famously done the same with the best seller of all his novels, *Schindler’s Ark*. After what has become an annual controversy among the Booker Prize judges (on this occasion over whether Keneally’s book was really a novel at all), it became the first novel by an Australian to win the prize. Later the novel was renamed *Schindler’s List*, which was also the title of the Oscar-winning film that was eventually made by Steven Spielberg and released in 1994.

Keneally is both a world-renowned writer and the ‘Homebush boy’ (in the title of his 1995 memoir) who grew up in a working-class Catholic household in western Sydney and in the north coast region of New South Wales to which both his grandfathers had come after leaving Ireland. That lush landscape was the setting of his novel *A River Town*, also published in 1995 and, as such, a part of that welling of autobiographical impulse that came to Keneally around his sixtieth year. If his family roots have furnished some of his most evocative writing, stories have also come to him by the chance that rewards those gifted to retell them. Thus it was, in a luggage store in Los Angeles, that he first heard of Oskar Schindler, saviour of more than a thousand Jews in World War II; a man who—after his death—would be ‘mourned on every continent’.

War has been a perennial incitement for Keneally's art, because of the ways in which it rends families not only at the time, but also later. His anguished account of such European aftermaths in contemporary Australia was *A Family Madness*. He also focuses on how war shapes and deforms the memories of nations. Keneally has been drawn especially to what were in effect, or in name, civil wars: the Hundred Years War in *Blood Red, Sister Rose*, the American Civil War (*Confederates*), the Armistice dealings after the Great War (*Gossip From the Forest*, which was short-listed for the Booker Prize) and the Eritrean war of independence against the Sudanese in *Towards Asmara*. Keneally witnessed that conflict at first hand for a time in 1987, as a partisan of 'the brave Eritrean People's Liberation Front'.

For Keneally, war is both a monstrous and an ineradicable activity, a horror for individuals at the same time as it seems to have been essential, if also often disastrous, for national self-definition. The war to which he has been especially drawn as a novelist is the one that over-shadowed his childhood: World War II, during which, for a time, there appeared to be a possibility that Australia would be invaded. His own recollections of homefront life imbue several of his novels: *The Fear*, which was the second of them to be published, in 1965, and which he revised as *By the Line* in 1989; *The Cut-Rate Kingdom*, which was first published as a special issue of the *Bulletin* in 1980, and *An Angel in Australia*. (In the United States, the ambiguous title of this book was *Office of Innocence*. The change was made so that Keneally's novel would not end up on the 'Angelology' shelves of American book-stores.) For Keneally, the deeds of the First AIF at Gallipoli and on the Western Front have not been as potent as the dramas of World War II. Reviving, with variation, an old pseudonym, he also wrote a brace of novels, *Act of Grace* and *Chief of Staff* as 'William Coyle'. These were set respectively in the European and Pacific theatres of war. Besides *Chief of Staff*, two other books by Keneally were published in 1991. They were *Flying Hero Class* and *Now and In Time to Be*. They show the deepening of interests

that had first been treated by him decades before, and which now found more complex expression. *Flying Hero Class* was a novel that dealt with the hijacking of an aeroplane in Europe by Arab terrorists, or freedom fighters. Among the passengers were the members of the Barramatjara Aboriginal dance troupe. It was nearly two decades since Keneally's courageous and, as he later judged, reckless intervention into the sad history of European and Indigenous relations in Australia. This was *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*, a novel that he wrote in England where he lived in 1970–71. (The film of the novel, directed by Fred Schepisi, who co-wrote the script with Keneally, was released in 1978. Keneally gleefully played the cook who cuckolded Jimmie. His other film role was in another Schepisi film, *The Devil's Playground*, 1976.) Based on the true story of killings committed in outback New South Wales by the part-Aboriginal Governor brothers on the eve of Australian Federation, *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* was Keneally's angriest indictment of the treatment of Aboriginal Australians. In the novel they are pitied, by some, as about to become 'extinct', but also persecuted to the point where Jimmie murderously avenges the slights against him.

Keneally has said that 'the snake in the [Australian] garden is that we have not recognised the prior sovereignty of the Aborigines'. On the other hand, he has been neither credulous nor sentimental in dealing with what he regards as a national shame. Thus, when he returned to a cast of Aboriginal characters in *Flying Hero Class*, Keneally's intuitive stroke was to probe the nature of stereotyping. He grasped the complex nature of stereotypes, which are not only a way of injuring and diminishing others, but can also be a convenience for those who live in and behind them. Jimmie's agony was in part the result of his refusal to accept white stereotyping of him. By contrast, the dancers of the later novel subvert their parts as they appear to live up to them. Here Keneally's art is redemptive and humanising, not least because its procedures in this instance are fundamentally comic. As a result, these resourceful Aborigines, neither caricatures nor

any longer thought to be doomed to extinction, are a perennial call to conscience and sympathetic understanding among all Australians.

Of the plight of Australian Aborigines, Keneally has also stated, by analogy, that 'the Aboriginal issue is Australia's Ulster'. It is the British imperial dealings with his ancestral country, Ireland, that he has in mind. In *Now and In Time to Be*, he took a line from a W.B. Yeats poem for his title, but for his own bearings he set out on an adventure that began 'on the cliffs near the fishing village of Ballycotton, Cork'. It was from here that his grandparents separately chose 'to launch themselves on the longest journey of the Irish diaspora—from Cork to Australia'. Of the ambivalence of their feelings he can only guess: 'a frightful grief, or ... a mix of wistfulness and exaltation?' Keneally's historical writing about the European peopling of Australia has, however, never been only an Irish story. Keneally has always been alert to the beliefs and superstitions, the laws and lore in uneasy conjunction in Australia's settlement years. Consorting in New South Wales were the 'unbuttoned, boozing hoons' of Georgian England (whom he sees raucously alive in this country still), the swell and flash languages of metropolitan London, as well as the Gaelic which disquieted British authorities and put them in fear of insurrection. These were part of a macaronic mix of tongues that had been brought so far from England and Ireland that these lands could henceforth only be homes in memory for most of those who had come to Australia.

In 1993, Keneally again released three books. One was a novel: *Jacko*. Among the least well known of his works, this is a festive comedy set in the United States. It also contains one of the many subtle portraits of a writer that distinguish the work of one who has been less remarked for self-reflexiveness about his craft than for the riotous misadventures and collisions on the surfaces of his fiction. Tribal loyalty of an other than Irish kind, Keneally's adherence to the Manly Rugby League team, produced the tribute

to Des Hasler, *The Utility Player*. Also in that year, Keneally's account of earlier aspirations for, and of his own dreams about, a better Australian polity—one tuned and truer to its finer instincts appeared. This was *Our Republic*. Throughout the 1990s, Keneally was a leading advocate of the Australian Republican Movement but this was—if one of the dearest—hardly the only cause that he served. In the 1980s, for instance, he was a member of the Australia–China Council and the Literature Board of the Australia Council and, from 1985–89, he was President of the National Book Council. Keneally's role in Australian public life has—in the last quarter of a century—become more outspoken, even as he has remained unfailingly cheerful in his demeanour.

He lives, as do many of his characters (occasionally to their harm), in the optative mood. At the same time he is intensely aware of all that has riven Australian society, from the ancient antagonisms between Irish and English in the colony's first years, to the brutal treatment and failures of comprehension of Aborigines, to the reign of greed and perfidy in our time, and of the humane forces that can confront it. This was the subject of *Woman of the Inner Sea*, one of Keneally's finest anatomies of Australian contemporary life. That life is surveyed in its abundance as both venal and noble. Keneally's viewpoint is essentially benign, notwithstanding his belief that 'fatal human malice is the staple of narrative'. Keneally has mustered an inclusive, but not indulgent, generosity such as few of his peers have matched. His most recent work of fiction, *The Tyrant's Novel*, was written in the same spirit. Not a diatribe against Australian policies towards refugees, although it opens in a detention centre outside Sydney, the novel sought an understanding of who the refugees are, and of the countries (such as Iran) from which they have come and why.

Keneally has spoken of the body of his work as 'a continuous and relatively homogeneous thing'. Certainly one can find within it a descriptive preference for the superlative degree,

recurrent character types—authors, executioners and visionaries among them—and motifs such as ‘wounds’ and ‘blood’. These have been discernible from the beginning of his career. There is also a tenacious consistency in Keneally’s cosmology. He is convinced that all our fates are intertwined. In consequence, our actions always implicate others at a moral cost with which some at least will have to reckon. As Oskar Schindler decides on ‘the ghetto’s last and worst day’, ‘all of them were under sentence’. And, as I argued in my book about him, *Australian Melodramas: Thomas Keneally’s Fiction*, the genius and temper of his work is melodramatic. So was Balzac’s. To speak of him as one of the national melodramatists is to place Keneally in a long and distinguished literary line that includes Marcus Clarke and Manning Clark, Christina Stead and Patrick White. Keneally is acutely conscious of how embattled Australians have often felt, how agitated they have been by the threats of foreign peoples and ideas, whether real or conjured from some obscure psychic need. He comprehends how the dire prospect of dispossession is the sovereign theme of melodrama, and of how well that has suited the history of this country.

In *The Playmaker*, we read that ‘one generation’s solemnities become the melodrama of the succeeding generation and the comedy of the next’. That positions Keneally’s work between the historical agencies that it has so regularly addressed, and the dissolution of their moral portentousness through comedy which his art has increasingly embraced. Published twenty years after *Bring Larks and Heroes*, *The Playmaker* was Keneally’s exuberant second account in fiction of the European settlement of Australia. Here was articulated his hopeful dream that—far from entrenching antagonisms—life in the Antipodes (this place where ‘Nature is reversed’, as an early officer complained) might eventually dissolve old bonds and obligations; it might enable a fuller existence for those who have, or who have had to, come to live in Australia.

While the unnamed first governor schemes for the rehabilitation of his charges in a world 'where the person under sentence was the normal thing and to be a free man abnormal', Lieutenant Ralph Clark, the playmaker of the title (the officer requested to stage the first theatrical entertainment in the colony which, fittingly for Keneally, was a comedy), ponders how freedom might be bestowed here, not only by pardon and the expiry of sentences, but also through 'new world marriages, new world associations'. The tragedy of *Bring Larks and Heroes* has been commuted into comedy. The characters are now infected by their author's optimism for the national future. This is the essence and the gift of Keneally's fictional revision of Australian history. It is also the sign of his life-embracing shift, from the alienation that fitfully directed his work of the 1960s to the affirmation that has been the burden which increasingly and richly it has expressed.

From *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*

At last he was lucky enough to get a contract from an Irish farmer up the river. One of those harsh, commercially-minded Irishmen with a fat, bleak-eyed young wife to sit by his fire and ponder on the crucifix above it.

Middle-aged farmers with prescriptive plump wife and crucifix are not known to be generous. The basis of the contract was this. One of Healy's pastures ran uphill into forest, and cows had therefore been occasionally lost and stolen. Jimmie was to make a forest fence, post-and-rail hardwood, posts seven feet apart, going rate one shilling and sixpence a rod, to be finished by the end of September. It would cost Healy £2 12s. 2d.

The Irishman was always delivering ultimatums and stepping up close to Jimmie. He had a large square beard like a nobleman called the Duke of Clarence, whom Mr Neville had once shown him a photograph of and, in a spasm of recklessness, even whispered that there were people who thought the duke was Jack the Ripper. Like the duke, Healy had the air of a basilisk.

'Yer any religion? Other than nigger?'

'Methodist, boss.'

'Then I give yer me Christian promise that I'll cut yore bloody black balls out if yer mess this job. And every post that's out of place an inch, I'll dock yer a shillin'.'



'Fair enough, boss'. It would be part of his cunning, he swore, to accept insult as a business proposition.

The means Jimmie used to acquire fencing tools are of little interest, except that he had stolen the shovel from Mr Neville's place, knowing where it was kept and not having to fumble for it in the dark.

Jimmie suspected that there was some sort of justice involved in that theft. Perhaps there was, for the Nevilles were the ones who, although poor themselves, had taught him that possession is a sacred state. They had even given him a parting endowment, a small amount; a deposit, they might have considered it.

Possession was a holy state and he had embarked on it with the Nevilles' shovel. The Nevilles had succeeded so well as to make Jimmie a snob. In the mind of the true snob there are certain limited criteria to denote the value of a human existence. Jimmie's criteria were: home, hearth, wife, land. Those who possessed these had beatitude unchallengeable. Other men had accidental, random life. Nothing better.

Making His Own Way

Brian Matthews

Such has been Tom Keneally's larger-than-life presence in the Australian literary culture for the past several decades—and, for that matter, in Australian society generally as prominent republican, social commentator, rugby league supporter, historian, and raconteur, among much else—that it comes almost as a surprise to find that nearly forty years ago he was a Miles Franklin Literary Award winner in successive years ('back-to-back wins' in the preferred argot of league pundits). In 1967 he won with *Bring Larks and Heroes* and the following year with *Three Cheers for the Paraclete*.

Bring Larks and Heroes was the deserving winner of Australia's most important literary award, and its success went some way towards convincing Keneally that he might have a future as a writer. Two previous novels, *The Place at Whitton* and *The Fear*, had attracted some favourable attention, but neither made the kind of impression that led anyone to expect of this new, young author works of such resounding, though very different, accomplishment as *Bring Larks and Heroes* and *Three Cheers for the Paraclete*. The former, in particular, aroused extraordinary excitement mainly because it was rightly recognised as a work of considerable literary merit and importance and because of the times into which it was launched.

The publication of Patrick White's *The Tree of Man* in 1955 had revived the Australian obsession with 'the great Australian novel'. Where was it? When, if ever, would it arrive? What were the conditions that might hasten its emergence? Was *The Tree of Man* the answer, at last? There had been candidates in the past but, in the view of some critics and reviewers, none had staked a claim as trenchantly as *The Tree of Man*.

That claim, however, was vigorously and acrimoniously disputed. White's attempt to show the extraordinary behind the ordinary, the poetry that alone could make lives bearable, involved an implicit attack on the staples of established bush narrative—fire, flood, hardship, loneliness—or rather, on the way they were presented and the assumptions that underwrote their central place in so much Australian story. Added to this were the difficulties and innovations of White's prose style—'pretentious and illiterate verbal sludge' as A.D. Hope memorably remarked, in a review that, nevertheless, was intelligent and not as negative as its most famous phrase makes it sound. White, approaching the very height of his powers, followed up with *Voss* in 1957, *Riders in the Chariot* in 1961, *The Solid Mandala* in 1966 and *The Vivisector* in 1970. Writers taking their first creative steps in the 1960s, such as Keneally and Thea Astley (*A Descant for Gossips*, 1960; *The Well Dressed Explorer*, 1962; *The Slow Natives*, 1965; *A Boat Load of Home Folk*, 1968), could not possibly fail to be both influenced and overawed by such a presence. So, when *Bring Larks and Heroes* was received rapturously and proposed as the 'great Australian novel', it did not take too much insight to understand that it had also become a stick in the hands of White bashers.

In that atmosphere and with the Miles Franklin award soon added to its conquests, it is not amazing that *Bring Larks and Heroes* should have become not only a successful and acclaimed novel but also a kind of talisman in the endless debate about Australian literary worth and critical values. This at the time did not do either the novel or its author any obvious harm, but it did mean that its virtues became collectively a 'given' and that, as a result, the nature of the achievement and the essential details from which its power and impact derived, were not much attended to outside the academy (an institution for which, it has to be noted, Keneally nursed a corrosive contempt which, in time, has mellowed). Curiously enough, this lack of close attention was exacerbated by the success of *Three Cheers for the Paraclete* because it is so different from its illustrious predecessor—but more of that later.

Bring Larks and Heroes is a work of extraordinary creative maturity in several ways. Where White recognises the literary baggage that he inherits and simply throws it away—turning the story of Stan and Amy Parker into, among other things, a critique of the established bush genre—Keneally deftly ducks and weaves his way into an open space all his own. With Marcus Clarke powerfully and persuasively present in the generic background, as it were, Keneally nevertheless successfully and convincingly rejects the model of ‘convicts’ and the ‘system’: the convicts are ‘felons’ and the location is not the Australia of the convict era but ‘a penal colony in the South Pacific’. The shift is subtle but significant. Just as Xavier Herbert’s *Capricornia* is and is not the Northern Territory of geography and history, Keneally’s penal colony is and is not convict-era Australia. Like a photograph slightly out of focus, it offers us two dimensions: one historically familiar if inexact; the other a world of the imagination.

From the start, Keneally skilfully signals that what is happening here is an act of the imagination, a drama that he has set in motion, distanced from any ‘real’ historical world of which we might choose to be reminded:

At the world’s worse end, it is Sunday afternoon in February. Through the edge of the forest a soldier moves without any idea that he’s caught in a mesh of sunlight and shade. Corporal Halloran’s this fellow’s name. He’s a lean boy, taking long strides through the Sabbath heat. Visibly, he has the illusion of knowing where he’s going. Let us say, without conceit, that if any of his ideas on this subject were *not* illusion, there would be no story.

The imaginative space that Keneally has devised for himself comes from his detouring around certain apparently pressing historical imperatives. Like Prospero, he commands and manoeuvres his players, bestrides time and circumstance, is conscious of his own mastery and trickery, and makes ironic nods to his audience:

[Halloran’s] elation on what, for the sake of starting the story, we have called *today* and *this afternoon* is buried now beneath a cairn of years. So his *today*

is not ours; his *today* is *that day* to us, and we are, after all, the people for whom the story is being told. Keeping sight of him, let us nevertheless say that *that day*, he arrived elated among the blighted turnips at the backdoor.

Thus, with great panache and confidence, Keneally launches the ‘parable’—his word—of love and art in the wilderness. That the engaging tone of the early part of the novel tightens inexorably into horror and tragedy comes as no surprise: like the ‘sweet air’ in *The Tempest* that creeps by Ferdinand as if ‘it waits upon/Some god o’ the island’, the loving, promising ambience of Halloran and Ann’s little world is actually fraught with a menace and portent which Ann does not see but Halloran suspects. Seeming to be living with purpose, hope and plans, they are merely ‘warding off oblivion’, and oblivion duly overtakes them.

Bring Larks and Heroes was rightly, indeed extravagantly, praised when it appeared. But such was the extraordinary productivity and diversity of Keneally’s subsequent work that its importance in his development has been blurred. There is a daring and confidence about the narrative devices; and the acuity of his observation and the sheer virtuosity of his descriptive powers—arguably at least as impressive as White’s, up to and including *The Solid Mandala*, and endowed with more dash in a prose more lyrical—constantly contribute to that sense of pressures ineffably building, of a doom whose lineaments keep subliminally and tantalisingly flickering.

There is Ewers’ hanging, for example, ‘the worst of hangings, a long stifling, when, in the muscular agony, the ravaged animal spills dirt and water down its legs’, which, at the novel’s stunning conclusion, we recognise as a prefigurement of Halloran’s own death by hanging: ‘Oh, the yawning shriek of his breathlessness, above him like a massive bird, flogging him with its black wings; the loneliness ripping his belly up like paving-stones’. And the arrogant, up-jumped Rowley, who was ‘nineteen, but ... had seventy-year-old grey eyes as a pledge of the ... chairman of corporation that he would become. He had

full lips and jaws born to become the jowls of a dominant old man'. Or again, Dinny Quinn's reflection on 'the lavender qualms of girls in confessionals, letting out their lovely guilt in little puffs of winter breath'. And much else that is easily as good.

Keneally reveals in his 'Author's Note' to the Sun Books edition of *Bring Larks and Heroes* that 'the germ-idea from which the book grew was a passage in Captain Watkin Tench's journal, *Account of Settlement at Port Jackson*'. But it is merely the germ, as the complexity and tragic inevitability within the moral microcosm that Halloran and Ann inhabit clearly attest. Keneally is not interested in the injustices and cruelties of the system except insofar as they provide both substance and backdrop to central human dilemmas that could be played out anywhere, but which are peculiarly and fatally complicated and exacerbated by a place where a 'disappointing spring had given way to the malign summer', where 'there would be no harvest at Government Farm, where muddied stooks of young corn stood like the camp wreckage of a beaten army', where—for all the lovers' pretence to be 'a universe to each other ... safe from the extremes of ... destiny'—the 'ironstone world was always there' and 'one day it would penetrate the avid heart and make it meat'.

Three Cheers for the Paraclete, conversely, quite obviously springs from more than a germ. For Keneally, who had entered the seminary at a young age and left it before ordination, it was probably inevitable that he would at some time return to that experience and, from the distance of fictional narrative and from a point of view of his own choosing, review and reflect upon it. And perhaps the successful risk-taking of *Bring Larks and Heroes*, with its nicely pitched moments of poetic intensity, the conviction and weight of its imaginative world freed from the thrall of history and literary tradition, gave Keneally the confidence to cut closer to the bone. *Three Cheers for the Paraclete* is not autobiography, but it clearly owes its conception to Keneally's own joust with, and eventual departure from, the church. What is so

impressive—and again, an achievement somewhat muffled by Keneally’s subsequent distinctions and productivity—is that within a year of conjuring up the ambiguously exotic, morally enigmatic world inhabited by Halloran and Ann, Keneally evoked the apparently secure but knife-edged, fusty yet forensic milieu of the seminary and the presbytery, where intellectual disputation was turned into mere charade by an underlying, cut-and-dried certainty that actually feared debate. Hence Maitland, at a pivotal moment, goaded into utterance and ‘blind with anger’:

‘Very well then, doctor. I think that it is more than barbarous in a merely human sense to make that girl risk bearing such a child. I think such a thing is *essentially* barbarous. I think that the risk of any minute organism which the doctor might remove being human is ludicrously tiny. And on the basis of such a tiny or non-existent risk, I can’t see that it’s justified to chance the future ruin of both this *real* girl and any child she may bear. I’m sorry if this shocks you, doctor, and, as you say, you’re the expert. But you wanted my opinion and that’s it.’

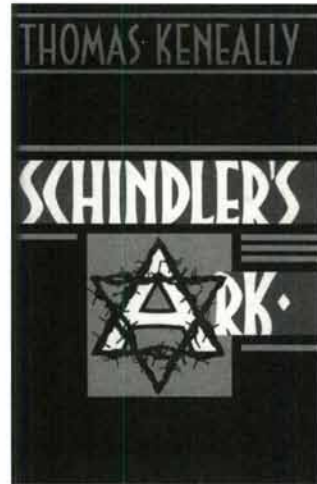
It is the kind of precise moral positioning that Halloran wanted so desperately to command, but for which he couldn’t even begin to muster the range of reference, let alone the vocabulary. It is another world. Keneally moves effortlessly through both of them.

Such was Keneally’s *annus mirabilis*, with a Miles Franklin award at either end and, perhaps more importantly, the clearest of signals that here was a writer of enormous power and virtuosity. Anyone wanting to explicate, analyse or dissect his subsequent writing career—and many have done so, not always with the greatest goodwill—would do well to be anchored by *Bring Larks and Heroes* and *Three Cheers for the Paraclete*.

From *Schindler's Ark*

We do not know in what condition of soul Oskar Schindler spent March 13th, the ghetto's last and worst day. But by the time his workers returned to him under guard from Plaszów he was back in the mood for collecting data to pass on to Dr Sedlacek on the dentist's next visit. He found out from the prisoners that Zwangsarbeitslager Plaszów—as it was known in the SS bureaucratese—was to be no rational kingdom. Goeth had already pursued his passion against engineers by letting the guards beat Zygmunt Grünberg into a coma and bring him so late to the clinic up near the women's camp that his death was assured. From the prisoners who ate their hearty noonday soup at Deutsche Email Fabrik, Oskar heard also that Plaszów was being used not only as a work camp but as a place of execution as well. Though all the camp could hear these executions, some of the prisoners had been witnesses ...

People in the camp below ... told themselves that it was partisans being shot up there, intractable Marxists or crazy nationalists. It was another country up there. If you kept the ordinances within the wire, you need never visit it. But the more clear-headed of Schindler's workers, marched up Wieliczka Street past the cable works and over to Zablocie to work at DEF, they knew why prisoners from Montelupich were being shot at the Austrian hill fort, why the SS did not seem alarmed if the truckloads were seen arriving or the noise was heard throughout Plaszów. The reason was that the SS did not look on the prison population as ultimate witnesses. If there had been concern about a time in court, a mass of future testimony, they would have taken the women deeper into the woods. The conclusion to be drawn, Oskar decided, was not that the mound fort was a separate world from Plaszów, but that all of them were under sentence.





Thomas Keneally, with judges Frank Delaney and John Carey, at the 1982 Booker Prize awards. Courtesy Thomas Keneally.

Visiting Tom Keneally

Marie-Louise Ayres

25 October 2005. I drove north from Manly, gleefully feeling that I was playing hooky from the National Library of Australia for a day. The sun shone, the sea sparkled, and I felt remarkably free of all the day-to-day responsibilities involved in caring for a large manuscript collection. No matter that I was to spend the day with Tom Keneally, assessing his manuscript collection and discussing its transfer to the Library. Or that I was a little fatigued, as I had spent the previous day packing up a very large collection belonging to one of Australia's most loved art historians, lifting and shifting around 500 kilos of archive boxes in a day. Curators love doing collection visits and, to me, both visits felt like a holiday.

Tom's charming, but—compared to its neighbours—relatively modest house, sits atop a cliff on the northern beaches with beautiful views down to the surf beach and out to sea. On the day of my visit, it was full of presents received for Tom's seventieth birthday and his daughter's wedding. In fact, turning seventy was what had prompted Tom to think about transferring the bulk of his papers to a public institution.

After our introductions, we set to work by going through the contents of Tom's study. In addition to the expected filing cabinets and cupboards, a billiard table had been put to good use. It was covered with boxes of papers and every bit of space underneath was taken up with similar boxes. I do hope that Tom has enjoyed a game or two since reclaiming the space.

As soon as we started to go through the study, I realised that I was looking at a rich collection. In that one room, there were papers relating to several of Tom's books, plays

and television treatments; research notes and files; the micro-cassettes onto which Tom dictates his first drafts; successive drafts; correspondence with publishers, broadcasters, readers and audiences. There were speeches and speech notes on a wide variety of public topics. There was correspondence from the famous and not-so-famous. And there were photographs: photographs of young Tom, Tom's family, Tom's travels and the amazing variety of people whose paths have crossed his. How many packets of family photographs have the paterfamilias standing beside Ben Kingsley? Or Steven Spielberg? Or with descendants of those saved by Oskar Schindler?

The study surveyed, it was into Tom's four-wheel drive and off we sped to a nearby suburb, where the Keneally family had not one but two commercial storerooms. Manuscript librarians are often confronted with very large amounts of documentary material but, even so, I could have been forgiven for feeling a tad overwhelmed when confronted by the mountains of boxes held in storage. There had been, however, a bit of 'method' applied to the construction of this particular mountain. Over the years, Tom and his wife had gradually boxed up family memorabilia—toys, books, clothes—and the output of Tom's prolific research, writing and public career. As the boxes were filled, they were numbered and the contents either added to a box list, or noted in an order book, with the originals taped to the outsides of the boxes and the copies retained in the books. More than 100 of the many more cartons in the storage rooms were to come to the Library. I was unable to inspect the contents as I had done back at the Keneally home. The boxes were stacked several high and several deep and there are limits to my intrepidity.

Back at the house, where we shared lunch and conversation, I tried to figure out how we could have such a large amount of material—all of it stored in large boxes—transported to the Library. Our packers ended up placing the boxes onto several pallets, shrink-

wrapping them and delivering them to the Library's loading dock. On delivery day, it was all hands on deck, with a veritable flotilla of Manuscripts staff and trolleys making many trips back and forth to bring the boxes safely to the Manuscripts stacks. Our work was still not over. Tom Keneally generously donated this magnificent collection to the nation under the Cultural Gifts Scheme. Two experienced valuers spent several days working their way through this rich collection, with staff progressively re-boxing the material from its original large boxes (which pose something of a hazard for Manuscripts staff) into more manageable archive boxes.

Running to more than fifty-five shelf metres (the equivalent of hundreds of archive boxes), the full archive includes manuscripts, correspondence and other documents collected over thirty years and relating to thirty-six novels and twenty-eight television and movie treatments. These include some of Tom Keneally's best-known works such as *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*, *Schindler's Ark* and *Towards Asmara*.

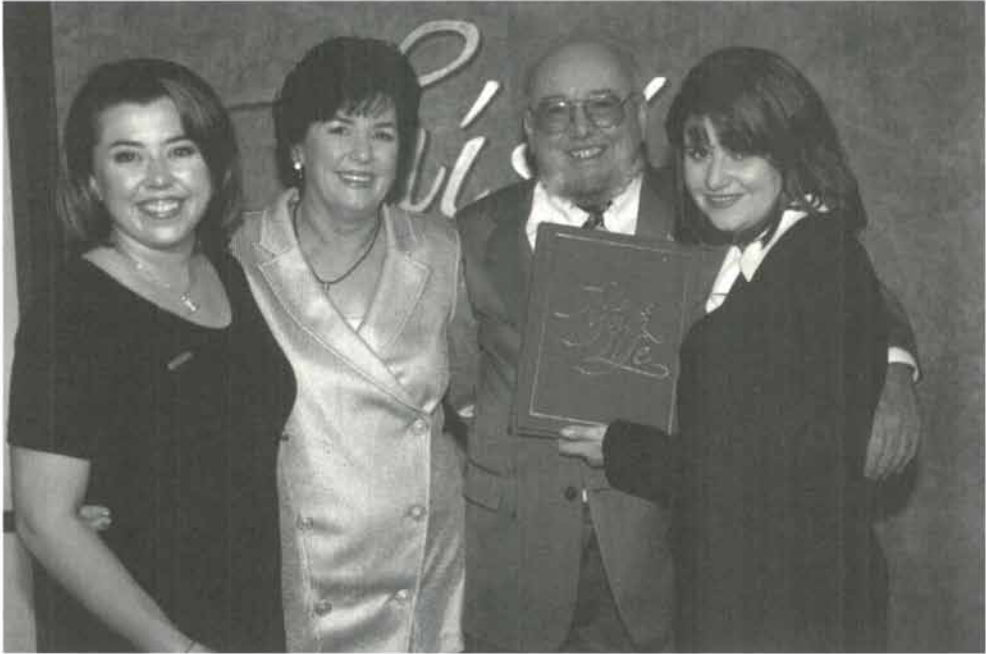
It might be thought that such a prolific output would be enough for one man. The archive, however, also documents Tom Keneally's huge contribution to Australia's public life, especially in the fields of politics and sport. Prior to receiving this archive, the Library held smaller Keneally collections, including extensive documentation of his role in the Australian Republican Movement. His passion for 'footy' (there is only one kind, as far as he is concerned) is evident throughout all of these papers, and will come as no surprise to those thrilled to see an Australian writer waxing so eloquent on the sport in the television commercials of a few years ago.

Like many archives of prolific writers, the archive was not, shall we say, in pristine order, and it will take some time before all this creativity is 'tamed' by the Library's archivists. No doubt there will also be further additions as new books and movies are researched

and written, including Tom's proposed people's history of Australia. At the end of this process, however, the nation's record of the life of a very public writer will be rich and profound. The National Library of Australia is grateful indeed for Tom's generosity of spirit in donating the archive for posterity.



Thomas Keneally at his desk, 1996. Courtesy Nathan Kelly.



Jane, Judy, Thomas and Margaret Keneally at the filming of the 1998 episode of *This is Your Life* during which Thomas was honoured. Courtesy Thomas Keneally.

Biographical Note About Thomas Keneally

Thomas Michael Keneally was born in Sydney in 1935, into an Irish-Catholic, working-class household. His childhood was divided between Homebush in inner-western Sydney and Kempsey, in the Northern Rivers district of New South Wales, to which both his grandparents had come from Ireland in the nineteenth century. This was the setting for his novel, *A River Town*. By 1942, while his father was serving in the RAAF in World War II, the Keneally family had moved back to Sydney. That anxious time was recalled in his second novel, *The Fear* and in his memoir, *Homebush Boy*.

Educated by the Christian Brothers, Keneally entered St Patrick's Seminary at Manly in 1952 where he trained for the priesthood. After painful consideration, he chose not to be ordained and instead went out into the secular world in 1960. At once he began to write but, in order to do so, he supported himself miscellaneously—as a builder's labourer, clerk and school teacher. His first story was published pseudonymously in the *Bulletin* in 1962; his first novel—*The Place at Whitton*—in 1964. The following year he married Judith Martin, a nurse and former Sister of Charity nun. They have two daughters, Margaret, born in 1966 and Jane in 1967.

Recognition came to Keneally in this period, and in timely fashion. In 1966 he was awarded a Commonwealth Literary Fund grant and in 1967 and 1968 he won successive Miles Franklin Literary Awards for the best Australian novel of the year with *Bring Larks and Heroes* and *Three Cheers for the Paraclete*. Between 1968 and 1970 he lectured in drama at the University of New England, the setting for his sparkling campus novel, and also his first tale of Antarctica, *The Survivor*. Keneally had visited the furthest continent as a guest of the United States Navy in 1968.

While living in London from 1970–71 he wrote one of his best sellers, *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*, in whose 1978 film adaptation he would take a small but telling part. In the decade between 1972 and 1978 Keneally concentrated on historical fiction, and especially on periods of civil war. Thus, while living in the United States between 1975–77, when he lectured for a time in Connecticut, he wrote *Confederates*. Keneally's attachment to the United States would strengthen. Work there became a regular part of his calendar from his appointment in the mid-1980s as writer-in-residence at the University of California at Irvine.

Besides his American teaching commitments, Keneally took on various responsibilities in Australia. He did some service to the state as a member of the Literature Board of the Australia Council (1985–88), as President of the National Book Council (1985–89) and as one of the leading spokespersons for the Australian Republican Movement throughout the 1990s. In 1987 he travelled to Eritrea, the site of another civil war, under the auspices of the People's Liberation Front. The novel that resulted was *Towards Asmara*. Later, Keneally would suffer intensely when the war resumed and the independence of Eritrea was threatened again.

Recently his creative energies have been fired as much by the writing of history as fiction. *The Great Shame* was his account of the Irish diaspora that engulfed his ancestors on either side of the family. He has also written a popular biography of Lincoln and of one of Lincoln's generals, Dan Sickles, in *American Scoundrel*. In Sickles, he found a charismatic rogue whose company Oskar Schindler would no doubt have enjoyed.

The latest of the many books in Keneally's grand and generous oeuvre takes us back to where his literary fame—and European Australia—began. This is another tale of our raucous origins, a work of history that he called *The Commonwealth of Thieves*. That deed of empire building, the British colonisation of Australia, has been one of the

many momentous historical occasions that has engaged Keneally's imagination. It was, however, a national—not an imperial—honour that he accepted in 1983, the Order of Australia, the right and simple citation of which was for 'services to literature'.

From *Three Cheers for the Paraclete*

‘Come now, James,’ His Grace said, ‘you desire to behold God, don’t you?’

‘Yes.’

‘Well, that desire is love.’

‘I don’t know if that sort of love suffices. Half the evil things done on earth are love-offerings, from someone to someone, I don’t know if I ...’

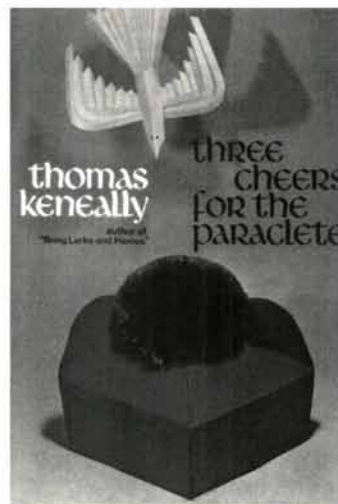
‘My God!’ Costello made his classic sinus noise. ‘He’s gone all Dostoevski on us now.’

Questions proliferated, and when they were finished, the three were satisfied that, within the limits of the theological definitions, Maitland loved God. Throughout, Maitland wanted to announce, ‘But we’re not talking about the same entity!’ But that would merely have initiated a parallel line of questioning ...

Third in the president’s notes, but bracketed by two red question-marks, was a digest of the strange theological opinions avowed by Dr Maitland during discussions among the members of staff in the downstairs parlour. But his Grace did not want a doctrinal showdown, not until [Maitland’s] *The Meanings of God* was brought up ...

[Archbishop] Nolan made an axiom. ‘With a priest, wisdom is obligatory.’

‘James, you realized that his letter to the Supreme Pontiff was a mistake. Why wasn’t I warned of it? Do you think I’m beneath trust?’



The young priest gave a negative shrug. 'You're absolutely right. You should have been warned in Egan's case. But Maurice had a career in the Church and ... well, I feared a disintegration. Which has happened in any case.'

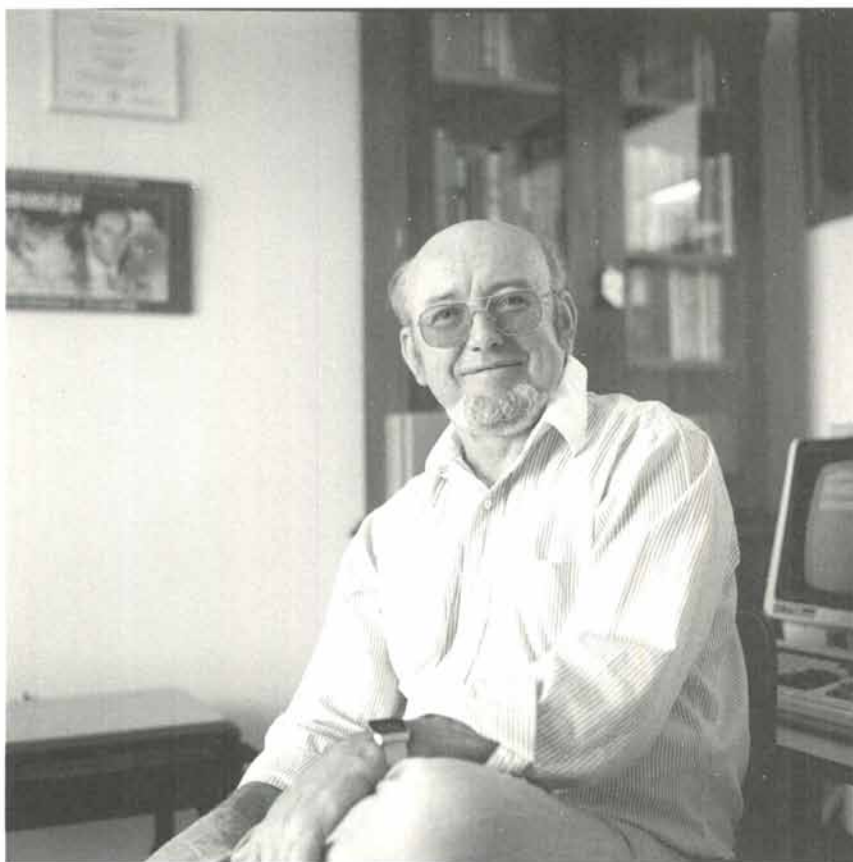
'You say, in *Egan's case*,' Costellow observed.

'I beg your pardon?'

'You emphasized, in *Egan's case*. As if it wouldn't have been better in any case to bring the problem straight to His Grace.'

'There was no special malice in my saying in *Egan's case*. But even a priest surely has the right to give or keep secrets. The archdiocese is not a police state.'

'Enough rhetoric, thank you, James.'



Alec Bolton (1926–1996)
Portrait of Thomas Keneally 1984
gelatin silver photograph; 21.5 x 16.5 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an14469056-1
Courtesy of Rosemary Dobson Bolton

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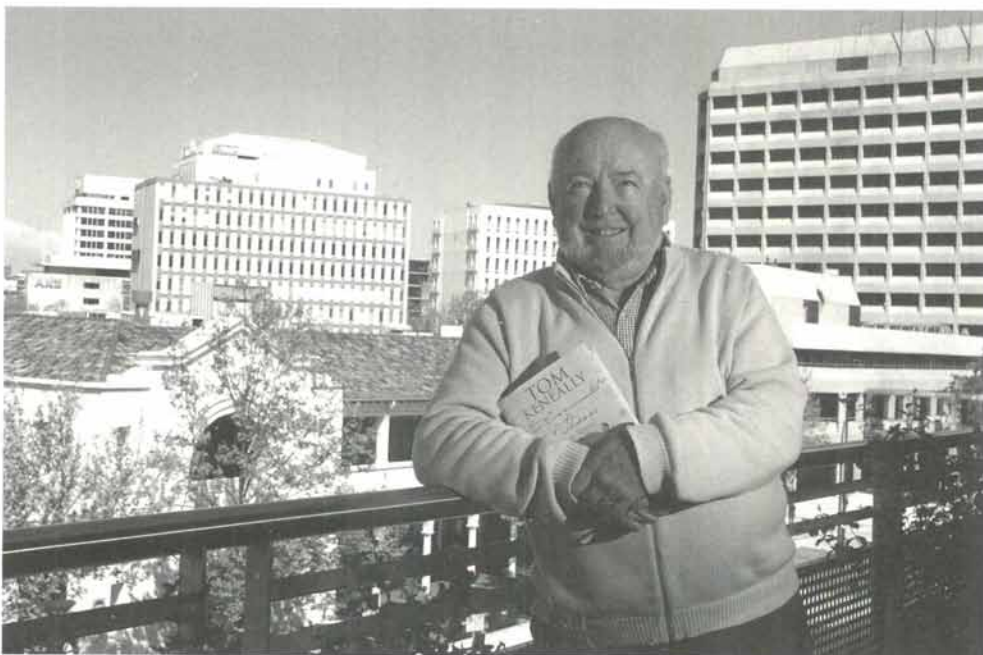
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[The Fryer Library at the University of Queensland also holds scripts for these unpublished plays by Keneally: 'Childermas', 1968 and 'An Awful Rose', 1972.

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Thomas Keneally in Canberra, 13 October 2005. *Photograph by Tommy Ritchie. Image courtesy of The Canberra Times. Federal Capital Press Pty Ltd.*

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Thomas Keneally 1987
by Bernd Heinrich
oil on canvas

Collection: National Portrait Gallery, Canberra
Gift of L Gordon Darling AC CMG 2005

Thomas Keneally's reputation as a storyteller, established in the 1960s, has been cemented by a series of publications—fiction, history, memoir and social comment—that has brought him international fame and national esteem. Remarkable for the power of his narrative, Keneally is irrepressible in the diversity of his interests and the intensity of his commitment to bringing the truth to his readers. As a generous and enthusiastic contributor to books and book culture, this collection of three essays: biographical, critical and celebratory—and an account of the Library's acquisition of Keneally's papers—is a fitting tribute to one of Australia's most engaging writers.

