

Australia's uneasy path to an independent democracy

The events of the Blacksmith murders coincide with the important historical moments in Australian history: Federation and involvement in the Boer War. Both topics are introduced in the early parts of the novel where Jimmie is involved in their discussion; in each case he uses them to declare his allegiance to Australia or his political awareness. Following the Newby murders, Jimmie does not engage with these topics directly, but his declaration of war, and the novel's regular reference to his exploits as such, allows Jimmie's "war" to be connected with the Australian experience in South Africa, tying both to the theme of cultural identity and Australia's uneasy path to independent democracy. Examples of such war references include:

- To Gilda: *Tell the p'lice I declared war* (p. 91);
- *Yet to see them [Newby victims] fully and without doubt as the first casualties of war regally undertaken . . .* (p. 84);
- *. . . raise the boy to be a rebel* (p. 86);
- *To his mind, the earth and Jimmie Blacksmith had become suddenly allied* (p. 93) in contrast to, *So they must leave and get used to being at war with the entire human landscape* (p. 103).

The irony of Australia's involvement in the war in South Africa is established early in the exchange Jimmie hears between two clerks, one of them dismissing the prospect of an American-style civil war in Australia with, "It'd never happen here. Could you imagine Australians shooting at Australians?" (p. 17). Of course, this ignores the battles between Australia's first peoples and the settlers, which is increasingly described as a war. It also highlights that Aboriginal people are not considered to be "Australian" under the new Federation. In fact the guiding document of the Federation, the Australian Constitution, doesn't regard them as citizens (not counted in official population figures) but placed them under the management of states (previously colonies) along with flora and fauna.

The same exchange between the clerks also introduces the problem of forging a new Australian identity out of an English heritage that still viewed itself as superior. One of the clerks, speaking in "upper-class English" (p. 17), declaring "there's no such thing as an Australian . . . Here there are only New South Welshmen, Victorians, Queenslanders . . . The only true Australians are . . . the aborigines (p. 17). It is note-worthy that the final comment comes from an outsider to the colonies.

After the killing spree begins the political issues faced by white Australians are mainly explored through the vigilante group headed by Dowie Stead. The main tension exists in the fact that many Australians may have felt more affinity and sympathy with the Boers who, ". . .

all they wanted to do was to have their land and keep the black man in his place. Isn't that our policy, here tonight?" (p. 113).

So just as Jimmie was attempting to carve out an identity and composite world view that took in his cultural heritage and practical realities, so too were pre-Federation colonialists who attempted to straddle two realities, articulated by Toban: "It's Britain's war, not ours . . . We're going to federate. We're going t' be a bloody power in the world. And our world's our world, not Britain's" (p. 113). But in this group, Toban, not a son-of-a-land-owner, is in the minority for some of the others "spoke as if the manhunt were a novitiate for the war in South Africa. They were unlike the clerk who Gave Jimmie the leaflet on fencing in 1897. Except for Toban, they were Britannically minded" (p. 112).

It is ironic, therefore that Jimmie the rebel, in declaring war on the imperial/colonial power is represented as an equivalent to Boers who had a bloody history with their own native populations.

In light of the ambivalence surrounding Jimmie Blacksmith (as white protégé gone bad, Christian convert, rebel, victim, bandit), the end of the novel gives some attention to the timing of his execution given his capture came so close to the date appointed for Federation. Jimmie's trial is glossed over with only two sentences coming between being told Jimmie "had opened his heart to Christ" and "Then Australia became a fact" (p. 187).

While the real Jimmy Governor was hanged only two weeks after Federation, Keneally delays it because, the narrator states, "It was unsuitable, too indicative of what had been suppressed in the country's making, to hang black men in the Federation's early days" (p. 187). Instead, "People laughed in their state of grace, the old crimes done, all convict chains a rusted fable . . . And the other viciousness, the rape of primitives? – it was done and past report" (p. 187).

Activity

Students locate references to Boer War and Federation and note down the attitudes held by characters, their occupation and social status. Ask students to identify any patterns to these attitudes and whether any similar attitudes could be applied to issues surrounding the treatment and actions of Aboriginal people.

(ACELR006) (ACELR007)