

University of the Sunshine Coast

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Voicing the dead

Biographical note:

Gary Crew is Associate Professor (Creative Writing) at the University of the Sunshine Coast, Maroochydore, Queensland. First published internationally in 1986 (*The Inner Circle*), Gary has continued to write over a broad range of genre from illustrated books to creative non-fiction, addressing audiences from children to adults. Four times winner of the Australian Children's Book of the Year, his multi-award winning work is published throughout the world.

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Creative writing – fictocriticism – post-colonialism – young adult literature

1

You ask, ‘Can the dead speak?’

I answer, ‘Is this blood that runs in my veins, or ink?’

You ask, ‘Are you a creature of flesh, or a character in fiction?’

I answer, ‘I am real enough. I call myself Jack Ireland. I am sixteen years old. A century ago I sailed the South Seas. I lived then, I live now.’

You ask, ‘So is this History?’

I answer, ‘If it bores you, shut the book – but you will not silence my voice. After all that I have suffered, it is impossible to destroy me. So I ask that you read me. I ask that you hear me. See me. Touch me. Others have, and tasted my blood...’

You ask, ‘Yet you still live?’

I answer, ‘Ask no more. Read...’

Over the years, many words have been written about me; of the life I have lived, the horrors of my suffering. I have also penned an autobiography, and seen it published – but my tale is not truly told. My editor, a certain Mr Thomas Teller (I tell no lie), refused to use my preferred name on the title page. Mr Teller called my book:

The Shipwrecked Orphans:

A True Narrative of the Shipwreck and Sufferings of John Ireland and William D’Oyley Who Were Shipwrecked in the Ship Charles Eaton on an Island in the South Seas.

By John Ireland.

S Babcock, Publisher, Chapel Street. New Haven. 1845.

What a mouthful that is, and so much of it *nice* and *proper* as Mr Teller thought that the life of an orphan should be in those times. Because Mr Teller did not simply edit my story (my life!), he took over; he left out the head hunters; the head hunters who captured us. Nor did he let me have my say. He would not let me use my own words – my own voice – as he admits in the preface:

The Narrative was written by one of the Orphans, John Ireland [John, not Jack!], and I give it to you in nearly his own words—[*Nearly, note!* *Nearly!*]—having made few alterations—[*Few? Few? Try hundreds. Try Thousands!*]—in the style in which he tells the story of his sufferings.
(Ireland 1845: 3)

Many lies have been told about me, and not just by Mr Teller. So much of what is written – entries in ships’ logs, stories in newspapers, novels and even history books –

is so far from the truth that I need to correct it; I need to recreate my life in ink so that you might read me. Only then will you hear my voice.

And not *my* voice only; as Mr Teller has (truly) writ, because I did not suffer alone. You will also read of little William D’Oyley – a toddler, captured with me – who was orphaned before our eyes. He being younger, poor wretch, is more to be pitied.

So, in answer to your question, ‘Can the dead speak?’ – and I thank you for your patience – I am obliged to ask: How can I be dead if you are hearing my voice? Try to understand: I do not live by blood – I have seen enough of that – I live through story. Wherever and whenever humankind has dipped a pen (or a feather, or a finger) in ink, or paint, or tar, or lifted a voice to narrate a tale in song or saga, I am enlivened. I ask, then, that you hear my tale: the truth of it, the horror; the pity. But for my voice to be truly heard, all that has been told of the events of my life must be reconsidered; recreated and recounted. Only when I tell my own tale, only when I am truly voiced, do I live.

2

For all of *The Shipwrecked Orphans* failings as an autobiography, Mr Thomas Teller saw fit to include it in a series entitled *Teller’s Tales*. Since readers of the Victorian era loved to Romanticise on the woes of orphans, *Teller’s Tales* was riddled with them. While the works of Mr Teller are not my favourite read, I am fortunate that I have access to many books – almost every book ever published, in fact – by means of an extraordinary ability (a ‘literary gift’, shall we call it?) which I will attempt to explain later in my story. By means of this gift, I have read widely on the fate of my own kind – the Victorian orphan:

Orphanhood was not uncommon in the nineteenth century because of the shorter life expectancy, and especially because of the frequent deaths in childbirth... But while orphans might wander the streets unheeded, or labour long hours in mines or factories without attention, in Victorian Literature they were used to evoke sympathetic audience responses (Reed 1975: 252).

Both in real life and fiction (sometimes there is little difference), Victorian orphans were often considered sub-human, invisible to proper society. Charles Dickens’ orphaned central character in *David Copperfield* (1850) is sent to school wearing a sign that declares, ‘Take care of him. He bites...’, which causes young Copperfield to believe he is a dog. Charlotte Bronte’s orphan *Jane Eyre* (1847) is inhumanely termed ‘A liar’ rather than being praised for her scholarship, and in *Wuthering Heights* (1847) Emily Bronte’s gypsy foundling Heathcliffe is referred to as ‘it’, as if he were an object, not a human being.

I mention these things for two reasons:

- (1) I am an orphan myself and
- (2) since my voice is enlivened by story rather than blood (You asked, ‘Are you a creature of flesh or a character in fiction?’ and now I am answering), you need to know that I move easily through time, and place, and narrative; but, to tell the

truth, I have no memory (should I call that ‘back-story’?) of any persons (should I call them ‘characters’?) or any place (should I call that ‘setting’?) previous to my boarding the ill-fated *Charles Eaton* on 28 September, 1833.

And so, all things considered, let me begin there, on the London docks, at that very date, because that is both where and when my life, my story, truly begins.

You ask, ‘Are you making this up? Is this some monstrous work of fiction, like Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, or yet another blood-lust saga by Stephanie Myer?’

Since I am familiar with the works of both authors, I truthfully answer, ‘Indeed, it is not.’

This narrative faithfully recounts the dreadful circumstances occurring to human beings not that different from yourself. If you don’t believe me, read Jordan Goodman’s account of the voyage of *The Rattlesnake* (Faber; 2005), the British vessel which rescued me from the head hunters. Goodman cites the exact words of Lewis, *The Rattlesnake*’s captain:

I found the skulls of the unfortunate people on the middle of the island...
These heads of different people were placed round like the figure of a man, and painted with ochre. I observed long sandy hair on one of the skulls, also great marks of violence on them. Having satisfied myself of the truth of this detail, I at the same time conveyed the skulls on board...
(Lewis in Goodman 2005: 7)

Now since I was there, and saw all of this – in fact, little William D’Oyley and I lived with the islanders for three years, from 1833 until 1836 – you might also check the accuracy of my story as quoted in *The Times* of London for December 1836 and August 1837 – copies are available through any decent library. There you will read my very words; you will hear my voice. I was interviewed; I appeared in court; I was quite the celebrity – while still no more than a teenager: a teenager who had been around, mind you; who had shaped history; who had stories to tell ...

Ah! I see you shake your head. I hear you groan, ‘I knew this was History,’ but it’s story first: a life story. My life story. And ‘Life’, as Virginia Woolf so aptly states, ‘is the only fit subject for a novelist ...’ Which leads me to wonder: Is that what I am? Or am I the novel itself? (I have enough bloody story in me – that’s for certain!)

I mention this conflict between story and history because, as opposed to story, in the nineteenth century (the time of my beginnings) the ‘common sense’ view of history was that the discipline consisted of:

a corpus of ascertained facts. The facts are available to the historian in documents, inscriptions, and so on, like fish on the fishmonger’s slab. The historian collects them, takes them home, and cooks and serves them up in whatever style appeals to him.
(Carr 1961: 6)

Indeed, in *The Cambridge Modern History: Its Origin, Authorship and Production*, one authority declares that through understanding history, we can: ‘show the point we

have reached on the road from one to another, now that all information is within reach, and every problem has become capable of solution' (Acton in Carr 1961: 3).

But my life is not made up of 'facts'. It is a combination of emotions, senses, longings and fears (oh, plenty of them...), among other sensations and experiences, none of which can be pinned down on a slab and called 'a fact'. Nor is history a 'road' (that is poetic license), and what's more, many people (head hunters included) never recorded 'information' (as Acton suggests 'all information is within reach ...') or, for that matter, did they make any attempt to bring 'all information ... within reach' of the world in general; nor, for most of history, did women and children have that chance; nor orphans, nor anybody else who was ignored or silenced by the powers of their time. So how can the voices of those who have been 'silenced' be heard? How can their stories be told?

I am on the side of Professor Greg Dening, who suggests:

If the texts of the past are mountainously high, the silences in them are unfathomably deep: silences of pain, and of happiness for that matter, silences of fear; silences of exclusion... Imagination is hearing the silence because we have heard some of the sound around it. Imagination is seeing the absent things because we have seen so much around it... Imagination humbles the author in any of us to accept what we cannot know or cannot say (Dening 1998: 210-11).

Oh dear! What a far cry that statement is from Acton's claim that through a knowledge of history, 'every problem has become capable of solution'. Which leads me to admit: they *were* head hunters who captured us, never doubt it. They *were* bloody murderers, clubbing young D'Oyley's mother, father and nurse as well as Captain Moore and my friend, Mr Clare. Oh yes. They killed them all right – beheaded them too – but who will speak up for head hunters? They have no paper, no pens, no ink, no weighty books to record their tale. Indeed, like so many others ostracised by society, their voices are lost in the silence of time – so they remain damned in their savagery: the doomed of History. Dreadful as the murderous scene was – William and I were there – we saw the killers' terror, their horror at the sight of our white skin, our blue eyes, our yellow hair, our wrinkled cotton hose (*Is that skin?* they wondered), our leather shoes (*Are they feet, all black and shining?* they wondered) and, like us, they were afraid. Who (or what?) were these alien creatures? These pale gods? These ghosts, returned from the dead?

Remember, as Mr Teller rightly says, we British were the visitors in those South Seas. These islanders did not come hawking their clubs and machetes through Sydney Heads, nor paddle their war canoes up the cold, grey Thames. No, indeed, we were the intruders in their world. We were the threat they responded to. But then, is murder ever justified? Is massacre ever right? Threat we may have been, but *dangerous*? We meant no harm. Not then, anyway...

And so, having both seen and suffered, it is my belief that if I am to tell my tale in truth, I must give voice to *all* the dead. And if you will hear me, I shall...

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Research statement

Research background

The barque *Charles Eaton* was wrecked in the Coral Sea in 1833. Ion Idriess fictionalised the aftermath of this wreck in *Headhunters of the Coral Sea* (1940). Although he cites three historical sources for this novel, Idriess makes no reference to the account of the wreck provided by the surviving ship's boy, Jack Ireland (1845). Presumably, this is because Ireland's more obscure illustrated children's novella has only recently become available (online). In responding to Ireland's account, the accompanying extract from the original young adult novel, *Voicing the dead*, is intended to bring an appreciation of post-colonial themes to the attention of youth through the medium of fictocriticism.

Research contribution

Voicing the dead creatively investigates the fate of the *Charles Eaton* through a fictocritical interrogation of Jack Ireland's personal narrative and numerous nonfiction sources pertinent to Post-colonialism. The intention is to expose a youth readership to a new form of novel while alerting them to the insidious, all-pervading power of a patriarchal Empire.

Research significance

The 70,000 word novel *Voicing the dead* is a unique contribution to literature, in that the fictocritical novel has made no previous inroads into the Young Adult market. *Voicing the Dead* is contracted to Ford St Publishers (Melbourne).

Works cited

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