

# THOMAS KENEALLY AND THE WAR ON THE BALCANS

**Eckhard Breitinger**

University of Bayreuth, Germany

Boyd Tonkin critically remarked in his recent article “Does Britain’s Europe Stop at the Oder?” (Tonkin 2007) the reluctance in British literary circles to recognise and critically appreciate the writings and writers from East Central European countries. The relatively low level of translations on the British (and American) book market, particularly compared to the 40% plus translation rates on the Scandinavian book market, extends even more drastically to the literatures of the Baltic states or in the South Eastern European languages. Reinier Salverda’s “Multilingual London and its Literatures” (Salverda 2007) surveyed the changes in the typical London immigrant constituencies since the 1990s. Formerly, distinctive immigrant milieus originated mainly from Commonwealth countries, first from Ireland, then the Caribbean, West Africa, Pakistan, India and Hongkong. Hammersmith had always been the centre of the Polish immigrant community of London. In the pre-1990s, it was mainly grey-haired couples who met on Sunday afternoons at the Polish Club or the Polish Cinema, exchanging gallantly welcoming hand-kisses, dancing waltzes and Polkas. Today, young people are running most of the shops in the area and Polish is heard distinctly in the streets of Hammersmith. Boyd Tonkin and Reinier Salverda thus demarcate two distinct areas in the cultural and social interaction within the globalised British society: 1. The reception – or rather the lack thereof – of literary representations of Central and Eastern Europe as written on their home turf. 2. The genesis and further development of diasporic communities in Britain, and London in particular and how these diasporic experiences are articulated.

In the literary production, British-Continental relationships developed along three major lines of thematic and spacial issues. 1. There is a rather slim tradition of British writers, setting their narratives and plays in continental East Central European localities, within specific historical contexts – the wars on the Balkans. After the patriotic poetry (e.g. *The Charge of the Light Brigade*) connected to the Crimean War, the anglo-Irish dramatist Bernard Shaw provided an early example with his comedy *Men at Arms*, a satire on foreign military advisors intervening in the Balkan

Wars at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Thomas Keneally, with whom we will deal here in more detail, an Australian writer of catholic Irish stock, embarked preferably on the treatment of “foreign” settings and “other” historical contexts from medieval France to World War II Europe. It could well be argued that his colonial background, his mixed ancestry, could explain his perceptiveness for the intricacies of foreign cultural milieus, as compared to the near total abstinence of other British writers. They seemed to prefer the Grand Tour landscapes of Italy, mediterranean island lore and the “Near East” (from the perspective of London) orientalist picturesque.

No matter how sympathetic or empathetic, Keneally strives to respond to his foreign milieus, his view is distinctly that of the outsider looking in to the Central European milieu. At the same time, Keneally is reflecting a specific Australian orientation by referring to the common view, that one “could only get perspective on Australia by seeing it from the outside.” Keneally describes his historical novels with a European (or African) setting as “literary overseas trips” (Hergehan 1986, 455).

2. The second line follows the depiction of diasporic communities scrutinized by British writers. Here again, Keneally provides a prime example with his novel *A Family Madness* (1986) which describes the endeavours of a Belo-Russian family to make ends meet in Sydney and accommodate to their new immigrant status in increasingly xenophobe Australia. Combining a narrative line set in Europe during World War II with an Australian setting of the 1980s, Keneally illustrates once more his concept of linking history with the present (Petersson 1989, 168).

3. We find the description of diasporic communities as experienced by immigrants or, at least, descendents of immigrant families. This is the case of Marina Lewycka and her prize winning novel *A Short History of Tractors in Ukrainian* (2005) (Reviews by Koning 2005, Perrik 2005 and Moss 2007). Marina Lewycka was born in a DP (Displaced Persons) camp in Germany to forced labour Ukrainian parents. From there, the family migrated to Britain in the late 1940s. Due to her mixed background as a genetically Ukrainian, but educationally pure British, she strongly modifies the contrastive “us” and “them” attitude of other diasporic narratives. Nadeshda, the first person narrator, observes and describes her father Nikolaij Mayevskyj very much from a British point of view. Although Nikolaij came to Britain more than forty years ago, he does not seem to have arrived culturally and socially. He seems to relate to his British environment in Peterborough mainly through the Ukrainian Club. Particularly since the death of his wife, his nostalgic feeling for his Ukrainian heritage strengthened and thus he falls an easy prey to the temptations of the economic refugee Valentina. Marina Lewycka creates a layered system of perspectives that builds on emotional closeness and intellectual difference. In the plausible attempt to

protect her father against Valentina, Nadeshda learns more about the traumatic and comic episodes in the family history, events and traumas that had never been talked about. Her relationship to her father matures during that family crisis. Her father as long time resident in Britain, occupies an intermediate position in relation to the rapacious attitudes of Valentina. He seems to understand her consumerist excesses and appreciates her emotional exuberance. Valentina's perspective of British society is determined by her long material impoverishment and deprivation back in Ukraine. In all, Marina Lewycka presents us with an inside perspective of the Ukrainian community, but significantly modified by the educational acculturation of the second generation immigrant.

Thomas Keneally became first known as a writer of Australian historical fiction (*Bring Larks and Heroes* and *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith*). He focusses on plebeian heroes who are not really the makers of history. On the contrary, they are the ones who are victimised by historical and social forces. Who can never be really masters of their own fate, much less can they master the forces of history (Breitinger 1976, 16). "Keneally does focus on victims rather than heroes" (Quatermain 1991. 75). In his often quoted interview-article "Doing Research for Historical Novels" Keneally spells out his concept of writing about historical situations and settings:

If you are writing fiction you have two attitudes to history. You wish either to point out the quaintness or exotic quality of a time past – to create a sort of travelogue to another time having little relevance to ours; or else you want to find evidence in earlier events for the kind of society we have now, wishing to tell a parable about the present by using the past. I attempt the latter. (Keneally 1975).

But in the same essay, Keneally also speaks about "the perilous moment in which we live", about the uncertainties of the present and the greater assurance of the past, which historians have already "reduced to some understandable unity for us" (Buckridge, 1990.443). His sense of the past avoids epistemological pitfalls in favour of narratological structure: the past is merely "the present rendered fabulous" (English 1987, 162.)

In his short author's note to *Season in Purgatory* (1976) Thomas Keneally assures his readers that "this mere narrative derives from real events that occurred off the Dalmatian coast in 1943 and 1944. However, the characters - with the exception of Tito himself – are entirely fictional..." (Keneally 1976). Five years later in *Schindler's Arc*, he approached a similar situation "which straddles the genres of fiction and

documentary” (Quatermain 1991, 8) quite differently.

I have attempted to avoid all fiction...since fiction would debase the record (Schindler's Arc, 1982, VII).

Although Keneally never mentions it, the allusion to Dante's *Purgatorio* is only too obvious and readers might also discover parallels to the other post-colonial saga of World War II in the mediterranean war theatre, Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*. Keneally tells the story of the young and ambitious medical doctor (27 years old) David Pelham from North Wales who starts out assisting old and distinguished members of the College of Surgeons in a field hospital in Bari/ Souther Italy. As the war front moves North and the hospital reverts to treating “civilian” ailments, David Pelham volunteers for another assignment. He wants “lots of cutting experience” (11). He becomes part of Force 147 under the Foreign Office (and Secret Service); he is flown into Bosnia, together with his orderly Fielding, a teacher, and the Irish petty criminal and alcoholic Cleary, with a very basic supply in medicine and medical equipment. He passes through the secret headquarters of General Tito, the commander of the Yugoslav partisan army, marched down to the Dalmatian coast from where he is ferried across to the island of Mus. With the help of Moja Javich, a trained doctor, member and well connected officer in the Partisan movement (and army), and an ingenious organiser, Pelham manages to establish a reasonably well-functioning hospital in an old aristocratic mansion. Through black market deals (army boots for drugs), diverting of supplies meant for the partisans or the British commandos (under the army), or outright looting, Pelham and his crew manage to have their clinic reasonably well supplied. Moja Javich's major achievement in this moonlight trading is the acquisition of an ex-ray machine for the hospital.

Keneally classifies the social environment in and around the hospital on the island of Mus in that unusual guerrilla war situation according to typical dominant and domineering structures. Pelham's superior in Italy, Twinkum Rankin, the apparently easy going Secret Service intellectual, Major (soon Brigadier) Southey, commander of the dare-devil commando fighter on the island, the Polit Commissar in charge of the Party and the Partisan army, and then, of course the mixed crew of the medical staff, all of them having their specific code of behaviour, their specific class, professional and national consciousness. Cleary represents the typical English working class attitude to foreigners, when he discovers that the Partisans chose a strategically ideal position for their camp: “...you always get a shock when furriners work these things out for themselves...” (26). The Force 147 elitists hold that “..if you had emerged from the Eton-Harrow-Rugby-Marlborough-Winchester axis” (38), you are prepared for all the vicissitudes in life, even those in wartime Yugoslavia. The

Commando fighters are convinced that the Yugoslavs "... are more like bloody savages, aren't they" (59). The Partisans themselves are highly suspicious of the in their opinion lecherous British, and pursue a strict and brutal moral code. In the warning words of Twinkum "...if a British soldier or any one else is found...in *commerce* with a Partisan woman, he is simply shot. They are quick on the draw when it comes to chastity" (15). Keneally touches on several incidents where culprits, i.e. mere suspects of having had affairs with foreigners, are executed. The Partisans relent only once in the strictness of their "jurisdiction", when put under direct military pressure from the commando units: They release the foreign culprit, an Australian fighter pilot stranded on the island after an emergency landing, but on the condition that he and the entire British crew have to watch the execution of the Yugoslav girl. David Pelham himself, who allows himself to be drawn into an affair with Moja Javich, thirteen years his senior, is part of this tense relationship with the Partisan authorities, and fully aware of the risk he runs.

David Pelham as the liberal intellectual, attempts to sublimate what he perceives as the archaic base of Yugoslav society and interprets it as the survival of old oriental myths and beliefs. Mjoa Javich explains to him the rituals practiced at the Mithra temple, the major tourist attraction of Jajce: "When you were initiated, a bull was slaughtered on a grill above your head: You were showered by his blood...his bone marrow pored on you. They believed that from this blood and bone marrow came the grape and the grain....there was only life if blood flowed." (47) Initiation into adult life was thus connected with the spilling of blood, with violence. Pelham saw the same connections also in other celebrations, e.g. when he visits the first Partisan hospital still on the mainland. He feels overwhelmed by the presence of death as essence of a hospital. And the celebration, the revelries of the hospital staff on the occasion of his visit, does not really dispel this feeling: Witnessing the drinking and dancing, Pelham concluded that "there would always be plenty of wine in Yugoslavia...blood and wine...were national products" (37). David Pelham thus expresses his "ethnographic" perceptions that violence dominates the life of Yugoslavs, but it is part and parcel of life. No life without violence, no wine and celebration without the spilling of blood and the administering of death. The daily routine in the hospital seems to follow that very same principle. Here too, the medical staff and the nurses fight an almost ritualised battle between life and death (Ken Goodwin sees the island of Mus as a place of blood sacrifice, Goodwin 2002, 235).

The world that Thomas Keneally describes in *Season in Purgatory*, the hospital, the Partisan army, the harbour, it is all a man's world. With the two British institutions, the Force 147 and the Army Commandos, it is clear that they are entirely male

institutions. Females come in as secretaries or switch board operators and the like. Women are not credited with "speaking roles" in that set-up. Whatever we read is male articulation on women, not self-articulation by women. And the talk about women is sexist, racist, xenophobic or at least cherishing xenophobic stereotypes. E.g. the polyglot nurse Suza is described as follows: "She was very much Slav. Pretty, with a trace of heaviness around the shoulders and breasts, a promise of middle aged poundage." (65) The ethnic, the sexual, the age stereotype are all there within a single line. The British doctors, orderlies, commanders and commandos comment on the looks, the faces, figures, dress of the Yugoslav "girls" – they perceive the surface, the exterior, above all the bodies. The Partisan authorities, on the other hand, execute complete control over the female bodies. Again, Keneally gives the readers only the assessments by the British. We hardly ever hear or see genuine self articulation of the Partisan movement, but we learn how rigorously they execute offenders. Brigadier Southey comments on the Partisans' sexual code:

If you bastards are found aboard a Partizanka, there is nothing I can do for you. Twelve inches from mons veneris, you leave the benign territory of King's regulations, and come under Partisan law. (74)

Southey is of course only concerned with what this means for "his boys". That this means total control over the female members of the Partisan army, or even any female within the reach of Partisan jurisdiction, does not really touch him. But the Partisans' apparent cruelty adds to the general attitude of condescension and even disdain of the Brits for their Partisan allies.

With the prohibition of sex, particularly with foreigners, the Partisans have gained total control over the bodies of the Partisan women, certainly as far as social functions are concerned. But the strain of the life as a Partisan fighter, living in constant fear of being killed, wounded, or worst, captured by the Germans, leads to a physical reaction of the Partisans' women bodies. Attending to out-patients, David Pelham found that many of the women fighters had ceased to menstruate, were suffering amenorrhea (Pierce 1986, 446). In typical scientific attitude, Pelham considers for a moment, whether he should write an article about this phenomenon of the "women carrying weapons on Mus who did not bleed. Savage and not caressing, killing and not bleeding" (80/81) for the British Medical Association (80). But Moja's explanation throws a different, almost existentialist light on the fate of these women:

There are hundreds of these poor things on this island, you know. Hundreds of Partisan women bearing arms. They all suffer from it. Some of them think they're pregnant, others that they're witches. In neither case are they right.

(80).

Thus, beyond the rules and taboos set by the Partisan commanders, nature reclaimed control over the bodies of the fighting women. While the partisans might have succeeded in turning the women into veritable fighting machines (Pelham witnessed an attack of a women's battalion with three-to-one losses), nature stripped those fighters of their biological womanhood. War thus upset not only the social fabric, it also suspended biological/physiological conditions of human life. With the Partisan fighters, the women who no longer give life, but who kill and take life, Keneally addresses the issue of the role of women in times of crises from an apparently patriarchal perspective. Women give birth, they do not mete out death, as the partisans do. Frances McInhery sees Keneally's concept of women as offensively reductionist. Beginning with Joan of Arc in *Blood Red*, Sister Rose Keneally describes women in purely biological terminology with the womb and menstruating blood as essentials. "Keneally seems to be returning to the very basis of the patriarchal myths of Woman and the belief that "menstrual blood represents the essence of femininity" (McInhery 1981, 253).

Women are accorded their own stories, but only in a disturbingly oblique and opaque manner. Practically all the women in Yugoslavia have their own story, but they are only mentioned, referred to, cited, but never really told, and certainly not told by the women themselves. Tony Kallich, who had formerly run a grocery store in Cleveland before coming back to Yugoslavia, records how his family's was extinguished: "... everyone in the Partisans has a story like that. That is no big-time story, except to me." (28) Pelham's nurse Suza also "had some terrible history...father eviscerated, brothers and sisters shot...something like that. As Moja said, one got the stories mixed in Yugoslavia" (76). This three line summary of Suza's story, if that's what it really is - suggests rape, murder, arson, violence – and above all victimhood. But it does not really spell out what exactly happened when, where, or how, and the summarised short version is particularly silent about who were the perpetrators. The first guess is of course the German or Italian soldiers, but it could also be an internal strife between Serb Chetniks and Croat Ustasha, between royalists and communists. The stories waver between individual and collective victimhood. Suza was subjected to violence, but so were many others. Suza's story is personal, individual, but also general and even universal, a story that could stand for hundreds of other individuals. Again, what speaks out is not conveyed by the content nature of the story, but by the attitude in which the story is told.

Again, Moja Javich presents an exceptional case. She tells her story herself and admits that her story is the story of a thousand of others. "Don't ask for the story: It's

the standard Yugoslav one and you'd get the details mixed up with the stories of other people. And I would like that the death of Marko Javich should **not** get mixed up with that of other people" (55). But Moja completely appropriates her own story entirely for herself and turned it into a psychological source from which she can derive the strength and determination of her personal survival strategy.

Partisan women and their stories as stories on Yugoslavia in general fit into the overall pattern of Keneally's novel, his view of Balkan war history as a medico-pathological account, but also as a psycho-pathological record. The Partisan women's stories as individual traumatic experiences serve to explain the traumatized condition of these women as individuals in the narrative present. Traumatic experiences in the past as universal or generic Yugoslav experience serves to explain the traumatized condition of Yugoslav society in general. David Pelham implicitly diagnosed this psychic conditions and sees himself confirmed when he witnesses, what he perceives as "atavistic" behaviour, e.g. when fatally wounded Partisan fighter are brought to the operation theatre and still cling to their vintage Enfields or won't let go their AK 47s even when put on the operation table. This expresses their archaic warrior psyche (154).

Keneally furnished David Pelham with a myriad of endearing and admirable qualities. He is a non-hierarchical, cooperative leader of his team, he is attentive to the needs of his staff, dedicated to the suffering of his patients, a gifted surgeon and an unrelenting, untiring operator. On three occasions, when his hospital was inundated with the wounded of major Partisan raids or German reprisals, he had operated non-stop for three days and nights until he literally collapsed physically. Particularly his last achievement during the landing on the island of Brac – a relief manoeuvre to allow Tito to escape from his mountain retreat – elevated Pelham almost to the status of a saint. He landed on the beach together with the fighters, set up a hospital in a farmhouse, kept operating under most primitive and testing conditions and only left the island with the last of the remaining troops, only to continue attending to the more serious cases, that he had sent "home" to the hospital on Mus. For this achievement he is honoured by Tito himself, who comes round to the hospital that is still crowded by the wounded of the Brac expedition. Kallich, the former grocery shop owner from Cleveland, translates for Pelham: "The Marshall says that you have shown yourself a true Partisan. He says that the wounded here have saved Tito, but brave Dr. Pelham saved them." (202)

Keneally allows quite a bit of hero worshipping for David Pelham. Above all, Pelham monopolises the entire narrative. His view, his perspective dominates throughout. The war in Yugoslavia is seen exclusively from Pelham's operating table. We don't



encounter heroic battle scenes or glorious fighting, we only see the victims of war that are brought to the hospital, have shell fragments or bullets extracted, limbs amputated, burns treated, eyes removed, haemorrhages stopped, morphine administered to alleviate the remaining hours in the life of a deadly wounded. David Pelham appears to appreciate the major achievements of his team, mainly improvisational achievements. Cleary, the Irishman succeeds to reanimate a dead generator and can thus provide the hospital, the operation theatre with electricity, with light and refrigerator facilities. True, the machine does not run entirely perfect, and Cleary must sit by the generator and control the throttle with a spanner while it is running, but electricity definitely boosts the medical performance of Pelham and his team. Equally ingenious is the solution to the notorious shortage in plasma. Dunga, who assists the cook Magda with the housekeeping, manages to construct a sucking device that with syringes and rubber devices (normally used for fruit preservation) allows that blood donations can be collected in the sterilized wine bottles that were found in the wine cellar which also serves for cooling the blood conserves. In a way, Pelham seems to be proud of the ingenuity of his staff, but somehow he seems to be dissatisfied that he has to accept these sub-standard devices. For him that is Irish farm engineering and Serb horse doctoring. What irritates most is that Pelham's dissatisfaction seems to spring from his ethnic stereotypes/ viz. prejudices.

David Pelham never allowed to become really close and familiar with the Partisans, he always kept his clinical distance, always looked at them as patients, objects of medical or psychoanalytical scrutinization. On arrival in Bosnia, before ferrying across to the island of Mus, he witnessed the Partisans preparing for a raid: They drink voraciously, they dance, they sing, preparing themselves for death on the battlefield seems like a big bacchanal, an orgiastic celebration. After having tended the Partisans' wounds for nearly two years, David Pelham still wonders about

“...the battle drunkenness, the tribal hypnosis that came over the Partisans. They sang and strutted in the manner of Zulus. To back their hysteria, they captured Italian artillery and had trained gunners. When they attacked the fortifications of such towns as Polace, Blato, Babino, Sovra, it seemed they did not believe in the fire their enemy threw on them. There was no pausing, there was no taking cover, there was no sheltering in the hollows of the earth...” (153)

Pelham would certainly not admit or even realise his racial and class prejudices. Keneally leaves it to the orderly Fielding, a schoolteacher in civilian life, to really tell Pelham off:

To you the Yugoslavs are unwashed savages. They don't know to keep the score in tennis, do they, sir? You show no sense, no sense at all, that they are the future and you are a museum piece...

Your class, your bloody arrogant class, have oppressed half the world as well as ninety percent of the population of the British Isles. And though you have a proper contempt for all peasants and natives, you've never been beyond dallying with native women." (199)

The saviour of the Partisans is exposed as an arrogant and condescending racist. But David Pelham's real plunder, where character flaw deforms his heroic stature, is in his personal relation to Moja Javich. His class and sexual attitudes belie his hero status. Before David Pelham even seriously considers whether his relationship with Moja Javich could be formalised, or what Moja really means to him, he is overtaken by the rules and attitudes derived from his upper middle class background.

...it was also a rule of his class. One was not supposed to marry the natives. One could get away with marrying a Frenchwoman or a German, or even a certain kind of Spaniard. But to marry a Slav, and a Slav thirteen years his senior, disqualified you from the fashionable London medicine he had a mind to practice after the war. These were indecent and paltry considerations. But they counted for him. He could not help them counting. (124)

And again Pelham needs "the other" to really tell him how meanly he was failing Moja. She adequately reacts to David's half hearted proposal to marry her, by playing up the society game of "What will the neighbours say?"

She imitated a Belgravia drawl: "They'd all say, "Old Pelham, he married one of the wogs, didn't you hear?" (128)

In her unforgiving direct manner, Moja articulated what David Pelham really felt and thought and feared – socially. Thus, a closer look how David Pelham related to those closest to him, those emotionally attached to him behind the attachment to the admirable doctor, chef of the clinic, reveals a rather narrow minded Brit, encased in his class rules and routines, definitely a character seriously flawed. In this, David Pelham likens Oskar Schindler, the hero of Thomas Keneally's most successful novel *Schindler's Arc* (1982). Schindler, who rescued more than a thousand Jews, also has his other life as a womanizer, capitalist entrepreneur who liked to play with the fire of the SS and Nazi destruction machinery (Quatermain 1991, 67). In the epilogue, Keneally cites Schindler's widow, who deemed her husband to be an incidental, not a wilful and determined hero.

...she remarked that Oskar had done nothing astounding before the war and had been unexceptional since. He was fortunate therefore that in that short fierce era between 1939 and 1945 he met people who had summoned forth his deeper talents. (Epilogue)

David Pelham also became the hero who "saved the Partisans who saved Josip Tito" by coincidence, because he was bored with the hospital far behind the frontline, another of Keneally's flawed heroes (Quatermain, 1991.66)

Season in Purgatory has two endings: an open ending at the very end of the novel and a total closure – the death of Moja Javic – with which Keneally begins his narration thirty years after the actual end of the story (Rutherford, 212). Then, towards the end of the war in 1944, Moja had left the hospital on Mus to assume another assignment for the Partisan cause, this time with a Canadian medical doctor without saying good-bye to David Pelham. On the very occasion when Pelham was honoured by Marshall Tito for his dedication to the Partisan cause, a short note from Moja is handed to him. The letter contains a promise with the potential for a new opening. "If you promise to be sensible, I shall come and visit you in London" (204). The letter ends with a note of hope – a very broad and general hope: "We expect the Red Army....The horror will be over then. Moja Javich" (204). The horrors of war, the horrors of dealing with the victims of war in their hospital, that is what had brought Moja and David together and kept them together, at least for the time being. In a period of emotional stress, almost submerged in streams of blood, putrefaction, among the disasters of untimely deaths, amputation and mutilation, Moja and David had managed to carve out a tiny niche for a tiny bit of private happiness.

Then, thirty years later, Moja's promise comes true. She visits David Pelham in London, together with her son who runs a wine import in the city. But this meeting cannot hold what the separated lovers might have hoped for: Moja suffers from cancer in the final stage. David can only offer the type of medical attention that he had hated most during their days in the Mus hospital. Pain relief with a dose of morphin for the few remaining hours of Moja's life. Moja's death puts a definite end to the story of those two characters, so different in background and attitude, and yet attracted to each other beyond the shared experience of suffering. But her death revives again all those experiences since now Moja has at last become one of David's patients. This is certainly the last thing which Moja wanted ever to happen, but it closes the story and closes the circle that links the days of the war on the Balkans with the the present in the London of the 1970s.

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