

*The Making of a Colonial Myth:  
The Mrs. Fraser Story in Patrick White's  
"A Fringe of Leaves" and André Brink's  
"An Instant in the Wind"*

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What was jailyard widens and takes in my country  
—R. D. FITZGERALD, *The Wind at Your Door*

They hand in hand with wandring steps and slow,  
Through Eden took thir solitarie way  
—JOHN MILTON, *Paradise Lost*

**O**N 21 MAY 1836 THE British brig *Stirling Castle*, homeward bound from Sydney to London, struck Swain Reefs, part of the Great Barrier Reef, off what is now Rockhampton on the central coast of Queensland. After twenty hours of confusion and makeshift repairs, the crew boarded the ship's longboat and pinnace and headed south towards the penal settlement at Moreton Bay. Aboard the longboat which was deserted by the faster-moving pinnace, the sickly Captain James Fraser and his pregnant wife eventually landed on the northern tip of Great Sandy Island (now Fraser Island), believing it to be the mainland. During the voyage in the longboat Mrs. Fraser had given birth to a child that died almost immediately, and was buried at sea. When they landed, the survivors encountered the local Aborigines, who progressively stripped them of their clothes and possessions and eventually killed some of the men, including Captain Fraser. His wife, who witnessed his killing, survived two and a half months of humiliating captivity before being rescued and returned to Moreton Bay and white society, where her story made her a celebrity. She soon remarried, and her new husband, Captain Alexander Greene, orchestrated appeals for her and

her children in Liverpool and London, after the citizens of Sydney had donated a generous sum to compensate her for her sufferings. She was eventually reduced to showing herself in a booth in London's Hyde Park for sixpence a time.

That much of the story is undisputed and passes for history, though none of those who originally told it was disinterested.<sup>1</sup> What is disputed is the manner of Mrs. Fraser's rescue. In the first version John Graham — an escaped convict who had lived for seven years (1827-1833) among the Aborigines before returning to Moreton Bay — led a rescue party commanded by Lieutenant Charles Otter and used his knowledge of Aboriginal languages and customs to negotiate a daring escape for Mrs. Fraser. Three other members of the crew were also picked up from different parts of the coast by Lieutenant Otter's party (Gibbings 80-100; Alexander 86-102). The second version which has captured the imagination of subsequent generations, derives from Henry Stuart Russell's memoir, *The Genesis of Queensland*. In it, Mrs. Fraser was helped to escape by Bracefell, a runaway convict living with the Aborigines. Bracefell was induced to undertake the dangerous rescue and return to Moreton Bay by the promise of a pardon and a large reward, but when the two approached the outskirts of the settlement Mrs. Fraser threatened instead to complain of him, and he fled back into the bush (Russell 256-59).

The Mrs. Fraser stories have recently been fictionalized in two major novels, Patrick White's *A Fringe of Leaves* and André Brink's *An Instant in the Wind*, both of which follow Sidney Nolan's two series of paintings about Mrs. Fraser. Nolan, White and Brink perceive in the stories a myth which embodies the archetypal colonial confrontations between the European consciousness and the virgin continent, between the "civilized" white settler and the "natural" black inhabitant, between imprisonment and freedom, between woman and man on the edge of survival in the antipodean wilderness, and between suffering and the individual soul. In the pages which follow I consider some of the different ways in which Nolan, White and Brink fashion these confrontations as an enabling myth for their respective post-colonial societies.

In June 1947 Nolan visited the poet Barrie Reid in Queensland, intending to stay "for a few weeks" but staying in fact for several months (Reid 447). Reid interested Nolan in the Mrs. Fraser story, and he became so fascinated by the accounts he read that the two went to Fraser Island, where Nolan painted his first Mrs. Fraser series.<sup>2</sup> Reid gives this account of the genesis of the series:

Eliza Fraser had seen the tribe spear her husband. She, herself, was given a menial position in the tribe until her escape during a visit to the mainland. For Nolan she was an emblem of a primary recognition of our environment, our landscape which most of us still did not see accurately, our eyes still, somehow, misted by Europe . . . Mrs Fraser naked in the mangroves, merged in the rain-forest, was an historical actuality which contained for Nolan a dynamic poetry and a focus for vision. Her miraculous meeting with Bracefell, the escaped convict, their living off the land and their extraordinary survival contained, in strenuous life, meanings which, Nolan saw, could energize our understanding of this country. For in extremity Mrs Fraser had acted out our own submerged history, our own unexplored or hidden responses . . . For a long time Nolan did not draw or paint. He read and he wrote. And then he went to the island itself. (447)

In February 1948 the first Mrs. Fraser series of twelve large paintings was exhibited at the Moreton Gallery in Brisbane (Reid 452), and in 1957 a second series of thirty Mrs. Fraser paintings was exhibited at the large Nolan retrospective at the Whitechapel Gallery in London. In his search for an Australian mythology of outlaws and outcasts to people the vacant Australian landscape, Nolan turned to Mrs. Fraser as he had earlier turned to Ned Kelly and as he was later to use Burke and Wills, and the soldiers of Gallipoli. The material was resonant, as Pringle points out: "The story of Mrs Fraser and Bracefell brings to the surface . . . the bitter memory of the convict days, but it is also a classic story of betrayal. Who is betrayed? The convict who trusted authority? The aborigines who trusted the white man? Every man by every woman or every woman by every man?" (35). The paintings depict a woman stripped of her clothes, her self, and even, to begin with, her human nature. A naked animal, like Lear in the storm, she is reduced to a minimal quest for survival. When Bracefell appears he is clothed, but

only in the hated convict stripes. They look at each other uneasily and uncertainly—their need forcing them together, their distrust holding them apart.

In the later series there are paintings of Bracefell and Mrs. Fraser together, sharing what Robert Melville calls “a lyrical episode . . . We see them bathing in billabongs, wading through mangrove swamps, perching high in gum trees, looking like prehistoric drawings in the shelter of caves” (8). There are also paintings of the two apart, of Bracefell alone and sometimes naked, and of Mrs. Fraser alone, insubstantial, even half-transparent against a landscape that is alternately lush and barren. Deprivation and suffering, shedding the paraphernalia of civilization and paring away at the self are themes that Patrick White and André Brink were both to take up in their explorations of the Mrs. Fraser story.

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In an interview with Jim Davidson, Brink said that *An Instant in the Wind* was initially inspired not by the eighteenth-century South African records with which it purports to begin—and which he admits inventing (Interview 55)—but by the Nolan paintings: he “was fascinated by the story of her shipwreck and her trek across the desert of Australia back to Brisbane” (Davidson 28). Patrick White has not to my knowledge referred to the Nolan paintings as an influence on *A Fringe of Leaves*, but given his lifelong interest in Australian painting, his earlier friendship with Sidney and Cynthia Nolan—who accepted his Nobel Prize for him in Stockholm (White, *Flaws in the Glass* 233-37)—and the Nolan jackets on a number of his books, including *A Fringe of Leaves* which has a painting of Bracefell and Mrs. Fraser, it is reasonable to assume that he knew the series and that it played a part in the genesis of the novel.<sup>3</sup> Although it appeared in Afrikaans in 1975, *An Instant in the Wind* was published in English in 1976, “within the same week” (Davidson 28) as *A Fringe of Leaves* (and in the same year as the film *Eliza Fraser* and Cook’s novel of the screenplay). While that coincidence is extraordinary, it is less surprising that the protean Mrs. Fraser—especially as interpreted by Nolan—should have caught the imaginations of two such different novelists. Her tale of im-

prisonment and freedom, of old countries and new settlers, of blacks and whites, of love and betrayal in a wilderness that is both Edenic and terrifying, offers God's plenty to the post-colonial novelist searching for a myth embodying his forebears' experience of a new and alien continent.

Neither Brink nor White is, however, normally a "historical" novelist, though both have drawn on historical originals in other works — White on Eyre's *Journal* and Leichhardt's journey in *Voss*, Brink on archival documents of the 1825 slave revolt in *A Chain of Voices* (Davidson, 28). White has explained his views on using historical figures in his fiction:

Personally I tend to dislike historical novels, and have avoided writing them because of the strictures they impose on the imagination. Instead, on a couple of occasions, I have taken a historic character or moment, as starting point. I feel this is permissible if you preserve psychological credibility and respect your aesthetic principles — the fiction need not decline into romance. If, instead of writing *Voss*, I had written a novel about Leichhardt, in whose life there was no woman his obsessive equal, or if in *A Fringe of Leaves* I hadn't substituted Ellen Roxburgh for Eliza Fraser, little more than a hardbitten shrew from the Orkneys, neither novel would have had the psychological complexities, the sensibility, and the passion I was able to explore. ("Patrick White Speaks" 100-01)

Brink is less concerned with psychological complexities than White, and more concerned with inter-racial contact and conflict, less concerned with the cage of class and more concerned with the cage of race, but he shares White's disregard for the merely factual and invents the "historical" records on which his book pretends to be based. What he, like White, wants from the past is a story comprehending the origins of the present, and which can enrich a spiritually impoverished society, lacking in humanizing myths.<sup>4</sup>

One of the reasons the Mrs. Fraser story meets these requirements is that it is a classic captivity narrative, in which, as Richard Slotkin defines it:

a single individual, usually a woman, stands passively under the strokes of evil, awaiting rescue by the grace of God . . . the temporary bondage of the captive to the Indian is dual paradigm — of the bondage of the soul to the flesh and to the temptations arising from original sin, and of the self-exile of the English Israel from England.

In the Indian's devilish clutches, the captive had to meet and reject the temptation of Indian marriage and/or the Indian's "cannibal" Eucharist. To partake of the Indian's love or of his equivalent of bread and wine was to debase, to un-English the very soul . . . The ordeal is at once threatful of pain and evil and promising of ultimate salvation. (Slotkin 94-95)

The Mrs. Fraser story conforms closely to this American narrative genre. A white, European woman is shipwrecked on a distant shore, beyond the bounds of settlement in a new and alien country. She is obliged to watch the murder of her husband by primitive and barbaric natives and to submit to humiliation and slavery. She may also have been sexually threatened and encouraged to practise cannibalism before she is rescued by Europeans who have mastered the hostile environment and outwitted the natives.

Behind this story are older captivity narratives that reverberate through the versions created by Nolan, White and Brink. Christ endured forty days of privation and temptation in the desert as he prepared himself for the task of regenerating fallen man and giving him a myth to live by. The Christian Middle Ages saw human life as a similar purgatorial sojourn in which the imprisoned soul awaited a deliverance earned only through discipline and suffering. The first European settlers in Australia inhabited a penal colony, a station on the way to somewhere else, a place where imprisonment must be endured, duty carried out, and freedom earned, before the longed-for return to the heavenly mansion of Europe. Ironically enough, the convicts and their guards were soon followed to Australia by free settlers, who saw the country not as a jail or forced exile from Eden but as Eden itself, at least in potential. And as Randolph Stow has pointed out, these two contradictory myths — both powerfully realized, for example, in *The Tree of Man* — have coexisted ever since in the Australian consciousness ("The Southland of Antichrist" 160-67). The first settlers' actual experience of Australia confronted those who had dreamed of paradise with a hard reality far removed, spiritually as well as physically, from their Euro-centric imaginings, but the myth persisted (see Gibson). Australia's more recent myth-makers have turned increasingly to failed visionaries who dreamed of a

new world but instead found themselves trapped between a littoral society slavishly reproducing the ills of the old world and a bitter, unforgiving inland offering only tantalizing glimpses of the Eden of which they dreamed. Nolan's Ned Kelly, Burke and Wills and Gallipoli series celebrate doomed heroes who aspire to something more epic than huddling in suburbs on the fringe of an unknown country. Manning Clark's Henry Lawson and White's Voss (Leichhardt/Eyre) are also visionaries who try to compel the country to live up to their aspirations; and if they fail, they have at least ventured into that inner centre where learning through suffering is possible, and where an enabling myth for life in Australia may at last be found. Death by torture in the country of the mind may take place more appropriately in jail than in Eden, but without it the dream of Eden can never be more than a receding fantasy.

In the Mrs. Fraser story the elements of this dual myth of Australia as goal and as Eden are invitingly present. For Nolan it is an ambiguous version of imprisonment, love and survival. Was Mrs. Fraser robbed of her humanity, along with her clothes and dignity, by the Aborigines? The first painting (*Mrs Fraser* 1947) certainly shows her in animal-like form, and at least one critic sees her thus depicted as Nolan's muse (Melville 5-9). In later paintings she is again erect and human, though anguished and uncertain. Her relationship with Bracefell, her rescuer, remains problematic, and Nolan seems to have been particularly fascinated by the betrayal in the Bracefell version of the story. Was the convict Bracefell a prisoner of Mrs. Fraser, the captain's wife? Did she enslave and exploit him as she was enslaved and exploited by the Aborigines? Faced with a misalliance that nature might foster in the wilderness but that society would certainly abhor, did she simply exert her timeworn right to change her mind? Or was she too perhaps a victim, losing her one true love as the price of re-entry into the only world in which she believed she could live? Are all women obliged to betray the men they love, and vice versa? Is not the story of Mrs. Fraser a parable of the captivity and betrayal inevitable in all human relations?

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In choosing the Mrs. Fraser story, as Nolan depicted it, as the starting point for *An Instant in the Wind*, André Brink addresses these questions in the context of South African society, which is both parallel to, and different from, Australian society. Brink's concern to put some aesthetic distance between himself and the anguished society in which he lives is evident in his decision to transpose an Australian story to South Africa, a nineteenth-century story back into the eighteenth century. A white, male Afrikaaner, he mediates the story through a young white woman and a black, convicted slave. This distancing presents him with some challenges to verisimilitude, but it allows him to employ a mythic simplicity that would have been more difficult to achieve in a version set closer to the present. It also demonstrates powerfully the degree of imaginative sympathy needed to cross the institutionalized barriers of apartheid, and to confront the common humanity of black and white and of woman and man.<sup>5</sup> He even found himself thinking in two different languages as he composed the book, English for Elisabeth and Afrikaans for Adam, which further emphasizes the abyss he had to straddle ("English and the Afrikaans Writer" 114). If he chooses a harsher ending to the story than White does, it is because he sees betrayal as inevitable, like Nolan, and because he sees the options in South Africa as more limited and inevitably more political than they are in White's Australia, though his choice of an Australian parent myth for his racially divided society emphasizes the parallels between the two countries. The whites in South Africa have betrayed the blacks not only by dispossessing them of their rights and denying them a meaningful stake in their own country—the common fate of indigenous peoples colonized by Europeans—but also by creating a racist polity that purports to justify this deliberate dehumanizing. As a result, Brink must go back to the eighteenth century to find an image of Eden that he can set against the jail of modern South Africa, and his story probes the choices and conditions that have made it the prison it has become.

At the beginning of Brink's narrative both Elisabeth Larsson and Adam Mantoor see themselves as betrayed and imprisoned. Elisabeth, first betrayed by being born a girl instead of a boy and then imprisoned in her girl's role in the small-town society of the



Cape, is “yearning for an apocalypse” (*An Instant in the Wind* 38). She is attracted to Larsson, the celebrated explorer: “I thought a man like him, such a famous scientist and explorer, would transcend the petty prejudices of the Cape” (151). She also seeks sexual awakening and fulfilment with a man who has seen so much of the world. In resolving to marry Larsson and to join his expedition into the unexplored interior of the country, Elisabeth is pursuing freedom and identity in the way traditionally open to young women: escape from the family through marriage to an exotic partner who will take her away and show her the world. Her marriage is a disappointment, however, and she finds she has exchanged one imprisonment for another. The expedition, like the marriage, is racked with internal tensions that hasten its demise and that of its leader, leaving Elisabeth alone and betrayed in the empty centre of Africa. She has not achieved liberation by marrying and running away; she must now earn it in the wilderness with only the resources she finds about her and within herself. When she meets Adam she is therefore ready to begin her journey from restless dissatisfaction with her lot to a hard-earned self-knowledge and fulfilment. It is a journey that has to take place outside the society in which she has been immured all her life.

Adam too has been a prisoner all his life, betrayed by a brutal system that denies humanity to its slaves. Like other blacks in Brink’s fiction, Adam fiercely resists the whites’ attempts to dehumanize him: “I was kept as a slave. I never *was* a slave” (55). But his masters ignored his right to basic human relationships. His young “bride” of one month was sold by his Baas for 400 rix dollars. His grandmother died because he was not allowed to deliver her firewood, and when his mother went to her funeral against orders, Adam was ordered to flog her. Not surprisingly, Adam turned instead on his master and so found himself a convict on Robben Island instead of a slave. Escaping from that second prison he fled into the interior, where he learned from his mother’s people, the Hottentots, to live off the land. With such a bitter history it is no wonder that he wants this lonely freedom, but it continues to deny him human relations, and is itself a kind of solitary confinement.

When he finds Elisabeth the last thing either of them wants is

the relationship that develops between them, but develop it does, out of their mutual need. Adam wants to go back:

I've learned to stay alive, to survive like an animal. But I'm not an animal. I'm a human being. And I want to live with people again. So I must go back some day: not crawling like a runaway dog, but walking on my own two feet, straight, with nothing to be ashamed of. (91)

Elisabeth sums up the bargain he proposes, which echoes Mrs. Fraser's with Bracefell: "My safety for your freedom" (91). At this stage Elisabeth simply wants to go back, for much the same reasons that Mrs. Fraser or Ellen Roxburgh want to go back — she cannot imagine living for any length of time without at least the basic civilized amenities. Adam and Elisabeth are thus forced into a hostile association by the bargain that offers the only hope for either of them. Slowly, as for Andrea and Mandla in Brink's *The Wall of the Plague*, their hostility dissolves as they tell each other their personal histories and recognize in each other something of their own fears and needs, sufferings and aspirations. But the transition from hostility to love involves anguish, and Elisabeth recognizes that every beginning presages its own failure: "love is the beginning of violence and betrayal. Something in oneself or in the other is killed or betrayed" (101). Love itself is a kind of prison, even the brief idyllic summer that Elisabeth and Adam share on their lonely beach. Their decision to commit themselves to each other is all too soon followed by entrapment: "you sound as if you felt cornered" (145). In a symbolic gesture they heighten the passion that is losing its first intensity by imprisoning themselves at high tide on the rocky island off their beach. But they cannot avoid the next agonized decision to leave their isolated Eden and return to the Cape.

Their journey back is an exodus of almost biblical grandeur which reflects the internal journey that Elisabeth realizes has liberated her in a profound and continuing way:

She remembered, with a sense of wonder, her endless discontent in the Cape and on her journey with Larsson. That restlessness, that rebelliousness in her, the interminable quarrels with her mother and her all-too-timid father. Now it was different. She would always remain impatient, driven by the urgency to get things done. But at the same time she experienced a new sense of peace. The timeless

existence at the sea had brought her the discovery, in herself, of something she'd never been aware of before: a faculty for happiness. That in itself sustained her through the all-demanding days. I know now that it is possible for me to be happy, I have explored serenity, something inside me has opened wonderfully. I have travelled farther into myself and nothing can ever be quite the same again. (158)

Brink presents the country through which they travel in all its pristine splendour, powerfully conveying his passionate attachment to it and his grief for its fall from unpeopled magnificence. Like Faulkner's "Bear," *An Instant in the Wind* chronicles the despoliation of a noble wilderness by rapacious Europeans who bring a poisoned ideology of racism and exploitation and who develop a social order that denies humanity to its rulers and slaves alike. Elisabeth remembers that it was not only the slaves who were imprisoned at the Cape:

It was so common — slaves assaulting or murdering their masters. All those vagabonds, and drunks, and adventurers, and fugitives around. We had to lock and bar everything at night. Mother suffered from constant attacks of nerves. . . many nights I got so scared I had no choice but to close the shutters. . . being white at the Cape means to live in constant fear. (150)

In twentieth-century South Africa this virtual penal colony has expanded across the wilderness to the north, converting the entire country into a prison in which, as in all jails, the guards as well as the prisoners are incarcerated.

Elisabeth and Adam feel freer during their journey through the wilderness than at any other time — even their first summer. The sense of a joint enterprise and of almost unassailable obstacles to overcome frees them from all concerns except the need to survive and continue their journey. But their freedom evaporates when they finally reach the outskirts of settlement and encounter again the ruthless separation of black and white. Their love cannot oppose the blind, unquestioning prejudice of every white they meet and the hopeless acquiescence of every black. On their last night they try to reassert their love and equality, but it is a gesture of despair, an act of farewell instinct with betrayal and death, though what has happened between them cannot be taken away, even by a system that denies the

possibility of inter-racial love. Brink leaves the story at this point, an affirmation of sorts in the midst of despair. He does not chronicle the actual betrayal, or what remains of life for Adam and Elisabeth. But if the prison gates close about them, and if they even acquiesce to some extent in their own imprisonment, they have known in the wilderness a freedom and a humanity they could not have experienced at the Cape. Perhaps it is all that any one can hope for.

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Emphasis on the denial of freedom in Cape society leads Brink to depart from his source and the usual form of the captivity narrative. Elisabeth is not a prisoner of the native inhabitants of the country in which she is stranded. Brink portrays an innocent country with supportive inhabitants. The Hottentots who care for Elisabeth during her miscarriage, and those who later save her from starvation, make no attempt to restrict her freedom. The Bushmen, the real natives of South Africa, are mentioned but not seen. The country is almost empty, and the hardships of the journey, not the humiliations of imprisonment, test and teach Brink's characters. Only in the vacant wilderness can Elisabeth and Adam learn to live fully human lives: in society they are dehumanized. White European society has introduced the slave mentality that corrupts this southern Eden. White, on the other hand, follows the traditional pattern of the captivity narrative more closely and keeps closer to his sources, leaving Alexander's version of the Mrs. Fraser story relatively unchanged in narrative outline (Ward). Though not without its beauty, the wilderness in *A Fringe of Leaves* is hostile, and the natives are decidedly unfriendly. Australia is an already fallen Eden in which Ellen can work out her salvation only through pain and suffering.

White's vision is less polarized than Brink's in that he sees both imprisonment and freedom as possible in either society or the wilderness. For White, salvation is less socially and politically determined than it is for Brink, more an inner spiritual condition. Ellen must leave society, and suffer humiliation and imprisonment, in order to approach salvation; but once having glimpsed it in the wilderness, she is able to return to society with

some hope of sustaining it in her future life. Brink is less sanguine about Elisabeth, casting her haunting statement "*This no one can take away from us, not even ourselves*" in negative terms, terms which suggest a memory hidden away from society and its thought police, even at times from herself.

Though the Mrs. Fraser story occupies a relatively small fraction of *A Fringe of Leaves* it is the centrepiece, and its juxtaposed themes of freedom and imprisonment extend throughout the story of Ellen Gluyas/Roxburgh. Ellen has been a prisoner of her family and then of her marriage long before she is a prisoner of the wilderness and the Aborigines. Her Cornish childhood, while not exactly unhappy, offered little relief from hard, continuing drudgery and little company from her sickly mother or her brooding, drunken father. Marriage to Austin Roxburgh solves the problem of how she is to live with both her parents dead, raising her in the world far beyond any expectations she might have entertained as the daughter of a poor farmer and a former lady's maid. But middle-class Cheltenham with a sickly, bookish husband frightened by her only demonstration of sexual passion is not the brilliant escape that it must have seemed to her envious relatives. White's acute yet sympathetic account of the Roxburghs' marriage portrays a relationship which condemns both to convict-like punishments: "Neither of them had felt the cat, only the silken cords of their own devising with which they tormented each other at intervals" (*A Fringe of Leaves* 154). However, Ellen remains loyal. Though locked into the roles of nurse and mother and denied sexual expression, she does not complain as Elisabeth complains to Larsson. She also has the social role of genteel Mrs. Roxburgh inexorably but kindly fashioned for her by her mother-in-law and her husband; she improves herself conscientiously, eventually performing the role with a degree of conviction which, if not enthusiastic, nonetheless passes muster in Cheltenham society. But she is not free.

The Roxburghs' journey to Australia takes them to a colony where Ellen's roles seem less immutable, and where they are eventually undermined. The society the British settlers imposed on Australia was not, strictly speaking, a slave society like that in South Africa, but it was a penal colony in which the lot of

convicts was not very different from that of slaves. In *The Timeless Land* Eleanor Dark portrays the Aborigines of Sydney Cove as bewildered by a system in which one group of white invaders systematically imprisoned, tortured, and humiliated another group. While the Aborigines have their own brutalities, they do not deny self-respect to their enemies, and they cannot comprehend an ideology of capitalistic ownership which entails the exploitation and degradation of one group of men by another. Dark portrays Governor Phillip as humane and visionary, but he remains a prisoner of his time and of the European system which he enforces. Rebellious convicts who escaped into the bush surrounding the penal settlements and learned to live with the Aborigines found, like Andrew Prentice, that they could not escape the remorseless expansion of the settlers. Like Adam Mantoor they had every reason to hate and fear the system from which they fled, but they could not avoid its claims upon them for more than a few brief years. Jack Chance in *A Fringe of Leaves* shares their dilemma. He is less anxious to return to Moreton Bay than Adam was to return to the Cape, and more sceptical of the proposed bargain, but he accompanies Ellen and even considers returning himself, until the memory of Captain Logan's triangles turns him back. Ironically White has Ellen plead his case with some success to Logan, who recommends clemency to his superiors in Sydney.

It is to this crude, transported version of English society that Austin Roxburgh's brother Garnet, like many another black sheep, has gone to recoup a damaged reputation. In the colonies some bonds are loosed, shifts of class and reputation are possible, and fortunes may be made or restored. Ellen is a less willing transportee, however, and she is troubled from her arrival in Van Dieman's Land. She does not enjoy the sight of convicts forced to labour as "unfortunate human beasts" (84), and she does not enjoy the company of her "coarse and sensual" (83) brother-in-law. The predictable, hermetic world of her marriage to Austin is threatened when she responds, in a moment of abandon, to Garnet's advances. No amount of repentance and refusal to repeat the experience can disguise the fact that Ellen was stirred by "an experience of sensuality she must have awaited all her life." The episode takes place in a forest clearing,

anticipating Ellen's later experiences in the bush. She has ridden out "to enjoy a freedom I've been denied since I was at 'Dulcet'" (115). The invalid Austin, by contrast, lives indoors, never venturing further afield than his Elzevir Virgil takes him. Ellen loyally goes back to him and persuades him to leave "Dulcet" for Hobart Town. Their voyage home via Sydney might have represented a return to the genteel civilities of Cheltenham, and for Ellen a return to prison, albeit a reasonably comfortable and familiar prison, had the *Bristol Maid* not struck the Great Barrier Reef.

The consequences of the wreck soon strip Ellen of the protection and the pretension of being Mrs. Roxburgh. If the colonies care less for forms and classes than the home country, a group of castaways rapidly ceases to care for them at all. Austin, to whom death "has always appeared . . . something of a literary conceit" (35), is speared by the blacks after an unexpected gesture of masculine assertiveness. Other members of the party desert or are killed, and Ellen is left to survive by enduring humiliation and enslavement. Unlike Elisabeth Larsson she has no single companion to initiate her into the ways of surviving in the wild, but she adapts to the subsistence living of the tribe with the resourcefulness of the younger Ellen Gluyas. Though Elisabeth is close to death a number of times, she is never so stripped of her identity, so tested by denial of all she has thought of herself, so helpless and unable to influence her fate as Ellen is. Ellen not only survives, however; she is enriched by her experience of deprivation and suffering though she is not tempted, like Elisabeth to remain in the wild. Ellen's journey back with Jack Chance is less epic than Elisabeth's, though it is hard enough. Her sexual experience with Jack is less idyllic than Elisabeth's with Adam, but it represents her first fulfilment. She is freed, ironically, by her experience of captivity and suffering. White has portrayed suffering as essential to spiritual growth since his first novel, *Happy Valley* (1939). Ellen's experience follows Theodora Goodman's struggle with sanity in the *jardin exotique* of a disintegrating Europe, Voss's struggle with megalomania in the desert of Central Australia, and Elizabeth Hunter's struggle with self and soul in a cyclone on Fraser Island. Like all of them she emerges purified and enlightened. Brink has also emphasized

“the importance of suffering, of endurance” an *An Instant in the Wind* (Davidson 28), but he is less confident about their ultimate effects. Having travelled so far and so hard, Ellen and Elisabeth are freed by their experience of how much they can bear, and of the resources they can find within themselves, and Ellen has entered into an abiding possession of herself. Despite the pain that it costs to acquire, and the difficulty of living up to it, it is knowledge profoundly worth having.

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Both Brink and White choose traditional narrative forms for their versions of the Mrs. Fraser story, though the sensibilities that inform them are unmistakably contemporary. White has always followed the Victorian rather than the modern masters of the novel in matters of form, and Brink, while regarded as a radical “Sestiger” in Afrikaans writing — mainly for his choice of subject-matter — uses traditional rather than experimental narrative forms. Both novels employ strong, essentially sequential storylines. Brink exploits the potential for excitement and suspense in his epic journey through the natural hazards of the wild, though he like White intersperses long episodes of memory and retrospection. White is less interested in his heroine’s physical journey than in her internal growth and development, but the journey remains a crucial metaphor, an objective correlative, for that growth, and he takes pains — as he did in *Voss* — to ensure that the physical journey is fully imagined, and that the telling retains and even enhances its inherent narrative interest.

White’s narrator is omniscient in the sense of knowing all Ellen’s life, but he does not claim to understand all that he tells. Brink’s narrator makes it clear in his quasi-historical introduction and at points throughout the story that he is engaged in an imaginative reconstruction with no authority other than its power to persuade the reader that it might well have been as he imagines it. One effect of this reconstruction is to suggest that all “characters” — inside or outside fiction — are as unknowable as these two imagined fugitives trekking across southern Africa in the middle of the eighteenth century. White has never extended the author’s notional omniscience to an understanding of his characters that would explain them in a fictionally privileged



way to themselves, to one another, or to the reader. For White character remains an enigma fitfully lit by shafts of insight and sometimes illuminated by approaching death.

Both writers use the landscapes across which their characters struggle as images of that uncharted inner territory they are also exploring, and through which the reader endeavours to follow them with equipment, like theirs, scarcely adequate to the task. "Don't you think people are landscapes too to be explored?" (39), Elisabeth asks Adam. And later she asserts defiantly: "This once I'll trek into my own wilderness" (65). Ellen is more reluctant to embark on exploration, though as she sails up the coast of New South Wales she is "sad to think I will never explore this vast land seen at a distance through spray and fog" (69); and later her feelings strengthen: "the landscape which she thought she had begun to hate until on the point of leaving it, was breaking up into brilliant fragments under pressure from the suddenly dominant sun" (141). But though her journey is forced and Elisabeth's is chosen, both involve a painful but ultimately illuminating exploration of the wilderness outside and inside themselves.

Both writers cross the equator of gender, and Brink the equator of race, as well as the geographic equator separating the familiar, European north from the vacant, unknown lands of the southern hemisphere. Recent feminist criticism has increased our awareness that such crossings into the "other" change the referents of navigation and turn expectations upside down. White has explored the territory of gender throughout his work, most recently and most profoundly in *The Twyborn Affair* (1979). Brink is a less androgynous writer, but he is not unaware of the difficulties. In *The Wall of the Plague*, his most recent novel, he subverts an apparently presumptuous male reading of the female protagonist by revealing in the last chapter that the "reading" of Andrea is that of her lover Paul, not that of the privileged author, and that it is therefore no more authoritative than his own imagined recreation of Mrs. Fraser and Bracefell as Elisabeth and Adam. Brink has dramatized black characters without apology throughout his work, and given the political situation in South Africa, and Brink's relatively privileged status within it, his insistence on a humanity common to black and

white understandably takes precedence over niceties of feeling about the dangers of patronage and presumption.

Relations between the races have been unhappy in both countries, but they have been unhappy in different ways, and the two books reflect the differences. The treatment of the Australian Aborigines by the European settlers has been brutal and exploitative, at times murderous to the point of genocide, but it has not included legalized slavery—even though the Kanakas brought into the sugar industry in Queensland were little more than slaves—and it has not attempted to institutionalize racial divisions on the scale of South African apartheid. In recent decades there has been some fluctuating political progress towards Aboriginal land rights and some social amelioration, though both are painfully slow and beset by seemingly intractable problems. White portrays the Aborigines in *A Fringe of Leaves*—from Ellen's point of view—as nasty, brutish and primitive. The view is external, and there is no attempt to explore their inner lives, or the ways in which they relate to their world. There are no unspeakable rites in this heart of darkness, and even the cannibal episode is viewed by Ellen more as a sacrament than a moral outrage. The adult blacks seem scarcely human to Ellen, who hardly relates to them—sexually or otherwise—except as she is forced to by their joint need for survival. Her captivity is not without its moments of pleasure, even ecstasy, but these are private—as they usually are for White—and she takes the first opportunity to escape back to her own society. In *Voss* and *Riders in the Chariot*, White has demonstrated his respect for Aboriginal art and culture and his sympathy for the plight of Aborigines imprisoned in a European society, but in *A Fringe of Leaves* he concerns himself with a first contact between the two races in which, atypically, the Aborigines were superior to the whites, and behaved no better, though certainly no worse, than the whites did when the situation was reversed, as it increasingly came to be.

Brink's Europeans are confronted with very different coloured races. To begin with, they are not all indigenous people but a mixture of native Africans, slaves from the Dutch East Indies and elsewhere, and mixed blood descendants of earlier Europeans. Whatever their origins, however, the line that is drawn

between them and the "whites" is a fiercely uncompromising one. And it is made more bitter by the fact that blacks and whites share the work, live together as children and indeed (though boxed apart) as adults and both claim the country as home (though both are immigrants). In Australia the attitudes of blacks and whites to the country has all too often been contradictory, with the blacks reverencing it and the whites exploiting it, and there has been little joint enterprise and little shared labour. In Brink's South Africa blacks and whites are seen as natural equals separated only by the uncompromising racism of the whites. In all his books Brink explores sexual relationships between blacks and whites, especially the taboo relationship between a black man and a white woman, and he portrays them as natural sexual partners who might be natural political and social partners if only the Afrikaaner establishment would allow it. Believing the racial policies of his government are an outrage against justice and sanity, Brink has no choice but to oppose them; but he does not see political change as the ultimate goal of his writing:

However close my work is to the realities of South Africa today, the political situation remains a starting point only for my attempts to explore the more abiding themes of human loneliness and man's efforts to reach out and touch someone else. My stated conviction is that literature should never descend to the level of politics; it is rather a matter of elevating and refining politics so as to be worthy of literature. (Interview 55)

Patrick White has taken on an increasingly public political role in recent years, but he remains a much less political novelist than Brink, and with the exception of Alf Dubbo he does not venture into the Aboriginal "other." The racial issue is also less visible in Australia because, in contrast to South Africa, the blacks are scarcely involved in the economic life of the country. *A Fringe of Leaves* reflects accurately the Australian experience of a largely uncomprehending collision between an indigenous people whose culture and technology could not resist the invader and a European penal colony which sent as its first ambassadors to the Aborigines escaped desperadoes and shipwrecked mariners, neither of whom was much disposed to display enlightened humanity or sympathetic interest. Whatever opportunities there

were for mutual respect and shared humanity were lost very largely through default, and while there is now some political willingness to recompense the Aborigines for their dispossession and create a more just society, mutually acceptable solutions remain elusive. There is little joint enterprise between the races.

\* \* \*

In addition to the division of the races, both novels set up as part of their structure a triple contrast between a European “home” country, a colonial settlement, and a surrounding wilderness. The need to escape, the desire to explore, impatience with the restrictions of predictable family life, and hunger for new experience drive the characters out from the centres and into the wilderness of the periphery. As Randolph Stow observes in “Stations”:

It is the Western destiny to father  
further and further virginal Utopias  
past ever wider, ever-asperging seas.  
*(Counterfeit Silence 61)*

In the wilderness the life-support systems fail — the *Bristol Maid* hits a reef, the Larsson expedition founders — and those who remain must face the challenges of the wilderness with only their own resources of endurance, adaptability, and the will to survive. They are helped by refugees from their own societies, escaped convicts and murderers,<sup>6</sup> who prefer the privations of the wild to the punishments of Robben Island and Moreton Bay, both notorious for the cruelty of their discipline even in an age when physical brutality to convicts was the norm. Ultimately, however, there is no escape for adventurers or absconders from the society that imprisons them. Brink sees the twentieth century as no more humane, probably in some ways crueller, than the eighteenth, and blacks remain effectively if no longer nominally slaves. In White’s twentieth century the cruelty of the convict system is no longer publicly sanctioned, but Himmelfarb, who has escaped the Nazi holocaust in Europe, is crucified by his egalitarian Australian workmates in *Riders in the Chariot*. In the past the wilderness was both a refuge and another kind of prison;

it permitted change, but it did not offer an abiding resolution to the conflicts never entirely left behind by the escapees who fled into it.

The centripetal force drawing such refugees and adventurers back from the wilderness to the centre and “home” and opposing the dispersion on which they earlier embark is evident in both novels, though most poignantly in *An Instant in the Wind*. The Cape calls insistently to both Adam and Elisabeth, even in the early, idyllic period of their relationship. They endure almost unimaginable hardships in their determined journey back to the Cape, though they know, in a sense, that their return will lead inevitably to betrayal and death. The relationship between Ellen and Jack Chance is a cruder Edenic mating, though it offers unprecedented sexual fulfilment and even transcendence for Ellen. Both novels suggest that in the wilderness and at the edge of survival it is possible to find a self and a sexuality — and even for a time an escape from society — that might never have been discovered closer to home. That the men are convicts literally and metaphorically striped, that Adam is a black slave and Jack a white trapper in “the cage-bird trade” (295), while the women are “ladies” and white, emphasizes the inherent hostility between the adventure of self-discovery and the cages and categories of race and social class. And yet they are all drawn back towards what passes for civilization in colonies at the ends of the earth. Even in White’s less bitter ending to the story, Jack Chance fears the triangles of Moreton Bay and also perhaps senses that the Mrs. Roxburgh Ellen is again becoming is concerned that society might “see her reflected in his eyes, or worse still, the convict in hers” (329). Their love will not survive a return to colonial society, and her betrayal and his are no less real for being less calculated and less gruesome in their consequences than Elisabeth’s betrayal of Adam, or Adam’s betrayal of himself.

While the Ellen in Mrs. Roxburgh might wish to bring Jack back with her to society, her sufferings after the wreck and during her struggle to survive in the bush have been such that she feels no temptation to stay with him in the bush. Elisabeth and Adam on the other hand are torn between the desire to stay alone on the unpeopled, unlegislated beach where they have

played out their version of Eden and their hunger to return to the Cape. Brink depicts but does not seek to explain this craving for society, perhaps because it lies too deep for explanation. South Africans in all his books are at the mercy of a passionate craving for their homeland, a craving which their despairing hatred of its inhuman race laws and its evil Security Police cannot subdue. Expatriates in European countries are confronted with as cruel a dilemma as Adam and Elisabeth. Like Brink's close friend Breyten Breytenbach, to whom *An Instant in the Wind* is dedicated, they may choose political, racial and sexual freedom away from their home, or they may return to that home knowing they face bigotry, persecution, the loss of all civilized freedoms, and, if they make enough trouble, imprisonment and almost certain death. From Joseph Malan in *Looking on Darkness* (1974), Brink's first major novel in English, to Andrea Malgas in *The Wall of the Plague* (1984), his most recent, the dilemma is the same; and the ultimate choice — to return home despite the cost — is inevitable, however much it is resisted. Andrea has determinedly created a life for herself outside South Africa, first in England and then in France. At the beginning of the book she is considering an offer of marriage from Paul Joubert, and she knows that her acceptance of the offer would complete the severance from South Africa that she has struggled to maintain during her years of exile. She has hardened herself against the bitter experiences of her fellow expatriates, and the increasingly disturbing news from home. When she first meets the black activist Mandla Mqayisa she detests him, but in the days they are forced to share while researching Paul's book on the Plague she is drawn against her will to recognize that Mandla is her country and her race calling her home, and her increasingly desperate resistance only delays the inevitable. But her return remains largely unexplained. *The Wall of the Plague* is Paul's attempt — bewildered and only partly successful — to understand why Andrea has left him to return to her home, to political activism, and to imprisonment, torture, and eventual death. She had earlier said that there are only two alternatives for lovers — to stay together or to betray one another. There are only two alternatives for South Africans, as Brink sees it: to fight the regime if you are black or coloured, or even white like Ben du

Toit in *Rumours of Rain*, facing and accepting death<sup>7</sup> in the process; or to betray your country by leaving it, dying morally and spiritually in the "safety" of exile. Andrea makes the cruel decision to betray her lover in order to be true to her country, her people, and herself.

Elisabeth's betrayal of Adam is more subtle and less agonized. She faces no great suffering in returning to the Cape, except the half-conscious knowledge that she and Adam will be separated and that he will be punished. She says, as Mrs. Fraser is supposed to have said, that she will plead for her rescuer, that she will use her influence to save him from the punishment he must expect as an escaped convict and, even worse, as a violator of "the ultimate *thou-shalt-not*" (22), a white woman. The extent to which she believes her own professions is not clear, nor is the point at which she recognizes that she cannot possibly succeed and must therefore save herself. Brink does not follow her re-entry into Cape society. Ellen, whose re-entry to Moreton Bay is followed, is less ambivalent in her desire to help her rescuer. It is Jack who foresees the response of authority and society, and who does what Adam Mantoor should have done—distrust his mistress's powers of persuasion or even her will to persuade.

The endings of both novels are unexpected, and the reader is obliged to reassess what has gone before in the light of the consequences. Ellen not only survives her ordeal in the wilderness, she explores the depths of her own nature for the first time and effects a reconciliation of sorts between her opposing selves of Ellen Gluyas and Mrs. Roxburgh. Although she does not lead Jack Chance out of the wilderness, she does not leave him any worse off than she finds him, and she does plead his case with Captain Lovell. Ellen's final flirtation with Mr. George Jevons shows her two social selves working in harmony and suggests that a marriage to him might give rein to both, for he too has risen from the ranks to the propertied classes. Elisabeth Larsson also remarried after her return from the interior, but Brink suggests that her life effectively ended when she returned to the Cape. She married an elderly neighbour, bore a son, and endured a long widowhood, but this is all dismissed in a line or two at the beginning of the book. No one, not even she herself, could take away her memories. But what followed was a long

postscript to her journey into and out of the Africa she shared with Adam.

Within traditional narrative structures, then, and using a story that has fascinated writers, painters and film-makers for 150 years, Patrick White and André Brink portray the agonized encounters between old cultures and new lands, between penal colonies and indigenous peoples, between imprisonment and freedom in society and in the wilderness, and between the individual soul and its unfamiliar landscapes, that constitute the essentials of colonial and post-colonial experience in its various manifestations. If their story, like all the best stories, is an old one — Ruth amid the alien corn — they bring to their tellings of it a late-twentieth-century awareness of how little we know of ourselves and one another, and how strange are the stories we tell about our past as we try to shed some light on a bewildering and often appalling present. Brink's passionate espousal of a brutally suppressed political cause, and White's passionate search for a way of salvation in a secular and dehumanized world, locate them clearly in a contemporary context, as well as in the longer perspectives of art, in which the struggle of the individual woman or man against the prison-house of society endures like the human spirit.

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The most reliable account of the story is Michael Alexander's, but see also those by Curtis, Russell and Gibbings. Mrs. Fraser's experiences as a castaway and captive have attracted racy storytellers rather than sober historians, and it is typical of the history of her story that the Bracefell version of her escape has been widely reproduced, though Alexander prefers the Graham version "beyond reasonable doubt." Fictionalized versions of her story have remained popular from 1838, when J. Catnach published a broadsheet (reproduced in Alexander 13-16) in London — it included seven stanzas of melodramatic doggerel, and a woodblock illustration in which almost every detail is at odds with the surviving accounts of what actually happened — to 1976 when David Williamson wrote an imaginative screenplay for Tim Burstall's film *Eliza Fraser*. Williamson's screenplay has been adapted as a novel by Kenneth Cook; the Hexagon Productions film *Eliza Fraser*, produced and directed by Tim Burstall, starred Susannah York (as Mrs. Fraser), John Waters, John Castle, Noel Ferrier and Trevor Howard. Neither Williamson nor Cook was restricted by concern for historical accuracy.
- <sup>2</sup> According to Maureen Gilchrist, the first Mrs. Fraser series "was preceded by Nolan's lengthy survey of the sources of the legend in the Oxley Library, Brisbane, and two visits to Fraser Island" (38-39); the principal sources were Curtis, Russell and Gibbings. If Nolan studied both Russell and Gibbings, he



- would have been aware of the contradictory accounts of the rescue by Graham and Bracefell. Reid incorrectly dates Nolan's visit from June 1948 instead of from June 1947 (447).
- <sup>3</sup> Randolph Stow identifies in *A Fringe of Leaves* "effects quite consciously, I believe, inspired by Nolan's Mrs. Fraser paintings. . . . Some scenes, like those in a lily-pool and in a tree-top, seem to be based on specific Nolan paintings of the 1957 series" ("Transfigured Histories" 32-33).
  - <sup>4</sup> Cf. Laurie Hergenhan: "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" (165).
  - <sup>5</sup> Brink says of the composition of *A Chain of Voices*: "The 'separateness' of the voices haunted me; master and slaves, all tied by the same chains, are totally unable to communicate because their humanity and their individuality are denied by the system they live by" (Interview 55).
  - <sup>6</sup> Jack murdered his mistress Mab in a fit of jealousy. Adam intends to murder his Baas but does not. As he escapes he shoots Lewies, his boyhood friend, who tries to stop him. Like Heriot in Randolph Stow's *To the Islands*, Adam flees into the wilderness not knowing whether or not he is guilty of murder in fact as well as in intention.

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