Post-Colonial Themes in David Malouf's
*Remembering Babylon*

This page last revised 27 May 1997

*NOTE: Much of the material used on this page is taken from a conversation with David Malouf in Dublin, 19 April 1997.*

It is interesting to note that, although in the context of this MA course we are studying Malouf's novel in terms of a post-colonial response, the author himself has expressed the opinion that it is not, strictly speaking, a post-colonial text. Most would agree with Malouf in that it is certainly not an example of resistance or response from a member of a colonised community in the same vein as, for example, Chinua Achebe or some Native Canadian authors. Rather, it can be seen as an examination of the colonial project by a descendant of the original colonisers.

Nevertheless, there are several themes running through the novel which constitute elements of post-colonial discourse, and this page intends to briefly examine some of them.

There is a pervasive sense of colonial guilt throughout *Remembering Babylon*, an awareness of the suspect morality of the colonial process. Like *Great Expectations*, *Babylon* recognises Australia as a potential utopia for the industrious European immigrant - unlike Dickens, however, Malouf asserts that the success of the project rests not on merely exploiting the resources available (while ignoring or displacing the indigenous people), but on reaching a kind of harmony and exchange with the landscape and with the colonised. This hybrid culture represents, for Malouf, the ideal ultimate outcome of the colonial process.

The potential for this utopia is personalised in the crude shape of Gemmy Fairley, an English castaway who lives among aborigines for 16 years before crossing back into European civilisation, where his identity is immediately called into question. Gemmy is an 'in-between creature' (p.28), occupying an uncertain cultural space, with no-one able to determine with which culture he should be identified. In the Reverend Frazer's utopian vision, he is 'a true child of the place as it will one day be.' (p.132)

The fact that the place is destined never to be this way is the novel's tragedy, a missed opportunity for true cultural harmony and expansion of human knowledge, which has had tragic repercussions for every subsequent generation of Australians, both native and immigrant. Malouf demonstrates the failure of the colonial project, with the blame laid squarely at the feet of those Europeans who fail to see the possibilities embodied in Gemmy.

Instead, they see only the threat of the 'blackfeller', who is revealed to be still in contact with his adopted people. Fuelled by the paranoid siege mentality brought about by fear of the unknown landscape, the settlers drive Gemmy away, unable to face the terrible knowledge which he brings - that the qualities which make them 'superior' may be more fragile than they think. Gemmy brings with him the unthinkable possibility than you could lose 'it....Not just language but it. It.' (p.40) Those who try to face this knowledge and ally themselves with Gemmy and what he represents become estranged from their community, and although they arrive at a new understanding of themselves and the landscape which supports them, it is clear that the cultural gap is too wide to bridge.
It is this still-extant cultural gap which results in the novel's aboriginal figures remaining totally unknowable; Malouf is unwilling, and unable, to appropriate the voice of the colonised. Despite their enigmatic depiction, however, we are given a certain insight into the mystical nature of aboriginal culture, for example in the unspoken knowledge which they bring to Gemmy. It is optimistic that several of the European characters, through contact with Gemmy, approach a new understanding of the world which they inhabit - most notably Janet McIvor, who experiences a moment of true epiphany, a realisation of harmony with nature which is very aboriginal in character.

Viewed from a post-colonial perspective, *Remembering Babylon* is a pessimistic assessment of the colonial project, a lament for the missed opportunities which a meeting of disparate cultures could provide for humanity. Yes, there is a hopeful hint that the utopia is still somehow attainable, in the self-knowledge gained by Jock, Janet, Lachlan and Frazer. However Malouf, writing as he is in the last decade of the twentieth century, is aware that the colonial project has failed on these terms, and this realisation must inform any reading of the novel.

**NOTE:** The page numbers referred to on this page are taken from the 1994 Vintage edition of *Remembering Babylon.*

This project was completed under the direction of Dr Leon Litvack as a requirement for the MA degree in Modern Literary Studies in the School of English at the Queen's University of Belfast. The site is evolving and will include contributions from future generations of MA students on other writers and themes.

This page was written by Nicholas Dunlop. E-mail me with your comments.

The Imperial Archive Project is supervised by Leon Litvack. E-mail me with your suggestions.