



**What inspired the idea of what is basically an old-fashioned, grand epic novel of the sea and colonial battles?**

My first interest was in the craziness of the Victorian British mind. I had written about Victorians being disastrously wrong-headed at home (in London) and so it seemed only right to look at them being disastrously wrong-headed overseas. Their record in Tasmania seemed especially atrocious, so that seemed the right place to start.

And when I was a boy I read a good deal of the C.S. Forrester *Hornblower* novels, which I very much liked, and I'm sure that helped get me interested.

**What inspired you to try to write a novel in more than twenty different voices? And how did it go once you started?**

I thought it would be exciting, and it was. In the past I'd written novels which followed one main character throughout, and I found it very liberating to be able to jump from one scene and set of characters to another. I especially liked the fact that I never needed to put in a scene unless it was important. If you're always following one character your options are far more limited. The voices never drove me mad. It took a little while to get each started, but once they were set it seemed surprisingly easy.

**Can you tell us something about the mechanics of juggling all those voices? Did you write the book chronologically, or character by character? And how much effort went in to making each voice distinct?**

I wrote the book entirely chronologically. I was very concerned to make the voices seem as distinct as possible, and to help with this I built up lists of words and phrases on my computer that each used. For the Manx I kept on going through a fine old book called 'Dictionary of the Anglo-Manx dialect' which had some wonderfully rich sayings. For Peevay I looked at the one surviving dictionary of the Tasmanian aboriginals, then mixed in Victorianisms, a few swear words, and any metaphors that I felt he might have come up with from the natural world he knew.

The second I sat down to begin the Potter character I knew he'd write in notes.

My favourite voice to write in was [Captain Illiam Quilliam] Kewley, I think because I loved getting back into the Manxisms. But I liked them all.

**Peevay's voice emerges as the strongest simply because of its uniqueness, but there's something of a line of explanation at the beginning of the book of its lack of specific inauthenticity. Why did you think that was necessary?**

That note was written with Australia in mind. I'd had some feedback from Australian friends who pointed out that Peevay sounded very different from the mainland aboriginal style of

speaking English of today. That was fine by me--I wanted Peevay to sound quite different, as he came from another place and time--but I felt it was important to clarify the matter.

**Despite "the storm of voices" the narrative of the book is never confusing. Did that take a lot of work to pull off?**

The book took six years in all. First a year and a half reading and researching, in Oxford, Tasmania and the Isle of Man. Then a long time trying to digest all this research and work out what to do with it. The actual writing took about three years, and I estimate I revised and re-wrote every page at least nine times. I knew from the start that it was going to be complicated, just from the number of characters, elements and different time periods, so it was my chief concern to keep everything as clear and simple as I could.

**What drew you to the story of the colonization of Tasmania?**

I do a lot of travelling, and took myself off to South America to try and think of a subject for a novel. Sitting on a Chilean bus I remembered--for no reason I can understand--a TV documentary about the Tasmanian aboriginals that I'd seen when I was a boy aged eight, which had struck me very powerfully at the time, though I'd hardly thought of it since.

**What inspired Geoffrey Wilson's fantasies about finding Eden there? Is he based on a specific historical model? Are any or all of the characters?**

Geoffrey Wilson's expedition was the very last part of the pattern to fall into place. I heard something on the radio here about crazy Victorian religious ideas and something clicked. I spent a few days in the Bodleian library here looking at religious pamphlets from the time, and one was a mighty attack on the wicked claims of false geologists. Then I remembered that there were all manner of theories at that time as to where the Garden of Eden might lie.

A few of the characters are based on actual people of the time, including the various governors and their wives, the fearsome aboriginal warrior woman 'Mother' (her real name was Walyer), the self-appointed saviour of the aboriginals Robson (who did so much to destroy them), and the aboriginal child George Vandiemer who was taken to England to be educated. Some of Potter's ideas are loosely based on those of the racist writer Robert Knox, but his character is entirely invented, as are Peevay, Renshaw, Geoffrey Wilson and the Manxmen.

**So have you been to Tasmania?**

I'd never been to Tasmania till I researched this book, when I spent a few wonderful weeks there, reading in the Hobart library, walking across the mountains of the center and visiting the vital places, such as Flinders Island. It's a beautiful place, as big as Ireland, with the highest mountains in Australia, and some magnificent bush trails and wild shorelines. It also has some of the world's least-touched wilderness. I'd strongly recommend a visit to anyone who likes nature--and strange, bounding animals--though make sure you go in summer. In the mountains the climate can be as windy and rainy as Scotland.

**At the end of the book there is an Anglo-Manx glossary, though the meanings of all the Manx words in the books are clear from context. At the beginning of the glossary you allude to efforts to revive Manx Gaelic in Manx schools. What do you think of that effort? And what drew you to the Manx dialect?**

I think it's marvelous that there's a real attempt to revive Manx Gaelic. It will be hard now--the last natural Manx speaker died in the 1970s--but it's well worth doing. I'm fascinated by languages, and feel very sad that so many are presently disappearing. In some ways it seems almost like the loss of biodiversity. After all a language contains not just another set of words but another way of thinking, and will frequently contain notions that are untranslatable into any other tongue, because they contain a unique way of seeing the world.

The Anglo-Manx dialect was the version of English that the Manx came up with. It's often a direct translation from the Gaelic, which gives it a strange richness and ability to surprise. The Manx wouldn't say 'he has a new house' but 'there's a new house at him'. Their dialect was peppered with words about supersition, ghosts and ogres, fishing and the sea, and the more I learned the more I felt I was getting closer to this largely vanished culture.

**What's next for you?**

Something to do with Marxism. Having looked at dangerously misguided notions of the nineteenth century it seems tempting to do the same for something more recent.

*interview by Sean McDonald*