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Interpodes: Poland, Tom Keneally and Australian Literary History

ABSTRACT

This article is framed by a wider interest in how literary careers are made: what mechanisms other than the personal/biographical and the text-centred evaluations of scholars influence a writer's choices in persisting in building a succession of works that are both varied and yet form a consistently recognizable "brand."

Translation is one element in the wider network of "machinery" that makes modern literary publishing. It is a marker of success that might well keep authors going despite lack of sales or negative reviews at home. Translation rights can provide useful supplementary funds to sustain a writer's output. Access to new markets overseas might also inspire interest in countries and topics other than their usual focus or the demands of their home market.

The Australian novelist and playwright Thomas Keneally achieved a critical regard for fictions of Australian history within a nationalist cultural resurgence, but to make a living as a writer he had to keep one eye on overseas markets as well. While his work on European topics has not always been celebrated at home, he has continued to write about them and to find readers in languages other than English.

Poland features in a number of Keneally's books and is one of the leading sources of translation for his work. The article explores possible causes and effects around this fact, and surveys some reader responses from Poland. It notes the connections that Keneally's Catholic background and activist sympathies allow to modern Polish history and assesses the central place of his Booker-winning *Schindler's Ark* filmed as *Schindler's List*.

ABSTRACT

The organized study of Western literatures has developed under the aegis of romantic nationalism. Constructing an Australian Literature has been no exception to the rule. In fact, the closeness of its origins to British writing perhaps intensified its postcolonial rejection of European ways and a championing of its own unique qualities of idiom and outlook, even as its peripheral colonial position made it hyper-aware (as a white settler nation) of its cultural connections to Europe. The emergence of national literary cultures in ex-colonies was accompanied by the formation of postcolonial literary studies that by definition operated on a global platform. These, however, tended in practice to work as comparative studies of national literary cultures, so models of literary history did not altogether change, despite major shifts in theories of literary value (Sharrad). More recently, Franco Moretti's attempts at new mappings of a world history of the novel and Pascale Casanova's (Paris-centric) ideal of a world republic of letters point to new ways of doing literary history that are multi-modal, non-homogeneous and transnational (Apter, Gikandi, Even-Zohar).

One figure who sits at the intersection of old national cultural criticism and new modes of transnational thinking is Australia's "national literary treasure," Tom Keneally. He won the premier Australian award for fiction, the Miles Franklin Prize twice: in 1967 with *Bring Larks and Heroes*, a novel reflecting the convict origins of British settlement in Botany Bay (now Sydney) and in 1968 with *Three Cheers for the Paraclete*, reflecting his own disenchantment as a trainee priest with the institution of the somewhat fossilized Irish Catholic church in Sydney. The Miles Franklin originated in the era when Australia was attempting to establish its own literary tradition and until very recently its rules demanded that entries represent Australian life. Keneally started publishing from the beginning in both Australia and England, later being taken up by US publishers as well. He won the Royal Society of Literature Prize in 1973 for *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* (a historical novel about race relations at the time of national Federation in 1901) and was nominated for the Booker Prize several times before winning it in 1982 with his documentary historical novel *Schindler's Ark*.¹

The critical treatment of Thomas Keneally has been almost completely focussed on his place in Australian literary history as determined from

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within Australia. He is placed in relation to Patrick White (Allington 36), evaluated in terms of his Irish Catholic slant on Australian cultural history (Peter Pierce, “The Critics Made Me”; Dixon), measured according to how many national awards (Commonwealth Literary Fund, Miles Franklin, Order of Australia) he has received (Beston 49). Obviously, there is good reason for this: we only have to consider the number of his novels and plays either set in Australia or based on Australian protagonists. And his work has been directed very much at an Australian readership.²

However, this is only part of the story. Keneally’s interest in moral challenges (Baker 125; Willbanks 136; Pierce) and the ambiguous nature of heroism (Fabre 102–04) and his fascination for history (Allington 36; Slattery 4–5; Walshe 46) have led him to position Australia in relation to events overseas.³ There are also novels with no evident links to Australia at all (the small-scale drama of negotiating the Armistice that is *Gossip from the Forest*, the story of Joan of Arc in *Blood Red*, *Sister Rose*).

Outside of the texts themselves, Keneally’s publishing has also been from the beginning a matter of negotiations between Australia, Britain and the U.S. Early in his career, he realized that to make any living as a writer, an Australian needed more readers than Australia could provide (Willbanks 129–30). And within Australian literary circles, Keneally has avoided complete co-opting into critical discussion around the dominant national culture by featuring Aboriginal, Belorussian, Jewish and Polish characters. Moreover, as his work gains readers in Britain and the US and he is repeatedly shortlisted for the Booker Prize, as his books sell film rights, he is taken up for translation across Europe, with some work also published in Indonesia, Korea, China and Japan.

Robert Dixon has made the point that Australian literature, either as a body of texts or as the story of its production as a corpus of critical study, is more than what happens within the borders of the nation (Dixon). Despite his pride in sales at home and his national profile in the media, Keneally has often complained of how narrow coterie and national fixations have limited positive responses to his writing and argued that he has been more favourably received overseas (Krausmann 56; Willbanks 130). So a complete critical assessment of the Keneally oeuvre must look not just at his placement in relation to the standard models of Australian literary

² Early on, he stresses in interview that his Australian sales for *Bring Larks and Heroes* lead his overseas figures (Beston 55.)

³ His reworking of polar explorations, for example, are allegorical investigations of the retreat of Britain from Empire and the Commonwealth (Baker 135–56; interview by Hergenhan, 454; Willbanks 134–35), and his wartime settings—from *The Fear* to *The Widow and her Hero* and *The People’s Train*—show Australian society interacting with events in Northern Africa, Singapore, Russia, and so on.

culture, but also assess how he is received abroad, and how that reception influences what he does and how he is placed at home. Translations of his work play a part in this network of producing the writer's career.

For example, the circulation of his novel *Towards Asmara* amongst foreigners attending the independence celebrations by the Eritrean government is something Keneally is proud of (interview by Wilson 25). This presumably means that whether the novel is well received at home or not, there is an impulse to continue "engaged" writing championing the underdogs of global conflicts. Keneally's contact with the wider politics of famine in Africa during his visit to Eritrea, combined with the positive response overseas to *Towards Asmara* clearly leads him to write the Sudanese half of *Bettany's Book*. That mix of Australian colonial history and topical international affairs might well divide opinion on the success of the novel in Australia.

My point here is that the construction of a literary career and the literary reputation resulting from it is often the product of a complex network of events and influences outside of the usual national cultural machine of reviewing and academic critique, and effects can be quite indirect. It is still generally true, despite multiculturalism, that Australian literary reception operates within an Anglophone ghetto, save for one or two classicists and those who name-drop the major French and Russian writers. The fact that Keneally might be read across Europe and commented on globally in at least fourteen other languages than English does not register in "home" constructions of his literary history and cultural standing. Arguably, however, as nations and their cultures become inevitably globalized through literary festivals, international awards and the electronic media, transnational models of literary criticism and history need to be brought into play.

Poland is the country with most translations of Keneally's work. Up to 2010, six titles have been taken up, beginning with *Blood Red, Sister Rose* (1982) and including *Gossip from the Forest* (1996), *Schindler's Ark* (1996), *A Family Madness* (1996), *Woman of the Inner Sea* (1994) and *An Angel in Australia* (2003). Poland's strong Catholic culture, its Polish Pope, John Paul II and the inspiration taken from him for the Solidarność movement through the 1980s possibly accounts for *Blood Red, Sister Rose* being the first book translated (Catholic saint versus the oppressive forces of a military occupation). Though it appeared with a press devoted to literary works (including the major South American novelists), the popularity of this title is suggested by its reissue in paperback by Da Capo in 1995. The other Australian writer with a significant number of titles in Polish is Catholic Morris West—seven works, but not the unorthodox *Shoes of the Fisherman* (AustLit)—and Keneally's personal interest in flawed Catholics and true goodness sparked his taking up Oskar Schindler's story (*Searching*

for *Schindler* 21). It is interesting to see that some of the titles picked up in Germany were not translated into Polish. *Jimmie Blacksmith* and *A River Town*, for example, did well overseas and their selection accords with touristic curiosity amongst young Germans for Australian colonial history and exotic Aboriginal culture, but that element seems not to have penetrated the Polish market. Surprisingly, *A Season in Purgatory* also failed to attract Polish translation, though it is also clearly related to the European War and its subsequent politics. *Three Cheers for the Paraclete*, the fictionalized version of Keneally's own disenchantment with the church as bureaucratic machine, did not appear in Polish.

Reasons for the circulation of texts are complex and can often only be supposed, but reader self-interest is always a factor in permitting a market to develop. Polish curiosity about how Poles might settle into a country like Australia probably drove the second translation, *Woman of the Inner Sea*, which depicts a Polish-Catholic migrant family and their real-estate wheeler-dealing offspring in Sydney. Surprisingly, the mainly Cracow setting of *Schindler's Ark* and the book's success with the Booker Prize did not spark immediate translation into Polish, but obviously the exotic Outback yarns and the Polish component of *Woman of the Inner Sea* proved enough of a success for the translator, Pawel Korombel and his publisher, Da Capo, to take on another Keneally book (*Gossip from the Forest*) and to reprint *Blood Red, Sister Rose*. It would seem that *Gossip from the Forest*, however, for all its compact dramatic qualities, lacked either "hook" of exotic appeal or local interest for a Polish market, and one can only assume did not do as well since Da Capo did not buy up rights to *Schindler's Ark*. However, it may be that the much larger Prószyński media operation was the only publisher able to put up a competitive sum for the rights to an international best seller. The *Blood Red, Sister Rose* reprint and subsequent translations clustered around 1994–96 clearly resulted from the production of Spielberg's Hollywood version of the book in Poland in 1993, Keneally visiting for the shoot and making public appearances as the author. *A Family Madness* is picked up, presumably for also depicting the ongoing trauma of the European War and Keneally acknowledges its origins in his historical work on Schindler (Baker 138–39, *Searching for Schindler* 155–56). It may be that perceptions of populist alignment of religious faith with nationalist opposition to Communism led to the odd inclusion of *An Angel in Australia* in the list of translations. Its publisher ranged from international pulp fiction to major Polish poets, but included emphasis on detective and historical novels (Fisiak). *Angel* (also circulating under the title *The Office of Innocence*) is a murder mystery set in war-time Sydney, and is centred on the temptations and ethical dilemmas of a young priest. Marek Paryż's review notes Keneally's "dynamic reconstruction of

the past” and how wartime confuses moral values and challenges Frank Darragh in his faith in confession and absolution, how Australian society is forced into change by the war and how history shapes everything (62–63). Consistent with this reading, the critical response to Keneally’s work centres around the actual historical moment of Spielberg’s filming of Schindler/Holocaust history at Auschwitz.

With the exception of a piece by Jacek Brzeziński in 1989 in a literary monthly reporting on the international literary scene, Poland seems to have been unaware of the success of the novel *Schindler’s Ark* until Spielberg’s film was made. Jerzy Armata notes its success elsewhere, summarizes the book with favourable comment and retells the story of its coming into existence (“Steven Spielberg w Krakowie”). Then all attention tended to be focussed on Spielberg’s film rather than the novel. This was certainly the case in *Wprost* and other papers mentioning Keneally and his fiction tend to subordinate discussion to the Leopold Page/Pfefferberg story and the movie (Kruczkowska 4). An interview with Keneally appeared in 1994 and two features in 1995 in anticipation of the book’s release.

Gazeta Wyborcza mounted two features discussing the nature of the best seller (Varga 2, Baczyński and Kalabiński 8). Although *Schindler* made it to the top ten sellers in Poland (Sadurski X1), there seemed to be some doubt about its credentials as a best seller, with sales quoted only at 60000 and no mention of it being the Booker’s best ever commercial success (Caterson). It is discussed as “the book of the film,” although its being framed as a popular best seller is offset by the fact that it was published in Poland under the series label “Connoisseur’s Library” (Fisiak). Blog sites suggest that it is valued (as in Germany) as historical testimony and a moral lesson, and that its art is subordinated to the historical reality of its lead character (Fisiak). However, Polish reviewers seem less anxious about the “faction” mix than those debating the Booker Prize (Hiscock, Raphael). Jacek Brzeziński, for example, says *Schindler* is more a “transition between reportage and a historical work” rather than fiction, but still credits the writer with imaginative inhabiting of his language and character such that readers are drawn into the drama; Keneally turns Schindler into a carefully detailed “literary hero” who nonetheless keeps his personal essence a secret (320–23). The progressive Catholic weekly *Tygodnik Powszechny* praises the text for not being too much of a hagiography (as does Gabriela Górka on the website *Literacje*) and for getting most of its historical facts right (“Dwie książki o zagładzie” 11). It suggests the “feel good” aspect is offset by the awareness of all those who did not make it onto Schindler’s list and concludes that the documentary fiction is a good bit of craftsmanship rather than a literary masterpiece. One review, however, notes that the book was popular

elsewhere before the movie release and calls it a “must-read” (“Review of *Schindler’s List*” 7), and another allows that the book makes a good comic picture of a crafty rogue-hero, an aspect that Spielberg’s more reverential film fails to capitalize on (Królak 8).

Keneally’s engagement with Poland clearly had a lasting influence. It led to his scriptwriting for the 1984 film *Silver City*, directed by Sophia Turkiewicz, and dealing with post-war Polish migrants. In the unlikely context of Africa, several years later, Poland is selected for specific mention. *Towards Asmara* shows the repressive regime of Mengistu’s Ethiopia propped up by Soviet aid. Poland under Communism is implicated in this, and when Eritrean Amna is arrested she is thrown into the back of a Polish Fiat. On the other hand, the patriotic struggle of the Eritreans against persecution is compared to Polish nationalism: the narrator describing the cells used by Amna’s captors recalls the pride in the graffiti of Polish partisans detained in the Pawiak prison in Warsaw (247). These details stem directly from Keneally’s 1981 visit to Poland to research the Schindler story (*Searching for Schindler* 82–83, 88). Authorial even-handedness does not overcome the ambiguities of history and social reality to produce a mutual admiration pact between Keneally and his Polish readers. There was mention of people finding *Schindler* to be anti-Polish in the conservative paper *Rzeczpospolita* (and stated clearly by the right-wing historian-publicist Jerzy Robert Nowak in a blog) such that Keneally felt obliged to point in an interview to the many Poles who were not aligned with the Nazi regime during the war. Nonetheless, the article was titled “The Best Story of the Century” (Sadurski X1), and the novel and film hailed (as in Germany) for its importance as a reminder to historical abuses of power and relevance to ethnic cleansing in contemporary situations such as Rwanda.

Keneally’s research into Holocaust experiences in occupied Poland clearly led him to look at other aspects of the European war and to think about their effects on migrants of that generation in Australia. This results in *A Family Madness* (1985), based on the factual group suicide in Sydney of a migrant family haunted by the war. At the beginning an Anglo-Australian airs his limited knowledge of Europe based on his approval of Lech Wałęsa (17), but the rest of the book deals with the destructive guilt of a Belorussian who collaborated in Nazi war crimes in a vain attempt to free his homeland from a history of domination by Poland, Russia and Austria. Reviewer Ewa Nowacka clearly respects the book but does not want to consider that fanatical nationalism might lead people to collaborate with the Nazis in order to achieve some limited political autonomy as much as it would lead to partisan opposition to fascism. Accordingly she faults Keneally’s depiction of Kabbelski, but admits that the book, though a bitter pill for many Polish readers, does its homework on Belarus history, shows

the haunting of past guilts across time and space, and offers a different perspective that in itself may be a blessing. The article is of interest, too, in that it puts Keneally in an international literary context by reading him against Polish writer Józef Mackiewicz (26).

Conclusions from this limited sample of overseas production and reception must of necessity be tentative. For a start, the vicissitudes of Polish history and lack of a comprehensive search machine for archival materials limit the number of reviews found. Secondly, they have no evidently immediate or direct effect on Keneally's literary reputation in Australia and on its national literary history. Further research into the links between Poland and Polish communities in Australia and to what extent this has an effect on literary reception/transmission would fill out the picture of multicultural Australia. In a wider frame, Australia's literary connections with Poland go back to a memoir of gold-digging published in 1856 by Seweryn Korzeliński and the AustLit database reveals not just significant Australian writers of Polish background such as Ania Walwicz and Peter Skrzynecki, but also a wealth of wartime memoir and migration narrative with which some of Keneally's fiction could be compared.

While it may be hard to produce definite conclusions, from all this, we can, I think, see how the very fact of having one's work translated might give heart to a writer and incline him or her to follow certain interests whether these are approved of by a home readership or not. What this small study does show is that Keneally's interest in history and "faction," though it may not result in uniformly positive reviews, is validated by Polish selection and response to his work, as is his interest in the Catholic church and moral dilemmas. Polish reviews, like others elsewhere, show too how Keneally's books have been swamped by focus on the *Schindler* film and as a result deployed for their socio-political interest rather than their literary qualities. The author's sense of appreciation abroad for European material will have an effect on his reception by a nationalist-inclined literary culture at home, if only because continued engagement with overseas settings will preclude him from further local success with the Miles Franklin Prize and earn criticism from "patriot" reviewers. As long as Catholicism continues to be seen as a relevant and influential part of Australian society, continuing this line of writing will be valued positively; but in so far as the national debate closes around domestic navel-gazing and protectionism and depicts the church as a backward element in modern secular society, Keneally's work will be seen as exotic or outdated. Examination of the overseas publishers picking up Keneally titles also speaks to how the author is positioned in academic and general literary culture. With the exception of the first Polish publication, the books all seem to fall into popular/bestseller titles by established names who rate more than formula

mass-market authors. For a small ex-colony still anxious to consolidate its own literary culture but also eager to produce the national genius who will win the Nobel Prize for literature, it is instructive to see how the larger spread of literary culture in Europe and the US allows this “middlebrow” position more serious critical regard than has been the case in Australia. If there is no local understanding of the transnational dynamics affecting the writer’s career, there can be no full or even adequate critical appreciation of his work and the national literary history will position it in a limited or skewed manner. Keneally has said, “I consider myself increasingly a citizen of the planet. . . . Australia is, now, stitched into the international community” (Todd Pierce 122). Australian literary scholarship is similarly moving to broaden its determinedly nationalist focus.

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