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Abstract
In Burn, his fourth published novel, Ireland uses war - and violence - to develop a number of his perceptions of Australians and their society. Some of the images of the repressive and destructive nature of respectable, institutionalized society which characterized The Chantic Bird and The Unknown Industrial Prisoner, are here the backdrop against which Ireland presents a group of descendants of those who had inhabited the land before the arrival of the English. The novel presents an evocative picture of a day in the life of a blacks’ camp, that outermost fringe of respectable (white) Australian society.

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In *Burn*, his fourth published novel, Ireland uses war – and violence – to develop a number of his perceptions of Australians and their society. Some of the images of the repressive and destructive nature of respectable, institutionalized society which characterized *The Chantic Bird* and *The Unknown Industrial Prisoner*, are here the backdrop against which Ireland presents a group of descendants of those who had inhabited the land before the arrival of the English. The novel presents an evocative picture of a day in the life of a blacks' camp, that outermost fringe of respectable (white) Australian society.

Originally written as a play, the novel retains a number of features which suggest its origins, notably the way in which, in its surface structure, it respects fairly closely the classical unities. The action takes place between early in the morning of 31st December and some time after midnight on New Year's Day. The time is some twenty-one years after the demobilization of the Australian troops at the end of World War II. Similarly, most of the overt action takes place on the banks of the Murrumbidgee, in an Aboriginal camp, over the bridge and a quarter mile upstream from the town of Myoora. We are, Ireland points outs, on the road to Kelly country; violence or the memory of it is not far away. The camp is made up of six huts, of which we really hear of only one, where Gunner, the central character of the novel, lives with his family.

Gunner, officially Stanley McAllister, is the half-caste son of Old McAllister; his wife, Mary, is white, so that his two sons, Billy and Gordon, are quarter-castes. (I have given these rather objectionable calculations of 'caste' since they remind us of the sort of mentality of racial discrimination which was still fairly widespread in Australia in the fifties and sixties, especially in some country areas). Billy, the elder, is drawn to old Gorooh, an aged and isolated full-blood Aborigine whose father, a tribal elder, had been a great story teller in earlier days (pp. 42, 90). Gordon is his mother's favourite and has been sent by the education authorities to a high school in the city (p.31). Though other
characters do appear in the novel, the central core is essentially this bickering, squabbling yet finally cohesive group, ranging from black, tribally oriented Gorooh to completely white Mary and Old McAllister, with the various degrees of autonomy, integration or assimilation advocated, sought or rejected by each of them.

Yet Ireland’s world is not as simple as this schematic presentation might suggest, for Gunner is that great Australian folk hero, a returned serviceman. More, he was decorated for his action on Bougainville during the war. Since his demobilization, Gunner has done little except sit in the sun, fish, relive his memories and, from time to time, get drunk.

However, he does more than simply relive his memories; he thinks about them and, more, about their implications. He rarely does this aloud, of course, but rather silently, in his mind, which is more prudent. In this way, Ireland creates two parallel texts: what Gunner says publicly and his running commentary on this. This intertextual movement emphasizes the fragmentation of Gunner’s personality – torn between what he can say aloud and what he must keep to himself – and, by creating two widely separate chronological sequences, also modifies the simple linear time sequence of the day’s events. Gunner’s realization of the contradictions between what he was encouraged to do as a soldier and what he is not allowed to do as a civilian – one can hardly say, as a citizen – is also expressed in the overt action of the novel through Gunner’s having kept a rifle, which he should have handed in on demobilization at the end of the war and which, as an Aborigine, he should not have in any case. Over and above this detail which runs through the narrative, as Gunner and the local policeman play ‘hide and seek’ with the rifle, Gunner generalizes his problem, mulling over the flagrant double standards in the exercise of authority, which mark Ireland’s Australian society. Gunner’s over-riding preoccupation, one could almost say his obsession, with the war, allows Ireland and obliges the reader, implicitly a white reader, to reconsider one of the central Australian myths: the Anzac spirit and the unity of national identity which the world wars are alleged to have revealed. The Anzac spirit Ireland is reconsidering is, of course, the naive, even simplistic, version which was still taught in Australian schools, at least until the end of the 1950s and still, apparently, believed by enough people to justify the various ‘reconsiderations’ proposed against it.

The Aborigines, dispossessed, chased off their land and deprived of their traditional sources of food, were not able or allowed to retaliate against the incursions of the whites (p. 56). For Gunner, his people (and he consciously discounts the white part of his heritage) are like the Japanese he had been allowed to kill on Bougainville. Just as the Japanese, whom Gunner saw as harmless, had been trapped on an
island, so the Aborigines are equally trapped and harmless in white society. Gunner develops further this daring parallel between the declared and the undeclared enemies when he sees that the whites will clean out the Aborigines, just as the whites (and Gunner) had cleaned out the Japanese twenty years before (pp. 65, 125).

Gunner sees the power structure of the army as a pyramid with himself at the bottom. Everybody could and did tell him what to do or, more importantly perhaps, what not to do. As both Gunner and Gordon see it, in white society, the blacks have no autonomous existence; black is not a colour, it is dirt, a sign of contamination, of being unacceptable. As older, blacker, hieratic Gorooh understands his daily life, Aborigines are neither black nor dirty to white eyes, they are simply invisible (p. 70). White Australians no longer see them, either as a separate group or as a full part of society; invisible, the blacks no longer exist.

Gorooh, whose meditations form another subtext, in counterpoint both to Gunner’s interior monologues and to the general, ‘public’ conversations, turns this white logic against the whites themselves. He questions the source of the eviction notice which has been served on the Aborigines and orders them to leave their shacks by 1st January, since, according to different versions, the land is needed for ‘progress’, for irrigation for the white farmers, or simply as a caravan park for white tourists. For the Aborigines, New Year’s Day will also be the last day they will be allowed to stay in what they call home. This notice has come from the Government, but Gorooh is neither impressed nor convinced. ‘They say the Government is all-powerful. We must be subject. But does it exist? No one I know has ever seen it. Has it ever existed? I think their Government means nothing more than what the whites want to do. And they do whatever comes into their heads. They have no tjuringa, no sacred stone to hold the spirits of their ancestors. And guide them’ (p. 53).

For Gorooh, power can be exercised only by clearly defined people or bodies, whose authority is clearly seen to be sanctioned by some source which transcends them. It follows that if the whites have no tjuringa, no sense of the transcendental, they cannot, in Gorooh’s eyes, have any legitimate law. In Ireland’s Australia, the old Aborigine’s impeccable logic is as out of place as is his elegant English in the family’s impotent squabbling.

On the other hand, Gunner has learnt through the army, a microcosm of Australian society, that power structures, whatever their name, do exist, but he is not convinced of their value. As he says to his sons; the whites took his country, which he then fought for against the Japanese, and now he intends to let the country support him (p. 81), a radical reworking of the Aboriginal notion of reciprocity, of gifts for services rendered. Further, he points out that ‘there is not enough to
the country' for him to devote or sacrifice his life to it (p. 89).

These passages capture a number of the points Ireland raises. The whites used violence to conquer the country, killing or starving the Aboriginal populations if they tried to resist. War is still their way of dealing with an enemy though a new development is that they are now willing to arm the blacks to fight against external enemies, while still forbidding them to have access to weapons at other times or for other reasons. Further, they prevent the Aborigines from integrating into white society by depriving them of the means of achieving this integration. Education, as Gordon, who has tried integration and failed, says, is not just going to school, it is also being adequately prepared, intellectually and psychologically, before arriving in the classroom. It is also being accepted by the whites both at school and, later, at work.

We find, then, that in *Burn*, Ireland takes an Australian folk hero, the Returned Serviceman, but by making him a half-caste, neither completely accepted in white society nor allowed to live completely outside it, he turns the myth inside out. Where other authors have looked at war as the loss or the destruction of innocence, Ireland shows that the whites had never been innocent. Where Australian volunteers have often been seen (and have seen themselves) as defending democracy and freedom, Ireland reminds us that white Australian society was founded on the subjugation and dispossession of the original inhabitants (p.114). Where popular Australian mythology cherishes the notion of a democratic 'fair-go' for everybody, Ireland shows that one part of the population is systematically excluded (three parts, if we consider women as well as the industrial 'prisoners').

Ireland does not ask whether the Returned Servicemen's organization would have allowed Gunner to join; he, in any case, points out that he has never wanted to take part in an Anzac Day parade. The reader is nevertheless left in little doubt as to the whites' probable reaction to such a request.

In short, Ireland shows us a country which, from the black point of view, is occupied by the enemy and from the implied narrator's point of view can be seen as in a state of undeclared civil war, as a result of the whites' inability to accept the existence of others; of their differences. In the Aborigines' case, these differences can be seen as triple: of colour, obviously, of life style, both in the fringe-dwelling present and in the tribal past and, thirdly, of attitudes towards nature. Old McAllister, for example, can have no place in Aboriginal society since, as a sawmiller, he is committed to an exploitation of nature diametrically opposed to the attitude of the blacks. This lack of a sense of sacredness of what is given finally excludes any possibility of integration of the whites into the system of positive values represented by the Aborigines.
These criticisms seem clear enough but in this situation of undeclared hostilities, Ireland’s view of the story-teller’s or the writer’s place, while no less central, is more ambiguous. Gunner’s memories and reflections on the years 1939-1945, his private monologues, are, as we have seen, central to the structure of the novel and crucial to our understanding of both what happened during the war and the ethical or philosophical value we are to attach to these events, and to all the racial fighting which has afflicted Australia since the arrival of the English.9 Gunner is also, in the ‘public’ text, a story teller, repeating the stories his (white) father handed on to him from Gorooh’s father. It is true that Gunner repeats mainly one story over and over in a somewhat fragmentary way but this only serves to underline structurally the repetitiveness and fragmentation of black and, therefore, white society in Australia, incapable, so far, of achieving wholeness. Yet, this very continuity of story-telling, depending as it does on the collaboration and mutual respect of a black and a white man and the didactic nature of the story we learn – Aborigines have lost their capacity to think for themselves, they need to learn to use their heads – could lead us to expect that Ireland sees the writer or the narrator as the person ideally placed to help the Aborigines (and the whites) to a fuller, more complete view of life which would transcend the state of war presented in the novel.10

Yet, in Burn, Ireland’s narrators are also subversive, as texts and subtexts weave an intricate net of implication and suggestion, whose structure underlines the ethical and social messages of the novel. Each of the examples we have looked at, Gunner’s ‘harmless’ Japanese, Gorooh’s proof of the non-existence of the Government, Gordon’s analysis of what integration really means or, crucially in a society that bases its mythology on the shifting sands of Anzac Cove, Gunner’s lucid definition of bravery as ‘blood lust’ (p. 81),11 all throw the white reader off balance, since the narrative point of view consistently adopts that of the blackman, whom white society does not see and whose history white readers do not know.12 This black point of view also helps explain the leisurely pace of the morning part of the narrative, where time is told by the position of the sun, not by the white man’s timetables.

If, in Australia, the Aborigine can no longer move through a familiar landscape, where each feature bears a significant name, so, in Burn, Ireland’s implicit white reader, finds perspectives changing before him, as his white expectations are not fulfilled. He can no longer rely on conventional white Australian narratives to guide him and must try to read the signs anew at each step. This is nowhere clearer than when the central story teller rejects the role he seems destined to play. Gunner expressly rejects the idea of being a ‘half-caste Christ’; he is not going to save or guide whites or blacks. Both have to find their own
way. To my mind, this refusal to be a guide is not just an expression of apathy or inner abdication (or lack of it) for his or her own actions.\textsuperscript{13}

The end of the novel, moreover, leaves all options open. The whites have won: they have burnt the shacks abandoned by the blacks but Gordon and Old McAllister had already made sure their family could not come back, by demolishing the McAllisters’ hut. Gunner, too, has had at least a partial victory: he has kept his rifle, outwitting the local policeman.\textsuperscript{14} However, his own father intends to steal it from wherever Gunner hides it and ‘drop it down the well’ (p. 146), to prevent his son from putting into action the idea of country town guerrilla warfare which he has suddenly articulated at the end of the novel, in terms which recall the apocalyptic end of The Unknown Industrial Prisoner.

The open-ended conclusion, marked by Ireland’s refusal to suggest simple or simplistic collective or political answers, leaves all his characters and, I suggest, his readers faced with a number of problems, entailing individual choices. Present day Australian society in Ireland’s eyes, founded on violence and finding its sustaining myths – at least its official ones – in war, continues to exist in a state of undeclared civil war against blacks and all those excluded by the richer, more powerful groups in society. The obvious comparison is with the work of Xavier Herbert, despite differences of setting and period. For both writers, their implicit reader is white; both appeal to his practical reason as well as to his aesthetic sensibility and they share a number of attitudes and values, as numerous passages suggest.\textsuperscript{15}

The writer can and should point to these problems but for Ireland, each individual who witnesses these situations, each reader confronted with social or literary texts, must find a way of interpreting the full story of the past, of preparing for the future. It is in the context of this preoccupation with each individual’s ethical response to life, that we can best see the final words of the novel, which otherwise seem inappropriate and portentous, compared with the tone of the rest of the novel. \textit{Burn} is, more directly perhaps than Ireland’s other novels, a ‘\textit{de te fabula}’; Ireland is talking about how we should live, what should be the guidelines of our conduct. In these last words of the novel, Ireland says a man must try to take ‘the straight line that’s so simple that men become lost along its complex length’ (p. 144). But, will he look for it and, if he recognizes it, will he take it? For Ireland, that straight line is the longest distance between a man and his true end.
NOTES

1. David Ireland, *Burn* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1974). All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.


4. Gunner's feeling that the war was 'the one big thing in his life' (p. 115) echoes *The One Day of the Year*, the title of Alan Seymour's 1962 play about the fate of two ex-servicemen and their attempts to find a place in peace-time society. See Alan Seymour *The One Day of the Year*, in, for example *Three Australian Plays*, ed., H. G. Kippax ([1963] Ringwood: Penguin, 1971).

5. Just as the whites eradicate the camp, so they have wilfully forgotten the meaning of the name 'Myoora', which meant, ironically, 'camp', p. 1.

6. Here, of course, David Malouf's *Fly Away Peter* and Roger McDonald's *1915* come to mind, though there are other titles where 'innocence' is important.

7. One could also refer to film. For example the hero in *Gallipoli*. In World War I, Australians were said to be wonderful as soldiers but impossible as officers and gentlemen and this was seen by many Australians as a virtue.


9. Interestingly enough, Ireland does not mention fighting within and between native tribes. To have considered one Aboriginal tribe fighting another would have 'diluted' Ireland's concentration on the deracination of the Aborigines by the whites. It would also have gone far outside the time framework of the novel. It would need another study to look at the way in which the war against the Aborigines has attracted little attention from writers or critics. Is it just a case of military tourism being more interesting, more 'exotic' than cleaning up one's own backyard?


11. Ireland is not the only Australian novelist to express scepticism about this sort of bravery. One is reminded of Patrick White's 'Courage is often despair running in the right direction'. See *The Twyborn Affair* ([1979] Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981).


13. Here, I differ from Helen Daniel's interpretation which seems to me somewhat moralistic on this particular point. See Daniel, op. cit., pp. 83ff and also her article 'Purpose and the Racial Outsider', *Southerly*, 38 (March 1978), pp. 25-43, esp., pp. 36ff.
14. Or has he? I think the question remains open.
15. The comparison with Peter Mathers' *Trap* is less obvious, despite evident similarities of content and some similarity of style, mainly because of what I see as a hesitation in Mathers' point of view. While much of the novel apparently expressed deeply felt anger, there is a certain jokiness, a tendency to give way to punning, which is not, I think, integrated into the fabric of the novel. The result is a 'dispersal' of effect which I do not find in *Burn* or even in Herbert's more comic-apocalyptic passages in *Capricornia*. See Herbert's *Capricornia* ([1937] Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1972); *Seven Emus* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1959); and especially, *Poor Fellow My Country* ([1975] London: Pan, 1977). Cf. Peter Mathers, *Trap* (Melbourne: Cassell, 1966).

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Bruce Dawe

FOR THE OTHER FALLEN

You fought here for your country.
   Where are your monuments?
You resisted the invader as best you knew how.
   Where are your songs of those days?

When you were captured you were not prisoners-of-war.
   That would have been awkward.
You had the misfortune of occupying 'unoccupied land'.
   You had to correct your gross error.

There was a prisoner tradition waiting to be unfolded.
   Tales resilient as ironbark.
Your share in them was minimal and negative.
   You were rather slow to understand this.

The bush and the stone and the stream.
   The tree. The plain.
The special green. The faded calico blue.
   They were your last line of resistance.

You fought here for your country.
   Where are your monuments?
The difficulties we have in belonging
   - these, these are your cenotaph.