A Companion to the Works of Kim Scott

Review by DAVID GUGIN

Wheeler, Belinda, ed. *A Companion to the Works of Kim Scott*. Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2016. 184 pages. $62.00.

In April 2017 I had the pleasure of attending the American Association of Australasian Literary Studies (AAALS) annual conference, held on the campus of Claflin University in Orangeburg, South Carolina. I was presenting a paper on the Australian Aboriginal writer Kim Scott's 2010 novel *That Deadman Dance*, a paper that would have been much more difficult to research and prepare if not for the fact that I had Belinda Wheeler's *A Companion to the Works of Kim Scott* close at hand. I had become familiar with Wheeler's editing skills when I reviewed for the *Pacific Asia Inquiry* her first contribution to the Camden House Companion Volumes, the 2013 *A Companion to Australian Aboriginal Literature*. What I liked most about that book is what I like most about this one, namely, its rhetorical flexibility, its appeal to and usefulness for a wide range of audiences – scholars, teachers, students, any reader really with an interest in the imagination and intellect of Kim Scott, who must certainly be considered a leading voice in both Australian and world literature. Until now, however, somewhat surprisingly, there had never been a collection of critical essays targeting (and connecting) the entire spectrum of his work. This *Companion* fills that gap. It is recommended reading.

An initial requirement for assembling any kind of focused anthology is knowing who and where the thinkers and writers are that can provide the most current, comprehensive coverage of the intended subject. As a longtime member of AAALS, Wheeler has the significant advantage of being at the center of a fertile network of informed scholars from various parts of the world. These contributors can then bring unique perspectives and emphases to their discussions and analyses of Scott's output, his poetry, short stories, novels and life writing, as well as his non-literary work with the Wirlomin Project, his long commitment to the preservation and revitalization of the Noongar language, culture and people. A case in point here is the Forward by Jeanine Leane. As a member of the Wiradjuri nation in southwest New South Wales, Australia, Leane is well-versed in what forms the underlying unifier of all of Scott's work, and thus the key to a full understanding of any of it, his Aboriginal insistence on the primacy of *country*, which she defines as a state of mind that "includes the memories of a people in a particular place past and present," a state of mind that also "connects to tangibles such as lands, waters, and the lives they sustain." When we read Scott then we are invited in to his Noongar *country*, an invitation that we as guests should privilege.

Preceded by a helpful, inclusive Chronology of Key Writings, beginning with his initial publication in 1985 and ending with his last, at the time, in 2015, Wheeler's Introduction illustrates how Scott's personal history (he was born in 1957, daughter of a white mother and an Aboriginal father) intersects in crucial ways with a significant moment in Australia's public history. In 1967, Aboriginals were allowed to participate for the first time in the national census, and in 1975 the federal parliament passed the Racial Discrimination Act, explicitly making illegal any ethnic- or race-based discrimination. Concurrently, the Australian white settler consciousness was finally beginning to confront what had been done to, and often supposedly for, Australia's indigenous people, including of course the Noongar, whose *country* can be found in the southwestern region of Western Australia. Wheeler notes that these developments paralleled Scott's by no means easy

or painless process of self-awareness, his discovery and eventual embrace of his Noongar identity. Without that journey of acceptance, it is hard to imagine how Scott would ever have achieved the literary stature and position he now holds, both inside and outside Australia. The influence of contemporary Australian history on Scott's life and work, the simultaneous influence of that life and work on Australian contemporary history is a fascinating example of the reciprocity inherent in the relationship between a creative artist and his or her specific social, political and cultural context, his or her historical moment. It is central to any appreciation of what Scott has accomplished.

Wheeler's *Companions* tend to be organized quite effectively. Readers can read them straight through, from chapter one to the end, or they can read the different chapters in any other kind of order, depending on their individual interests, without sacrificing the overall effect. Either way has value, though I typically prefer the former in order to maximize the benefits of a cumulative approach. This *Companion* begins with a provocative chapter by Per Henningsgaard discussing Scott's publishing history in each of its three overlapping contexts: Australian Aboriginal, Australian, and international. Such a discussion had not previously occurred, and Henningsgaard uses the considerable statistical data he has gathered from smaller Australian local or regional Aboriginal presses and larger, multinational publishing companies to suggest, among other things, that the traditional scholarly focus on Australian Aboriginal life writing may be misplaced, at least in Scott's case. The evidence indicates that most of the Australian Aboriginal texts being read and taught today, including Scott's, are novels and short story collections not life writing. In addition, they have been published by the larger multinationals not the local presses. Henningsgaard concludes, naturally enough, that literary scholars should take note, adjusting their methodologies accordingly.

Within the academy especially, the danger with indigenous writing is always territorial – the tendency to marginalize, even ghettoize it. In other words, "Yes, Kim Scott is a fine Aboriginal writer, but that's all he is. Go ahead and teach him over there, in that small room in the corner, but leave the real, serious literature to us, here, in the main room." This *Companion* does an excellent job of resisting that attitude, specifically in terms of Scott, but by extension to other Aboriginal writers. For example, in the second chapter, Brenda Machosky demonstrates how Scott's first novel, his 1993 *True Country*, although Aboriginal in content, also emerges out of and ultimately reshapes a time-honored genre in the Western literary tradition, the German *Bildungsroman*, a novel that addresses the formative years or spiritual education of its main character. Billy Storey, the protagonist of *True Country*, is searching for his identity in a mission in Western Australia, and, as Machosky convincingly argues, the result is an Aboriginal *Bildungsroman*: "An experience of acculturation, of development into the Aboriginal culture as it exists in modernity – marginalized, central, invisible, mysterious, powerful, welcoming." The larger point here is that the best Aboriginal literature must be viewed as original in the Eliotic sense. In *True Country* Scott is both writing within the Western tradition of the *Bildungsroman* and writing against it. By doing so, he rejects the marginalization of his Aboriginal identity.

In the third chapter, Lisa Slater offers a similar example of literary elevation, providing fresh insight into Scott's second novel, the 1999 *Benang*: *From the Heart*, one of his most popular books. Focusing on what she calls biopolitical spatiality, the intersections between place and space, Slater firmly locates *Benang* in the international postcolonial canon (and though not her main concern, within the growing body of eco-critical literature that also emphasizes those intersections). She shows how the text is structured by an oppositional relationship between white colonial notions of spatiality and indigenous anti-colonial notions. The competition then is

between a rhetorical stance that will acknowledge only uniformity – a single voice, a single speaking position, i.e, white settler – and one that insists on the recognition and validation of multiple voices and multiple speaking positions. For Slater, *Benang* is a stinging rebuke of eugenics and social Darwinism. Motivated by "the vitality and intensity of life," it is also a reminder that the Noongar and other Aboriginals were "not simply the before to European stories of progress and civilization." They cannot and will not be erased.

As Wheeler and others have discussed before, life writing remains a significant genre for almost all Aboriginal writers, because of its close connection to the oral tradition and its subsequent ability to occupy and complete the many blank spaces in Australian history resulting from the lengthy effort to essentially eliminate Aboriginals from historical accounts and narratives, indeed the entire historical record. As such, it still plays an important role in strengthening social health, in improving mutually beneficial communication between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples. In the fourth chapter, Christine Choo therefore focuses on Scott's 2005 *Kayang and Me*, a joint collaboration with Noongar Elder Aunty Hazel Brown. Choo explains why this project is central to Scott's career as a creative artist, since it "offers a key to understanding Scott's journey to his Noongar roots and contact with his extended family and community." As the title of her article indicates, and using *Kayang and Me* as her starting point, Choo also shows the great value life writing and oral histories can have for Aboriginal writers like Scott in their quest to re-establish identity and reconnect to *country*. In his case it also forms another potent example of how as a writer he has typically been able to successfully merge significant events in his life with his ever-increasing and constantly changing artistic output. Scott then has always been a profoundly mimetic writer – the art imitates the life, or perhaps more accurately, the life imitates the art.

I personally consider Scott's 2010 *That Deadman Dance* his greatest literary achievement to date, his most complex, most fully realized work. In Arindam Das's chapter he rather adroitly applies and extends postcolonial theories of mimicry and strategic essentialism (as articulated by Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak respectively) to examine how *That Deadman Dance* chronicles the intensifying efforts of the Noongar to resist their physical and cultural displacement after the arrival of white settlers in southwestern Australia in the 1820s. Das argues correctly that the novel is not at all about a friendly, egalitarian, mutually profitable relationship between whites and Aboriginals. It instead should be read as a representation of how the Noongar used mimicry and strategic essentialism to challenge the colonizers and fight back against the destruction of their culture. And as I have suggested elsewhere, building on Das's critique, the ultimate, ongoing act of mimicry here is actually Scott's own "performance" of Anglo-American Modernism. Infusing that Modernism with an indigenous perspective he has reinhabited and politicized it. The underlying point again is that Scott must be viewed as an international author and the sixth chapter, by Gillian Whitlock and Roger Osborne, is a well-placed reminder of Scott's position in world literature. But Whitlock and Osborne insist that even with its global audience, *Benang* (their case study), is a book that "remains embedded in the language and imaginative geographies of Noongar *country* that resist translation and dispossession" (italics added). What is true for *Benang* is true for Scott's other fiction, especially *That Deadman Dance*. The end result is a literature that successfully maintains its uniqueness, its authentic Aboriginality, in the international marketplace, while doing much more.

One of the strengths of both *Companions* is Wheeler's ability to collect quality articles on subjects that are obvious choices for inclusion – Scott's novels, for instance – while also discussing less obvious, less common topics. Scott's short stories have not received as much attention as his four longer works, and so the next two chapters in the *Companion* are quite helpful for the larger

editorial goal of covering Scott's complete canon. In a compelling re-reading of three of Scott's stories – the 2009 "A Refreshing Sleep," the 2002 "Capture" and the 1993 "An Intimate Act" – Lydia Saleh Rofail analyzes the haunted landscapes, ghostly beings, and destabilized identities that inhabit all three, in my opinion, their affinities with the Gothic, yet another example of how Scott exploits the Western tradition for his own purposes. However, she also suggests that they are more than just symbolic depictions of traumatized, fragmented Aboriginal subjects. The endings of each story are not simply a static acceptance of that condition but rather imply more proactive attempts to reject it, to change and alter identity, to heal. In the following chapter, Nathanael Pree uses spatial poetics to illustrate how a metaphorical language borrowed from *Benang* circulates throughout many of Scott's short stories. In an especially pioneering critique of the 2000 "Into the Light," Pree illustrates how Scott employs ekphrasis, "the poetic representation of visual artworks," in this instance the Hans Heysen painting *Droving into the Light*, in a way that can also help explain his novels.

Not known as a poet, having published only six poems, it is understandable that Scott's poetry has received little critical attention over the years. Fortunately, Tony Hughes-d'Aeth's chapter rectifies this omission, in the process developing lines of inquiry that should stimulate further interest in this small but intriguing aspect of Scott's work. The poems are worthy of study as discrete texts, on their own autonomous terms, but as Hughes-d'Aeth points out are equally useful for the insights they give into the more well-known novels on which Scott's literary reputation is based. For example, as its title indicates, the 2002 "Wangelanginy" has clear thematic similarities with *That Deadman Dance*, in particular the centrality of speech. What is instructive, too, is how the earliest poems make no direct reference to Scott's indigeneity, while the later ones begin to do so, including the 1986, semi-autobiographical "Our Father, Koo-ee-lung." It should also be said, from a strictly technical or pedagogical perspective, that in this chapter Hughes-d'Aeth provides close readings of all six of the poems in a performance that would make any New Critic proud. Clearly, he knows his poetry.

No critical anthology of Scott's writing would be complete without a careful discussion of his non-fiction. Accordingly, in the tenth chapter Natalie Quinlivan focuses on the Wirlomin Noongar Language and Stories Project that Scott founded and chairs. For Scott, cultural preservation and linguistic reclamation are inseparable, one is not possible without the other, so he has dedicated much of his professional life to the Noongar language. In Wheeler's words, Quinlivan examines the ways in which Wirlomin stories "strategically navigate the national and global space while still maintaining a connection to *country*." In addition, Quinlivan demonstrates that Scott, conscious of not overshadowing other writers with his own celebrity status, has consistently worked for a collective and not individual approach to the Project's Noongar language publications. In the eleventh chapter, Rosalie Thackrah and Sandra Thompson address the national and international impact of Scott's contributions to Australian Aboriginal health. Thackrah and Thompson were colleagues of Scott during his 2009-2012 appointment to Curtin University's Indigenous Health unit. They provide an eyewitness account of his work there (again, as part of a larger group) promoting exposure to Aboriginal culture, instituting a mandatory unit on Aboriginal health in the curriculum, and then writing the accompanying textbook. It is hard to imagine too many other novelists of Scott's stature (twice a winner of the Miles Franklin Award, Australia's most prestigious literary prize) dedicating the time and effort required to write a college textbook on health.

A Companion to the Works of Kim Scott ends with a transcript of a phone interview of Scott by Belinda Wheeler, originally conducted on June 16, 2015. Intentionally designed to range over

a wide variety of topics, both literary and non-literary, instead of just focusing on a specific text, the chapter is a fitting conclusion to a book that fulfills its stated goal of providing a broader, more holistic view of Scott's life and work. Above all, the interview, like the book, demonstrates his enduring commitment to *country*. Moreover, both the interview and the book raise once again the larger question, which was also fundamental to Wheeler's first *Companion*, of how exactly literature should be defined, what exactly is it? Thackrah and Thompson call Scott a "boundary rider," and he most certainly challenges conventional genre classifications, both within a given text, and between them. He also challenges conventional identity classifications – an Aboriginal writer? An Australian writer? A Western writer? All three at once? It would appear that Scott's long-awaited next novel is forthcoming. If so, this *Companion* is both educational and timely. It belongs on the bookshelf of anyone who enjoys reading Kim Scott.