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REFERENCES

Paul Sharrad. *Thomas Keneally and the Literary Machine*. London: Anthem Press, 2019. 270 p. ISBN (hb) 9 7817 8527 0970. £80

- 1 Paul Sharrad has established a reputation as a first-rate, archivally-oriented literary scholar, and this book adds considerably to that repute. It is a quite stunningly detailed case and career study of a major postcolonial author, Thomas Keneally, and of his hard journey as a talented young writer emerging improbably from a plebeian Sydney suburb and somehow re-inventing and sustaining himself as a professional author for fifty years, writing classics such as *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* (1972), a grim, bloody tale of a young Aborigine's violent response to the experience of colonial racism, and *Schindler's Ark* (1982), his remarkable study of Oskar Schindler, a German profiteer whose Cracow factory became a place of refuge for Jews set for execution under Nazism. Sharrad calls *Schindler's Ark* a "not wholly fictive book [...] that earned [Keneally] his greatest literary award, sales and renown" (157). This "faction" account of a tortured Catholic businessman won Keneally the 1982 Booker Prize and was developed into a Spielberg movie. Sharrad explains how Keneally can be esteemed as a serious literary figure in Australia and an entertaining, popular writer elsewhere, noting, importantly, that "Keneally's career happens not just as a series of runs in the same event: it is a combination of novel, drama, history, screen-writing" (199). Keneally has produced highly-charged ethical narratives exploring human redemption in a series of works which has comprised thirty-five novels, two children's books, seventeen works of non-fiction, seven plays, eleven TV, film and radio scripts, and numerous essays.

- 2 Decades earlier, at his Catholic high school, Keneally had been exposed to liberating draughts of modernist writing, but when he became a seminarian the young Keneally, the bright boy thousands of miles from Rome, suffered from a cultural-theological lag which insulated his colleagues from the quietly escalating forces of change sweeping Australia in the 1950s and 1960s. He endured a fug of puritan denial at St Patrick's Seminary. Eventually "Mick" Keneally managed to transmute his waning priestly vocation into a new one: as a nationalistic purveyor of frank Australian truths, and mentored to a degree by Professor Manning Clark, a Canberra academic and narrative historian of Australia's development and a "historian hero" (194, 127) who believed that the historian must tell a story, and at times blurred dry fact with empathic speculation. That model inspired and typified Keneally's methods, equally eschewing arcane modernist writing strategies. Sharrad's is not a formal biography but a strenuous, sympathetic study of how such a remarkably fruitful career was shaped under varying pressures in a newly affluent culture slowly awakening to its geographical location in the Southwest Pacific.
- 3 Organised into six chapters and a conclusion, Sharrad's narrative charts, in impressive, almost over-powering detail, Tom Keneally's struggles with publishers, reviewers and a culture then inimical to reflective self-exploration, in order to become that relative rarity: a full-time professional and cosmopolitan Australian creative writer. This is an informative chronometric study of reputation-making rather than a work of literary-critical appreciation (Peter Quartermaine and Peter Pierce have already done that, complemented by Stephany Steggall's 2015 biography).
- 4 Paul Sharrad has deftly used his unfettered access to Thomas Keneally and to a multitude of archival sources to track Keneally's quite astonishing productivity and evolution as a multiform novelist of distinction and yet also a "star author" into the bargain. At times, the enormous amount of archival data makes this a collection of briefly deployed critical theory, the citing of reviews, tracking Keneally's frequently fraught relationships with publishers and editors and, occasionally, his bouts of ponderous opinionation. It would have been helpful if Sharrad had placed his very carefully nuanced, insightful and detailed career assessment (165–74) at the beginning, as a bookend-style "Overture" or preview of coming attractions. The subsequent highly detailed chapters reviewing Keneally's entire writing and publication journey would follow that opening, with serially expanding case-studies, and a brief recapitulatory "Afterword." Lacking that introduction, this study becomes for readers a mentally demanding work of very intense scholarship with a constantly snaking through-line. I can see that Sharrad's approach helps us to gain a mimetic sense of that intense journey, however. Perhaps *Thomas Keneally and the Literary Machine* is best viewed as a reference work and not as a linear reading progression except for the most dedicated of Keneally enthusiasts. This book nicely complements the issue of *Australian Literary Studies* (May 2015) that Sharrad edited to celebrate fifty years of Keneally's illustrious career as a teacher, writer and activist dedicated to the creation of a self-respecting, independent, republican postcolonial Australia within the Commonwealth and which is escaping from its (literally) imprisoning colonial past.
- 5 This is a ground-breaking study of a major Australian author who cannot be written off as a B-grade, middle-brow writer. Keneally's achievement has been truly hybrid, often polyglot, skillfully mixing the popular stream with the best attributes of quality literary fiction. Sharrad's analysis is anchored in sometimes arduous detail, but is an exhaustive

and deeply impressive assessment of the gritty material construction of a literary career and a global reputation among mainly Anglophone readers. The “Acknowledgements” reinforce the sense that this text superbly historicises Keneally as a public citizen, secular commentator and private man who has creatively used his high profile to champion a range of causes from Aboriginal dispossession, republicanism, global famine, and the plight of refugees (see *Schindler’s Ark*). These achievements establish Keneally as a kind of secular priest – a writer of fiction and fact with a deep conscience who has valiantly escaped what A.A. Phillips coined as “cultural cringe.” Writing about living authors is inherently difficult, indeed problematic, but Sharrad has tackled the problems presented by a complex career with consummate tact, empathetic insight and acute literary judgement.

Thomas Keneally
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Bruce Harding is a scholar of postcolonial literature and white settler studies and the Curator of the Ngaio Marsh House in Christchurch (New Zealand). He first encountered and interviewed Thomas Keneally while conducting his doctoral studies on Australian and New Zealand prose

fiction. He has been an educator and research associate at the Macmillan Brown Centre for Pacific Studies and the Ngai Tahu Research Centre at the University of Canterbury in past years and is currently adjuncted to the Department of English in the College of Arts and Humanities at that university. He is occupied with a study of Keri Hulme, best known for her novel *The Bone People* (1984).