Books

History revealed in black and white ... with loads of colour

Thomas Keneally says his latest tome is his penultimate appraisal of our nation’s history, writes PHIL BROWN

VETERAN Australian author Thomas Keneally wears metaphorical black-and-white armbands when he sits down to write Australian history. The 79-year-old Booker Prize winner is known for his prodigious work ethic and in between his novels he has been producing his masterwork, a series of books spanning our history.

It’s a tale of the good, the bad and the ugly and a lively account of the events and people that made our country what it is today.

Keneally began this series with Australians: Origins to Eureka in 2010, followed it up with Australians: Eureka to the Diggers in 2012 and now, in volume three, Australians: Flappers to Vietnam, he takes up the story at the end of the Great War and explores our development as a nation in the tumultuous 20th century.

It’s an epic tale and a big job for a man his age but it’s no surprise to hear that he is now planning a fourth volume to bring us up to the present.

“This is the last folly of my old age,” Keneally says, with a cackle, when we meet over lunch in Brisbane.

“But it is no black armband view. I wanted to challenge the black-and-white armband theories and say, well, we should wear both. There is reason to rejoice but also a lot of darkness. For example, when you are writing about what happened to Aboriginal people there’s cause to be a bit bleak.

What I’m saying is we can wear both armbands. The only thing I don’t want to wear is a grey armband.”

There’s nothing neutral about Keneally’s colourful narrative style. Where we sit and chat is within spitting distance of MacArthur Chambers, the building in Brisbane’s CBD where General Douglas MacArthur had his headquarters for a time in World War II.

That’s a bit of local history that is pertinent and Keneally writes quite a bit about MacArthur in his book giving some fascinating insights into the great man, or the man whose PR machine kept telling everyone how great he was, and his influence on us. Keneally, whose garden gnome looks are marked by an impish sense of humour, gives the US general a bit of a touch up “in the Australian manner”, but he also explores the fascinating relationship between the military leader and our wartime prime minister, John Curtin.

It’s little things like this that make Keneally’s narrative so lively and interesting. As well as concentrating on getting all the important stuff right – dates, names, places, battles, and so on – Keneally delves into the human stories that bring history alive in a way it wasn’t brought to life when he was young.

As a novelist, Keneally is skilled at giving his readers a visceral experience and recent historical novels such as Daughters of Mars and Shame and the Captives skilfully bring history to life.

In his nonfiction Keneally uses a novelist’s skill to enliven the past and re-imagine the players. “I wanted to bring to my histories the human dimension so that the reader can connect.” Keneally says. And connect we do. There are stories of artists and politicians, of soldiers and communists, of prime ministers and ordinary folk such as Barbara Ann Porritt, the millionth post-war immigrant.

Keneally tells the story of how Porritt was judged by the critics to be one of the best books about post-war immigrant. Ann Porritt, the millionth post-war immigrant.

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