

Laurie Hergenham: The City or the Desert: Patrick White's *A Fringe of Leaves*

Author: Laurie Hergenham

Title: The City or the Desert: Patrick White's *A Fringe of Leaves*

Journal: UQP

Imprint: 1993, *Unnatural Lives: Studies In Australian Fictions about Convicts from James Tucker to Patrick White*, Chapter 11, Pages 151-166

In comparing the roles of the desert and the sea in relation to the city in Romantic literature, W. H. Auden suggests a traditional association to which *A Fringe of Leaves* contributes in an individual way:¹

To leave the land and the city is the desire of every man of sensibility and honour ... The natural desert is therefore at once the place of punishment for those rejected by the good city because they are evil, and the place of purgation for those who reject the evil city because they desire to be good.

The “desert” in Australian terms has been a name for the uninhabited bush (as in Clarke), not just sandy wastes, and in *A Fringe of Leaves* it is a place of both punishment and purgation. Here, Ellen Roxburgh undergoes her education, in the sense of awakening to the evil — and good — in herself and in the city to which she returns. Her companion, the convict Jack Chance, abandons the city as irredeemably evil.

Auden suggests that when the desert is the purgative place there is a cluster of traditional associations:

The image is primarily associated with the idea of chastity and humility. It is the place where there are no beautiful bodies or comfortable beds or stimulating drink or admiration. The temptations of the desert are therefore either sexual images raised by the denial to make the hermit nostalgic for his own life or the more subtle temptations of pride when the devil appears in his own form.

The desert austerity is present in *A Fringe of Leaves*, but sex is no mirage, nor is it simply a temptation.

The poles of the metropolis and the fringes of civilization have been recently explored by David Malouf in *An Imaginary Life*, and in poetry and debate by Peter Porter and Les Murray (in terms of town and country poetry, Athens and Boeotia).² Behind all such debates are the concepts of the centre of civilization and the moveable antipodes, dating from Greek times and probably before,³ and finding common expression in Australian literature in the opposition of the city and the bush.

The opposition between the desert and the city contributes much of its special character to *A Fringe of Leaves*. Though one can see a comparability of concerns in White's previous work, especially in the general theme of an opposition between social forms and “deeper realities”, he extends these concerns (as in *Voss*) by taking his outcasts literally outside civilized society (that is, white, European-derived society) and indeed outside any society whatever.

Randolph Stow comments that the general concerns of *A Fringe of Leaves* are “not markedly different from his [White's] novels in a contemporary setting. What he gains by going back to the 1830s is bizarre happenings and extreme situations which could hardly arise in this shrunken world”.⁴ This is partly true, but it overlooks White's ability to see the bizarre and the extreme as revealing parts of contemporary life, *The Twyborn Affair* being a startling example. (Christina Stead also finds these elements in the present while Thomas Keneally has had to make more use of the past to avail himself of them.) As well as continuity, critics have seen a change in White's concerns in *A Fringe of Leaves*: while previous novels showed the individual in damaging conflict with society, and as achieving transcendence by some kind of visionary means, if he achieved it at all, this work shows White exploring the possibilities of coming to terms, if uneasy

ones, with society. This shift was seen as a congratulatable virtue and change for the better because it was felt to be morally and socially preferable: "The novelist no longer appeals away from the social forms and ordinary people to a closed world of his personal mythology."⁵ The variety of White's work, and not just hindsight after *The Twyborn Affair*, perhaps White's most savage indictment of society, might have made the reader wary of finding much acceptance of society and also of generalizing from it about White's views on "life" or his development as a novelist. If any acceptance is embodied in *A Fringe of Leaves* it is in heavily qualified terms.

While the novel can be seen to have White's usual European affinities and allusiveness (for instance, to Virgil, to the Tristan and Iseult legend), the novel also has links with some previous Australian novels, including those about the convicts. There is, for instance, the recurrent questioning of what is "natural" and "unnatural", "civilized" and "uncivilized", of what lies beneath the social facade, as the novel moves between society and the wilderness. Of course, similar concerns are found in European novels, such as Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, which move between the metropolis and the expanding colonial antipodes.

In *A Fringe of Leaves* White draws on the convict system, not so much for its literal fact as for the imaginative interplay of images of imprisonment and freedom which it can generate. Whereas Warung and Penton used the system to suggest how the Australian past "lives and reverberates in the present",⁶ as well as to evoke wider concerns, White is closer in general intention to Keneally in *Bring Lark's and Heroes*, in offering "a parable for the present".⁷ White's "parable", however, is not so directly orientated towards the "present" of its composition (the Vietnam war and conscription, for instance left their mark on *Bring Larks*). While White has used some aspects of Australian history, he has used them as a departure point:⁸ "The past supplies him with a fable, but his concern is with all times and places."⁹ This of course does not mean that White completely transcends time and place of white European culture: his own concerns of the 1970s must feed into his novel, however indirectly. Also, an interpretation of Australia's past is an inevitable if subsidiary part of the novel's concerns, as in *Voss* and *The Tree of Man*.

A Fringe of Leaves had several probable sources or starting points. One of these is the wreck of the *Stirling Castle* on the barrier reef in 1836 on its way to England, and the subsequent privations and rescue of Mrs Eliza Fraser. While taking liberties with the historical characters, White follows the general outline of this story closely, adapting some details of the historical reports.¹⁰ There were, however, two versions of Mrs Fraser's rescue: the authenticated one by a convict John Graham as part of an official rescue party (Graham spent insufficient time with her alone in the bush for impropriety); and, alternatively, the fictitious account of another convict (Bracefell), who had been living with Aborigines for some years. He claimed to have led Mrs Fraser overland to Moreton Bay where, to hide their sexual liaison, she threatened and cowed him so that he escaped back to the bush.

Randolph Stow comments that one of the main literary advantages to White of going back to the 1830s was

*a landscape (on which man had hardly left a mark) from which to work effects, quite consciously, I believe, inspired by Nolan's Mrs Fraser paintings. And the events are so truly bizarre that he can often be, like Nolan, funny and touching... The fictitious version of the Mrs Fraser story was followed by Nolan, and White takes advantage of all the visual opportunities it offers. Some scenes, like those in a lily-pool and in a tree-top, seem to be based on specific paintings of the 1957 series.*¹¹

The visual stimulation of Nolan's paintings is important. In the paintings sexuality, betrayal and the isolation of the lover-fugitives were apparently the dominant motifs.¹² Mrs Fraser is naked and the convict Bracefell sometimes represented with black and white "bars" across his body to give both a skeletal and a prison-garb (American) effect. White was to adapt and change these motifs and, just as importantly, the landscape, making use of the "visual opportunities" of the "untouched" Australian landscape to produce scenes of greater variety than Nolan's, both in the tropical and in the Tasmanian sections of the novel. *A Fringe of Leaves* is markedly visual. The landscape of Ellen's trek is to be linked with a variety of other vignettes and images. Indeed, the role of landscape as setting can be almost as important as the relatively few (compared

with White's other novels) social scenes — though the two are, of course, not always separate. Landscape is also important for character, for in this novel White relies on figures rather than full portraits, except for the protagonist Ellen. And the “figures in a landscape”, mainly alone or in pairs, are to be balanced against the social scenes. The novel offers an extraordinarily rich evocation of aspects of the eastern Australian coastal scene. As well as being dramatically effective, this evocation is also in a sense celebratory of Australia and the natural world, perhaps suggesting White's growing acceptance of his “roots”.

The English painter Bridget O'Reilly confirmed some of his doubts about how expatriatism can be limiting when she told him: “ ‘Even abstract painters can't afford to sever their roots.’ ” He commented:

*This is what I sensed before returning to live in Australia after Hitler's war. Australian expatriate writers and artists in general, eventually starve in the absence of their natural sustenance. Journalists are a different breed. Their roots are air roots. I often envy them their freedom as I sit endlessly at my desk.*¹³

It is possible to see *A Fringe of Leaves* as continuing, through its convict theme and associated landscapes, White's search for roots that are both local and universal, as he freely adapts and questions Australian history to express his abiding concerns.

A Fringe of Leaves generally resembles modern Australian novels about the convicts by drawing on myth (especially Christian) in seeking to be true for all times and places. Indeed, the “fable” element is more dominant and apparent there than in any of White's previous novels.¹⁴ I am using “fable” in the general sense of a story in which there is an implicit intention that the incidents and the whole structure are designed to embody a meaning or moral which is exemplary. This broad distinction between *A Fringe of Leaves* and White's other novels (though all have elements of fable and myth) can be seen by comparing it with its predecessor, *The Eye of the Storm*, and its successor *The Twyborn Affair*. By comparison, *A Fringe of Leaves*, while far from simple, offers a more-simplified picture than these large-scale, extremely complex novels. Looked at externally it seems to have offered its author a breathing space between two hugely demanding works. Similarly, it does not make as large demands on the reader in language or structure. Its characters, except for Ellen, are less detailed and lifelike and there is less social detail. This is partly because of the novel's design: instead of centring on particular characters or groups, and their environments, the story moves ascendingly through a number of different environments. As a result, the figures we meet along the way are less “rounded” characters than relevant to the fable to which the general outline is constantly drawing our attention. The story is essentially a linear one of development, for all its deft use of flashback and its subtle interconnections. It is basically a *bildungsroman*, a story of the moral education of the protagonist, of “growing up”, though Ellen is a “late starter”.

A Fringe of Leaves is made up of five main parts and settings: a farm in Cornwall where Ellen was raised; Cheltenham, Gloucestershire, where she moves after her marriage to a gentleman, Austin Roxburgh; the “country house” of Austin's brother, Garnet, in Van Diemen's Land; the desert island, or cay, where the shipwrecked party stay briefly; the bush of Fraser Island and its mainland environs where Ellen lives with Aborigines; and, finally, the primitive government settlement at Moreton Bay.

The novel begins in Sydney after the Roxburgh's ship calls there briefly on their way home to England. From Sydney (and also on the voyage north), the Cornwall, Gloucestershire and Van Diemen's Land experiences are narrated by flashback, with interweaving. The opening in Sydney is a “prologue” spoken by “minor actors [who then] took themselves off to the wings”. This raises, through comedy, White's favourite theme of unrevealed depths which, for the genteel Mrs Merivale, may involve a disturbing “frightfulness” and “awfulness”, just like the “interior” of “this harsh land”. The “interior”, along with the implied fringes of the continent to which the novel is confined, is a recurrent metaphor, as in *Voss*. Mrs Merivale retreats from her environment, for example, from a lizard “which had once stared at her... from a scorched earth” (the first of many playful touches involving the Eden myth), to her villa at Glebe where she could draw the curtains “almost as at Winchester”. She can, however, be titillated by speculation about Ellen's sexuality and what might be “revealed” in her. Mrs Merivale overlooks in her husband, an explorer-surveyor, a strength arising from “a relationship with landscape, an unprepossessing one at that”.

Through a homely childhood, Ellen Roxburgh had also been “drawn to nature”, even if it is that of a derelict farm on a stony hillside at the edge of a moor — “she depended on it [nature] for sustenance, legend and hope” (p.45).¹⁵ This affinity encourages a strength which is to help her to survive, and nature as both beneficent and cruel is to assist throughout her journey. While her father was an uneducated and a poor farmer, frequently drunk, her mother still retained notions of gentility, having been a lady's maid. Ellen is to have a foot in both worlds, for she is educated by her husband and his mother. The tension between artifice and naturalness underlies the novel.

Life at Garnet Roxburgh's Tasmanian country property reflects these tensions in its mixture of cultivated and wild nature and in the contrast between the urbanity of the privileged society and the underlying cruelty which shows itself in the oppression of the convicts and in Garnet's predatory sexuality. His house is ironically called Dulcet, a “*picture of idyllic landed ease*” (p. 90, my italics). The distinction between things as they are and converted into conventional forms is often raised ironically, as when the shipwrecked party lands on Fraser Island and makes its first meal of maggoty kangaroo:

Seeing that evening was approaching it was decided to camp beside the water-holes, which in normal picnic circumstances would have provided an admirably restful setting, upon an upholstery of moss, inside this vast green marquee, its sides just visibly in motion as a breeze stirred the creepers slung from somewhere high above. The scene lacked only the coachman and a footman to produce the hampers (p. 210).

This “idyll” is to be disrupted by resulting diarrhoea and the first appearance of “savages”. The novel is enlivened by such playful touches, even at serious moments. Nibbling macaroons at Cheltenham is, for instance, contrasted with craving food as a basic need. To a starving Ellen a fragment of snake in an empty stomach can provoke “ectasy” (p.238). (It may be that in this novel White is expressing something of his own experience at school in Cheltenham and of his unsuitability, like Ellen, to being moulded by “acceptable” values.)¹⁶

Attempted “escape” from discontented thoughts and the general constriction of their life at Dulcet prompt Ellen to invite a “rape” by Garnet in which for the first time she both asserts her will and experiences sexual passion. (Her husband is not interested in sex.) Sex is to be for Ellen one of the main means, along with other basic physical needs, such as hunger, by which she confronts her own nature and thereby that of other people. What Ellen is eventually to “escape” — no absolute term — is self-ignorance and its frustrations.

Convicts do not enter directly into Ellen's Van Diemen's Land experiences, but they provide pictures, and also an ambience, of imprisonment. There is one telling glimpse of prisoners in a road gang. The “closed eyes and white eyelids gave the prisoners that expression of unnatural serenity seen in the blind, and which makes them all but removed from the life around them” (p. 75). This blindness is echoed in Ellen and in her two male companions, Austin and Garnet, as they drive past: she feels relief, more than commiseration, that the convicts do not “open their eyes”, the men are immersed in their own pasts.

Ellen is to sense some kinship with the convicts. She wonders how much of the “miscreant” (as convicts are called) is in her, and Garnet. Hoping that “freedom sometimes exchanges abstraction for reality” (p. 112), she is disappointed to learn that escaping convicts (a recurrent motif) do not survive in Van Diemen's Land: they are either shot or brought back for more punishment or, if bushrangers, “strung up”. She feels “disgust, anger, despair ... for the human souls condemned to torments on this island on which they *too* had the misfortune to find themselves” (p. 113, my italics). But this kinship arises partly from her sexual guilt and frustration, and is to be later deepened by understanding of convicts' lives, by “bridging the gulf”. Dulcet, while outwardly serene, is haunted for Ellen by convict servants. One of them, Holly, is made pregnant by Garnet and sent back to the “factory”.

Van Diemen's Land, a comparatively well-settled landscape, is another contributing presence. It is both “cultivated and wild” (p. 75), “pretty and wild” (p. 78). With its hawthorn hedges, lambs in green fields, its golden poplars, fish leaping in the river, and Dulcet's garden and orchard, it is, on the surface, comfortably close to Gloucestershire. Indeed, on her departure Ellen is to pronounce that “almost every landscape on the island is a watercolour” (p. 125), as was the landscape of her Cornish childhood (p. 226), though the context

of making polite conversation draws subtle attention to the artifice involved in this rendering of reality, still said to be generally accurate, in artistic terms, of the Tasmanian landscape. Ellen is to be challenged later by the “opulence” of the tropics, and Brisbane River is to appear “a canvas painted in turgid oils as opposed to the iridescent colour of Hobart town” (p. 360). But in Tasmania, as well as the “pretty scene”, there is the “passive mystery” of the forested mountains, with their damp ferns and greenery which “neither invited nor repelled”. The mountain suggests Ellen's own depths which dimly trouble her, and it is here, through the “rape”, she attempts her first self-exploration. The setting for this is a clearing reached by a “tunnel” leading off the road into the forest and, with its wet ferns, this is a paradisaal setting (though the intercourse takes place on a bed of compost). The episode is, however, a “fortunate fall”, for it starts Ellen on the road to a necessary knowledge. Her last glimpse of the island is fitting: “The landscape which she thought she had begun to hate ... was breaking up into brilliant fragments under pressure from the suddenly dominant sun” (p. 125).

Ellen now pledges to “redeem” herself through devotion to her husband, “an honourable man”, if sickly and self-absorbed. Such willed devotion to a worthy object would have been a conventional solution to a fallen Victorian woman (and in a Victorian novel); but Ellen is to find that her “redemption” overtakes her, rather than being fully chosen. It comes unexpectedly and involves a liberation rather than a suppression of her non-respectable self, and also an understanding that sexuality is part of humanness and need not be divorced from spirituality. Perhaps in the way these revelations come, involving subordination to larger, non-human forces, White may be delicately suggesting a religious dimension to the novel, the presence of what he has called “the unprofessed religious factor”.¹⁷

From Sydney the Roxburgh's sail north, speculating about the unknown “interior”, and the chances of escapee convicts there. Ellen tried to visualize the “interior in which her presence might have lent reality but which in her continued absence must remain an unimagined country, a tangle of indeterminate scrub burning with the tongues of golden teasel” (p. 41). Teasel is the bush flower gathered from a stony Sydney headland where “drought and wind” had not prevented its flowering. The “burning tongues” imply a reference to the Pentecostal tongues of fire (knowledge) of the Holy Ghost.

After the shipwreck the survivors stop briefly at a cay, literally a desert island. Such desert episodes, influenced by both *Robinson Crusoe* and the realities of early Australian life, had been used in fiction, as in the parable-like episode at Macquarie Harbour in *His Natural Life*. Here, as in White, the intention was to strip away the false layers of civilization, such as class. White strips deeper than Clarke could have perhaps done at his time of writing, though he sees deeply enough. Delving beyond the impositions on natural man (naturally good in Clarke),¹⁸ White arrives at the pre-moral through the exposure of the bookish Austin Roxburgh. On the cay he found “nothing of that pastoral green ... to re-live the pleasures of the Georgics”, and he resisted the urge to bare the *leaves* of his saturated Elzevir edition” (my italics) that he had salvaged:

Mr Roxburgh was fully exposed. In advancing towards the land's end, he felt the trappings of wealth and station, the pride in ethical and intellectual aspirations, stripped from him with a ruthlessness reserved for those who accept their importance or who have remained unaware of their pretentiousness. Now he even suspected, not without a horrid qualm, that his devoted wife was dispensable, and their unborn child no more than a footnote on nonentity.

So the solitary explorer gritted his teeth, sucked on the boisterous air with caution, and visibly sweated. He might have been suffering from a toothache rather than the moment when self-esteem is confronted with what may be pure being — or nothingness (p. 185).

Ellen, on the other hand, in a parallel confrontation, not with the elements but with a man, the embittered second mate, Pilcher, senses her forthcoming exposure with the Aborigines and with Jack Chance, but in keeping with her non-intellectual character this experience is to come gradually, part-intuitively, and through relationships with human beings. This awareness is to be healing and positive as well as devastating. Pilcher, overturning class barriers, strips Ellen of her Garnet rings and demands the water she had gathered. When she protests that she is not his servant he replies, sensing her servant status as a wife: “If we're not eaten by the maggots or the sharks, you may be yet. There's few servants don't own to more than one master” (p. 197). In contrast to her husband's exposure, Ellen's is more socially orientated as she

glimpses the arbitrariness, even chaos, which society seals over but which may be ripped open by extreme physical need. Pilcher is echoing Spurgeon, the steward, who has just told Mr Roxburgh: "I weren't born into the moral classes." Jack Chance repeats this claim of not being able to afford morals.

Austin's attempt to invest himself with some meaning takes the form of charity, of ministering as servant to the boil of Spurgeon the steward. This is a parody, though a gentle one, of self-discovery: "He had come to love Spurgeon's boil for giving him occasion to discover in himself, if not an occult gift, a congratulable virtue" (p. 193). Ellen herself, as well as being attacked by Pilcher, is lovingly ministered to by the cabin boy, Oswald, the first of a line of surrogate children (including Aborigines) who are to help her overcome feelings of a more than physical barrenness. Oswald is plucked by a wave from the cay and drowned, in another reminder of man's vulnerability to larger forces.

The novel deftly evokes the desolate setting of the cay, "land's end", where the human "niceties must only excite derision (p. 185). The only "cover [is a] grey, tough, sea-bitten variety [of] wiry bushes tortured by the wind, scurf of dead-green lichen..." (pp. 183–84). It might have been Ellen's "native heath" except that "furze and hussock had been replaced by thickets which tore more savagely, and starved creepers set gins for unwary ankles, and lizards were more related to stone" (pp. 189–90).

Mrs Fraser's unusual experiences with the Aborigines and her convict-rescuer make up the bulk of surviving accounts of the wreck, indeed, almost the whole, as they do for Nolan's paintings. For White, the corresponding sections together comprise less than one-third of the novel, with the convict section the briefer. Thus, although crucial to the novel, these experiences are part of the whole, needing a long preparation and a resolution.

When the "castaways" reach Fraser Island, for some of them it seems an arrival, with the Almighty's trumpets, "on the fringes of Paradise itself", as it is in some senses (p. 208). This irony is frequently present in this section (both "funny and touching" as Stow described it) to show Ellen coming to understand that life cannot be split neatly into categories of good and evil, innocence and guilt. On her capture by the Aborigines, amidst the natural splendours of tropical "opulence", Ellen senses "the beginning of her martyrdom" (p. 217). She is to suffer extremely, but not to die; rather to endure a kind of "agony in the garden", of the bush,¹⁹ where heaven, hell and purgatory are interwoven in her experience and in terms of landscape.²⁰ White's "garden" is an inclusive one, much more so than the bush settings of other Gethsemanes, as in *Richard Mahony*.

In Aboriginal society, Ellen encounters an apparent social primitivism, as distinct from the natural one of the cay. The picture of Aboriginal society, seen through its daily life, is depicted in realistic detail. She is once more a servant, at times a tortured slave, where living is reduced to scraping (often literally) subsistence from the land. More rarely, she is also once more a work of art, to be modelled and decorated. But her misery is not unrelieved: two emerging motifs are an assuaging of her sexual guilt, and an acceptance, even fleeting enjoyment, of society (especially of the children) through physical well-being and a sense of communion. This is heralded by nature:

Disgust might have soured her had it not been for a delicious smell of dew rising from the grass their feet trampled and the bushes they brushed against in passing. The sky was still benign. Were she presently to die, her last sight, her last thought, would be of watered blue (p. 225).

Such benign moments in nature are lacking in *Bring Larks and Heroes* and in the Nolan paintings more commonly reproduced, in which walled dark rainforest is emphasized. The moment of fullest communion with the Aborigines, and with the larger natural and spiritual forces, is first felt through a shared grief (especially with the women) for a dead child. This is accompanied by paradisaical imagery of green, damp forest which echoes the Van Diemen's Land scene of Ellen's rape. Her participation in cannibalism takes place when "scrub" is "transformed into a mesh of startling if chilly beauty. Where she had been slapped and scratched at first, she was now stroked by the softest of fronds. ... She felt accepted, rejuvenated" (p. 242). "The morning air, the moisture dripping from frond and leaf disposed Ellen... to share with these innocent savages an unexpectedly spiritual experience" (p. 243), of the ritual of her "cannibal mentors". She is beginning to transcend her guilt; to accept her flawed humanity; and to see beyond the conventions:

“She was less disgusted in retrospect by what she had done, than awed by the fact that she had been moved to do it” (p. 244). In previous fiction about convicts, cannibalism had been used to suggest a total inversion of “natural” human values, man's extreme in predatoriness. While the cannibalism of the above episode involves the eating of a girl who had died “naturally”, the other alternative (amongst whites), of killing to cannibalize and survive, is raised at the end of the novel through Pilcher's past experience, and is not to be rejected as outside the bounds of humanity. Pilcher himself, however, never recovers from it and from his betrayal of some of the shipwrecked survivors, because in contrast to Ellen's experience of “communion” he falls victim to isolating guilt.

The next section of the novel, the briefest, shows Ellen's return to white civilization with the help of Jack Chance. As a character he is seen primarily in his relationship to her. Through him she extends her knowledge of human suffering, of the inextricability of good and evil. The brutal cruelty of Jack's convict past at Moreton Bay, Jack as victim, is evoked, and also his own guilt and suffering over his murder of his mistress, Mab, in a jealous passion. Ellen's sexuality, which had been stirred by Garnet, enjoys free expression with Jack. While theirs is more than a physical communion, their relationship realistically falls short of “love” in the fullest sense. Indeed, one of the themes of the novel is that human love is flawed, but is not to be rejected or idealized for that reason for, as one of the epigraphs of the novel states: “Love is your last chance. There is really nothing else on earth to keep you there.” Jack and Ellen are necessarily wary of one another to some extent, their different pasts can come between them. When it is stated that “it was love, whether selfless or sensual” which had “restored” Ellen, White is indicating the mixed nature of love. Through shared sexuality Ellen is shedding guilt but also building up more: because her love is necessarily limited she cannot “heal his [Jack's] innermost wounds” through “loving kindness” as she had hoped. In spite of her promises to win him a pardon he flees back into the bush, though this is more the result of his choice than her influence. Though she has clung to her wedding ring, she has removed it for sex with Jack, and her losing it shortly before she reaches civilization perhaps suggests both a further shedding of conventions and the part-intuitive form of her development. The physical landscape of their journey continues the contrasting motifs: thorns and stony ground alternate with paradisaical, garden imagery of light, green leaves, water and birds. One morning is “gently perfect, compounded of birdsong, shifting leaves and speckled light” (p. 283).

Ellen's entry into Moreton Bay is assisted by the mothering of the kindly Mrs Oakes on an outlying farm, where Ellen arrives prostrate and helpless as a child.²¹ Here her fragmented feelings tear at her but they do not tear her apart. Mrs Oakes' “loving kindness” is to be echoed in other women, Mrs Lovell and Miss Scrimshaw and, it is hinted at, in Mr Jevons, the man Ellen may marry.

At Moreton Bay we follow Ellen's apparent reconciliation with society — it is ready enough to accept her as Mrs Roxburgh. The outline of the fable has included a “fall”, followed by knowledge painfully acquired through it and through her following (not resulting) experiences as a wanderer outside society. We sense that she has come back with a new knowledge of society's evils, and so we wonder what will be the terms of her return.

This return is shown by a series of evocative vignettes which it would be pointless to try to summarize, for their purpose seems rather to suggest, to offer hints and possibilities, than to lead to a clear-cut moral or outcome. These scenes mainly suggest Ellen's emotional life, her groping her way back, with feelings that are ambivalent and tentative. It would be misleading to intellectualize these scenes or extrapolate clear generalizations from them about the novel's (or White's) view of society. One can at best indicate the general direction, and even more tentatively than with the rest of the fable.

Ellen's main problem seems clear enough: how can she re-enter society, as a privileged member because of her class, now that she has become deeply aware that society is built partly on deception, injustice and resultant suffering? It is “unjust and unnatural”, as Jack comments (p.225). This is a question to which she attaches personal guilt. How can she return when Jack, her rescuer and by no means an evil man, remains an outcast?

Ellen forces herself to confront the brutality of society, leaving the protection of Government House and seeking out the most-degraded convicts; she is forced through the officialdom of Commandant Lovell to face society's indirect coercion and avoidances (though he is not inconsiderate); and he forces her also to face a “fellow culprit”, Pilcher. What emerges out of all these scenes in different ways is that, though Ellen has

been awakened to evils in society that are echoed in herself, she appears to be able with great difficulty and pain, but without trauma, to re-accept society.

The terms of re-entry are not clear, nor meant to be. Previously her survival had been intuitive: “She would not, must not die — why, she could not imagine when she had been deprived of all she most loved and valued” (pp. 225–26). Even at Moreton Bay when she does involve herself in a questioning it is largely on the emotional level. For instance, in Pilcher's chapel: “She did not attempt to interpret a peace of mind which descended on her (she would not have been able to attribute it to prayer or reason) but let the silence enclose her like a beatitude” (p.353).

Again, there are possibly additional, religious overtones here. But the scene is also suggesting, like all fiction about the convicts, that conventionalized Christianity is no help. The ramshackle chapel or “folly” evokes love, human and perhaps divine. Being open to nature (birds come and go), it connects with Jack and freedom on the human level, and it bears the simple legend, God is love, suggesting the “ideal” to which human love aspires.

What appears to enable Ellen to trust and accept her “reborn” self (and hence society) is, generally speaking, her identification or communion with those who suffer (such as the convicts); her new self-knowledge of her own failings — and strengths — associated with this identification; and “loving kindness”, exemplified mainly by women, who can live positively in society while being particularly disadvantaged by it. These are the simple truths that can sustain her in an imperfect world but, as their delicate evocation suggests, they are simple only in the abstract. It is indicated at the end that Ellen will not only survive but will find things to enjoy.

There is continuity in the final section of the novel in the use of children and gardens. Throughout, “fat pastures” have contrasted with thorny, stony ground in references to Cornwall, Gloucestershire, and Van Diemen's Land. Government House at Moreton Bay, an echo of Dulcet, has its own protective and disguising garden, fertile and spacious, but Ellen refuses to let it seal her off. One of the moments in it suggests the concerns of the novel's final section. Kate, one of the Lovell children, has just been seen by Ellen with a chick which has had its neck wrung (presumably by Kate):

It seemed to Mrs Roxburgh that this bend in the brown river, with its steamy citrus plantation, garden beds too primly embroidered with marigold and phlox, and beyond a hedge, cucurbits of giant proportions writhing on mattresses of silt, was designed for revelations of evil, as with the low-built, rambling, deceptively hospitable official residence presided over by the fecund Mrs Lovell and her authoritarian spouse. Or was she attributing to her surroundings emanations for which her own presence was responsible? (p. 344).

The almost indecent fecundity of the garden cannot shut out the evil which is even latent in “innocent” children and in Ellen herself, as well as in a fat “establishment” that can support the harsh convict system of Moreton Bay. The “emanations” become more palpable when a suffering convict's scream penetrates “through the humid ranks of lemons, shaddocks, citrons and guavas, the voice of a human being appealing in such unearthly tones the chaplain might not have realized had his intended convert not drawn his attention to them (p.349). (In *His Natural Life* Marcus Clarke uses the sudden appearance of a convict in a garden, Dawes to Sylvia, to suggest the futility of attempting to shut out social evil.)

Ellen does eventually cease to agonize over two such “incompatible worlds” (p.335), though it would seem she will not cease to be troubled by them. They are social worlds found in *The Tilted Cross* and other convict novels, but they also correspond to the divisions between inner and outer reality, divisions that can afflict White's characters.

Unlike some of these, Ellen is bent but not broken. Her passivity is both a personal and social flaw but it involves strength: “She was immured not only in the blacks' island stronghold, but in the female passivity wished upon her at birth and reinforced by marriage with her poor dear Mr Roxburgh” (p.237).²² The mixed virtues of social conditioning are indicated in the recurrent image of strong but dependent lichen. That some conditioning is inescapable is suggested by the conclusion, where Mr Jevons converts the group of women

and children into “breathing statuary”. The novel suggests that Ellen will survive such “conversions”, as she has previous ones, for she is nothing if not resilient. She accepts that more “elaborate disguises” than “a fringe of leaves” are necessary in society and preferable to “the known perils and nakedness” of the bush (p.354). Ellen would not survive in the bush, Jack can.

Attention should not be focused solely on Ellen at the end and on the relatively hopeful note of her qualified acceptance. Jack Chance, having been brutalized by society, can never come back; convicts still suffer harshly and will always have counterparts, not necessarily behind bars; and Pilcher cannot surmount his unworthiness and guilt. Is the novel suggesting, with these unchanging inequalities in mind, that, while society does not change, some men and women can change, that it is possible for Ellen to live a limited but positive life through society? While she may talk of being “a lifer from birth” (p.324), and of the “rescue” never taking place (p.341), her “sentence” and “prison” (part of the human condition) are preferable to that of others, including Mrs Fraser's. This lower-class woman came from the Orkneys, and her husband, a sea-captain, was afflicted by frequent illness. After his death she remarried, or rather seems to have been picked up by another captain, Greene, apparently a shady character who exploited her experiences by turning her into a travelling sideshow.²³ By changing the Roxburghs/Frasers into an upper-class couple, White has been able to widen the social and psychological roles of his novel. One can believe in, and like, Ellen, who survives better than some others partly because what society has made of her and what she in turn can do through it. Her social status, as well as her farm origins, extends her experience and articulateness, and it can be a help, even with Jack in the bush. White has commented that, while he dislikes historical novels “because of the strictures they impose on the imagination”, he has twice taken an “historical character or moment” (Leichhardt and Mrs Fraser) “as starting point”. He adds: “I feel this is permissible if you preserve psychological credibility and respect your aesthetic principles — the fiction need not decline into romance. If...in *A Fringe of Leaves* I hadn't substituted Ellen Roxburgh for Eliza Fraser, little more than a hardbitten shrew from the Orkneys, [the] novel would [not] have had the psychological complexities, the sensibility and the passion I was able to explore.”²⁴

The whole novel, then, offers a realistic view of life, of life as it is, with some possibilities of change. But, as Ellen and Pilcher agree, the truth is “often many-sided and difficult to see from every angle” (p.341). To expect an explanation of how Ellen's acceptance is compatible with other possibilities may be asking the novel to reconcile the irreconcilable; in the final words, to indulge the natural human desire to “grasp at any circumstantial straw which may indicate an ordered universe”.

Similarly, while the novel is about Australian life,²⁵ as well as reaching beyond its time and setting, it would be distorting to attempt neatly to extract Australian elements. Their general direction is clear. As in *Voss* and *The Tree of Man*, White may be seen in *A Fringe of Leaves* as trying to make Australia spiritually habitable by understanding the present through its past and by enriching our understanding of the past. In *Voss* the ex-convict farmer Judd, practical and reliable, proved himself a survivor a second time, and both times at a cost, by being (along with an Aboriginal) the only one to return from Voss's obsessive journey into the interior by turning back. In *A Fringe of Leaves* White deals more substantially with the convict past, which is used to express his dominant theme of the suffering that underlies the personal and the social life. But the novel goes further in suggesting that this suffering is embedded in Australia's communal past and also (by implication of the novel's parable) in the present, and beyond Australia. In *A Fringe of Leaves* convictism raises the two main possibilities found in all convict novels: society can be irredeemably destructive and must be rejected; or one can at least reach a compromise with it. Jack shows that some kind of life outside white society is possible and preferable (this is the only convict novel to suggest this), Ellen shows the reverse. Both are presented as individuals formed by society. Similarly, the guilt which afflicts both characters is socially induced and suggestive of the way Australia is “involved in mankind”, in both its inherited ills and its possibilities for growth. Hence, Ellen will not “escape” by returning to London, and the novel suggests, in the end as well as throughout, Australia's dual origins: the indigenous, and the European. White's novel is distinctive in that the possibilities are finely balanced, the double-faced truth is confronted. Ellen, the main character, fares much better than Jack; personal effort can help but it is not necessarily enough. *A Fringe of Leaves* suggests that the two general possibilities remain but they are not exactly “open”. Yet it is the poise or openness of the novel itself that is one of its main appeals.

It is fitting that while no doubt much more convict fiction will be written, this study should end with *A Fringe of Leaves*. Not only is it one of the best novels to use the convict motif but, while resisting anything approaching conclusiveness, it and *Sir William Heans* are the only two of the novels treated here to approach the kind of acceptance referred to at the end of the introduction to this book through the allusion to Eliot's *The Cocktail Party*. This is an acceptance which cannot be neatly spelt out but which admits the dialectic of the continuing difficulties and yet the possibilities of growth: "...only by acceptance/Of the past will you alter its meaning."

1. W. H. Auden, *The Enchafèd Flood* (London: Faber & Faber, 1951), pp. 23–24.
2. Peter Porter, "Country Poetry and Town Poetry: A Debate with Les Murray", *Australian Literary Studies* 9 (1979): 39–48.
3. See Brian Elliott, "Antipodes, An Essay in Attitudes", *Australian Letters* 7 (1966), 51–70.
4. Randolph Stow, "Transfigured Histories: Recent Novels of Patrick White and Robert Drewe", *Australian Literary Studies* 9 (May 1979): 32.
5. Veronica Brady, "A *Fringe of Leaves*: Civilization by the Skin of Our Own Teeth", *Southerly* 37 (1977): 127.
6. Stow, p.38.
7. Thomas Keneally, "Doing Research for Historical Novels", *The Australian Author* 7, no. 1 (1975): 27.
8. See the text of an address given by Patrick White on the occasion of the announcing of the National Book Council Awards 1980, printed in the *Age*, and the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 October 1980, and reprinted in *Australian Literary Studies* 10 (1981): 99–101. Here White says that in his "historical" novels he has "taken a historic character or moment as a starting point. I feel this is permissible if you preserve a psychological credibility and respect your aesthetic principles — the fiction need not decline into romance".
9. Stow, p.38.
10. The probable historical sources of the novel are discussed in Jill Ward, "Patrick White's *A Fringe of Leaves*: History and Fiction", *Australian Literary Studies* 8 (1978): 402–18. The best accounts of the versions of Mrs Fraser's rescue are given by Michael Alexander, *Mrs Fraser on the Fatal Shore* (London: Michael Joseph, 1971). I have drawn on both Ward and Alexander.
11. Stow, p.32.
12. Nolan followed the Bracefell account of the episode. See Elwyn Lynn, *Sidney Nolan: Myth and Imagery* (London: Macmillan, 1967), e.g., pp.31–32; and Elwyn Lynn, *Sidney Nolan — Australia* (Sydney and London: Bay Books, 1979).
13. See n.8. These comments indicate some change in White's attitude since his famous article as a reluctant "Prodigal Son" (*Australian Letters*, 1958).
14. This is ably discussed by David Kelly in his M.A. thesis, "The Structure of Two Novels by Patrick White" (University of Queensland, 1979), ch. 6, and this discussion has been useful to my own commentary.
15. All quotations are from the Penguin edition of the novel (Harmondsworth: 1977). It was first published by Jonathan Cape, London, 1976.
16. Brian Kiernan also points out that the Cornish landscape of the novel has links with White's book of poems *The Ploughman* (Brian Kiernan, *Patrick White*, [London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1980], p.127). White also visited Tasmania in his youth.
17. See Peter Beatson, *The Eye in the Mandala, Patrick White: A Vision of Man and God* (London: Paul Elek, 1976), p.167.
18. Clarke was probably testing Rousseau's ideas.
19. John Barnes refers to Richard Mahony experiencing "a kind of agony in the Bush" ("Australian Fiction to 1920", in *The Literature of Australia*, ed. Geoffrey Dutton [Ringwood: Penguin, revsd ed. 1976], p. 188).
20. Stow, p.36.

21. For an interesting interpretation of this episode in terms of birth imagery, see Suzanne Edgar, "A Woman's Life and Love", *Quadrant* 21 (1977): 69–71.
22. Suzanne Edgar argues that Ellen is a type of "passive woman...who nevertheless possesses enormous strength of character" (p.69).
23. Michael Alexander, pp.155–56.
24. Patrick White, *Australian Literary Studies*, pp. 100–101.
25. Veronica Brady (see n.5) has treated this aspect but while hers is a challenging interpretation it seems to me to turn the novel too much into "a tract for the times".

Important: © Copyright in this work is vested in the author or publication in which it appears. [Copyright in the encoding of the work rests with the University of Sydney Library's Scholarly Electronic Text and Image Service]. AustLit holds a perpetual licence to distribute the text to users, by kind permission of the copyright holder. This work may be used, with this footer included, for noncommercial purposes within a subscribed institution or for personal research purposes for individual subscribers, according to the [AustLit Copyright Policy](#) and relevant Licence Agreements. No copies of this work may be distributed electronically or in any other manner outside of the subscribed institution, or by the individual subscriber, in whole or in part, without express written permission from the copyright holder.