



Don Watson's
The Passion of
Private White,
2022

Demolition of Bauxite Refinery, Gove, 2022

"Tragedy and comedy are distinguished in the same manner; the aim of comedy being, to exhibit men worse than we find them, that of tragedy better"

Aristotle, Poetics, p3

In hindsight it was not a bad choice to task churchmen and academic anthropologists with the job of creating sustainable Aboriginal communities across our great land. Their monumental, emotional failures and the complete absurdity of the task in every single case, give us some leads on what should be a set of relatively simple tasks: allow and acknowledge sovereignty – cultural, social and economic, support self-sufficiency, independence and prosperity, create learning pathways across cultures and worlds, find as many mutually prosperous ventures as possible with resources and expertise, as if investing in a bauxite refinery, a uranium mine or a conventional civic entity with roads, schools, hospitals etc. It's really that simple.

Instead we have created a multi-billion dollar farce, a series of national tragedies from one end of the country to the other that is an embarrassment and disgrace on the world stage. How did it come to this? *The Passion of Private White* gives us many explanations.

Don Watson cut his teeth writing about tragedy, our national tragedy, he also writes comedy, the two sides of the Aristotle-an classical coin. Watson's first tragic hero was the luminous,



flawed Communist historian Brian Fitzpatrick. {Watson} Watson grew up in Gippsland, the modern heir of Scottish colonists who escaped barbarity and created their own. That was the tragedy he arose from. Those heartfelt words of Paul Keating's Redfern speech "*We committed the murders. we took the children from their mothers. We practised discrimination and exclusion. It was our ignorance and our prejudice.*" came from Watson's deep research of his family's New Caledonia. (Watson) Keating and Watson were, in my view, a combination of deep knowledge and moral authority and verbal showmanship unmatched in Australian politics. Without Keating's delivery, his natural Irish Catholic verbal dexterity and moral authority these phrases and words would never be remembered. Now due to the Keating/Watson partnership, they are immortal. Everything Watson writes is worth reading.

The Redfern Speech was a prologue of greater awareness of our national tragedy. It was an acknowledgement and an awakening. It represented a maturing understanding: Our prosperity was forged on the suffering of First Nations communities and land holders. We now move to another phase of the same tragedy. Watson was the chief "bleeding

heart" in Keating's office. The bleeding heart characterisation reflecting in part, our inability, even amongst the "true believers", to properly deal with and acknowledge this primal tragedy of our national history. I agree in one respect with Jacinta Price, Labor cannot be trusted to do anything other than deal symbolically with our national tragedy of real people dying every single day for reasons which are completely unacceptable. Perhaps that is because Labor feel very comfortable operating on the same plane as church men and academic anthropologists. We can all wring our wrists. Meanwhile the pragmatic Nationals when asked to build a shed, will build a shed. Don't ask them to do anything more, but at least they built the shed.

I remember at that time of the Redfern speech the Aboriginal Affairs portfolio being compared to 'cleaning the toilet on the titanic'. No-one wanted the job though there were then, and since, some magnificent people like Gerry Hand, Robert Tickner, Jenny Macklin and lately Ken Wyatt who tried hard to push things forward. Hopefully in 2023 there may be further progress under the formidable, often underestimated and experienced Linda Burney. But it is a joke to think that "Canberra" is capable of

local solutions across this wide sun scorched country from desert to rain forest to savannahs from one-horse towns to cosmopolitan cities.

New Caledonia was written before Watson became well known as a comedy writer for Max Gillies, speech writer for John Cain and Paul Keating and the sometimes, controversial historian of the Keating Prime Ministership. (Watson) *Caledonia Australis* sets out the sins of the nation, *The Passion of Private White* (Watson) is a sequel. It is about the balanda (european) quest to look into the heart of dispossessed native peoples.

Even when it is sometimes wrong, *The Passion of Private White* (Watson) is right, in the sense of 'she'll be right' and the spirit of Yolŋu generosity, because it is impossible for a balanda (European) to be right, even after two hundred years of co-existing with, and maybe eighty four years, since (Elkin), of trying to understand, our first peoples. Old hands in Arnhem land will tell you, don't try to come up with solutions for Yolŋu people, the more you try the more you will fuck it up. There is some wisdom in this completely unsatisfying sentiment. But this wise precept is in one way about finding the right place and role.

Early on Watson ponders Neville White's main Yolŋu collaborator and friend: Tom Gunaminy Bidingal "If every human culture develops its own way of seeing, did Tom see a different world". p.20 Well yes.. and it is still barely comprehensible to us, to Watson and even to Neville White himself. The problem is we reference ourselves and the written texts of others before us, meanwhile Yolŋu culture flows on like a river oblivious, barely registering anything we are talking about. The hopeful future might create some form of bridge or viaduct between the flowing river and the balanda dukarr (road).

In this book Dr. Neville White is the heroic, flawed and vulnerable anthropologist, through which our (and Watson's) pity and fear might be cleansed. As Watson was writing about the superhuman struggle of White he too was battling potentially fatal leukemia and sometimes you can feel the link and the desperation for meaning, resolution and healing. This feeling between the lines, is what makes this an unforgettable book that readers will come back to again and again.

Vietnam was the generational tragedy that consumed and drove Neville White. Don Watson

was lucky to have avoided a similar fate. Instead he and his peers protested against the war and unwittingly at the time created some of the psychological trauma that infected almost every Vietnam veteran in Australia and the USA. They came home unthanked, disowned and, most often, dealing with PTSD. To recover, required losing life as we knew it. Watson recognised the heroism of White when he invited him to address his students, (perhaps at Footscray in 1985, I wonder whether Terry Counihan was there as well). White no doubt delivered rocked Watson's world with an unparalleled understanding of the remarkable Yolŋu magical world of North East Arnhem land, that only now do mainstream Australians barely comprehend through events like the annual Garma festival, of whose, superficial connections, I am sure White would not approve. [1] Thus began an affection, loyalty and awe of Watson towards White that has culminated in this book.

Two tragedies come together for Watson in

1 "That's the reason why some from Donydji don't go to Garma. Because they don't believe it's for them to sell their culture. People can learn, and they're very happy for people to learn. But they want people to learn with them on their country, and not go somewhere else." Hambly, G., White, N., 2021. *Homeland Story: Friendship and filmmaking in Donydji homeland, North East Arnhem Land*. TEXT 25.. doi:10.52086/001c.29614

the figure of White: the generational tragedy of Vietnam and the national tragedy of almost complete ignorance about Aboriginal life. White's tragic, lonely struggle is a compelling narrative full of all the twists and turns, frustrations and contradictions of trying to do good in remote communities. There is a third tragedy, and that is, whether it be due to selfless heroes like White or the corrupt and hopeless bureaucracy of Aboriginal affairs, our ongoing inability to sustain an independent, healthy Aboriginal first nations community in this country. Of all the communities in Australia perhaps the Yolŋu had the best chance of surviving and thriving. However, not only can we not improve the lives of the Aboriginal communities we cannot even, in a place like North East Arnhem land, maintain the quality of life that was once enjoyed in the early twentieth century. It seems that almost everything colonial Australia has done, from the banning of Macassan traders that were an essential component of the Yolŋu economy to the creation of missions, (benevolent or otherwise), to the blatant exploitation and corruption of mining, has been destructive. The fourth tragedy of this book is Watson's struggle to find his own good health after being

diagnosed with leukemia and White's own battle with melanoma. In these struggles both Watson and White thankfully prevail.

The flaw of this book is the flaw that bedevils our society. There is a tendency for balanda heroes to hark to a purity that is of their own making, and to forget Yolŋu heroes like some of those mentioned in this book: Burrumurra, Laynhupuy, Yunupingu and others Gurrumul, Gulpilil and many others who are not so well known on the national stage. All Aboriginal leaders that have been effective have had to compromise with the dominant culture. They have not been puritanical but surprisingly pragmatic, even at times uncaring about being seen as virtuous or morally acceptable to us. There is a reason why Aboriginal culture is the oldest continuous culture in the world and it is not just because of continental remoteness. It may well be that the issues that we fuss about as colonists, trying to live with our own conscience, are but minor stories compared with the long-term survival/vision of Aboriginal people. One thing I do not like is the tendency for balanda who come to NE Arnhem land to dismiss the negotiated struggles of the peoples of the South East and other places in Australia in favour of the more unsullied cultures of

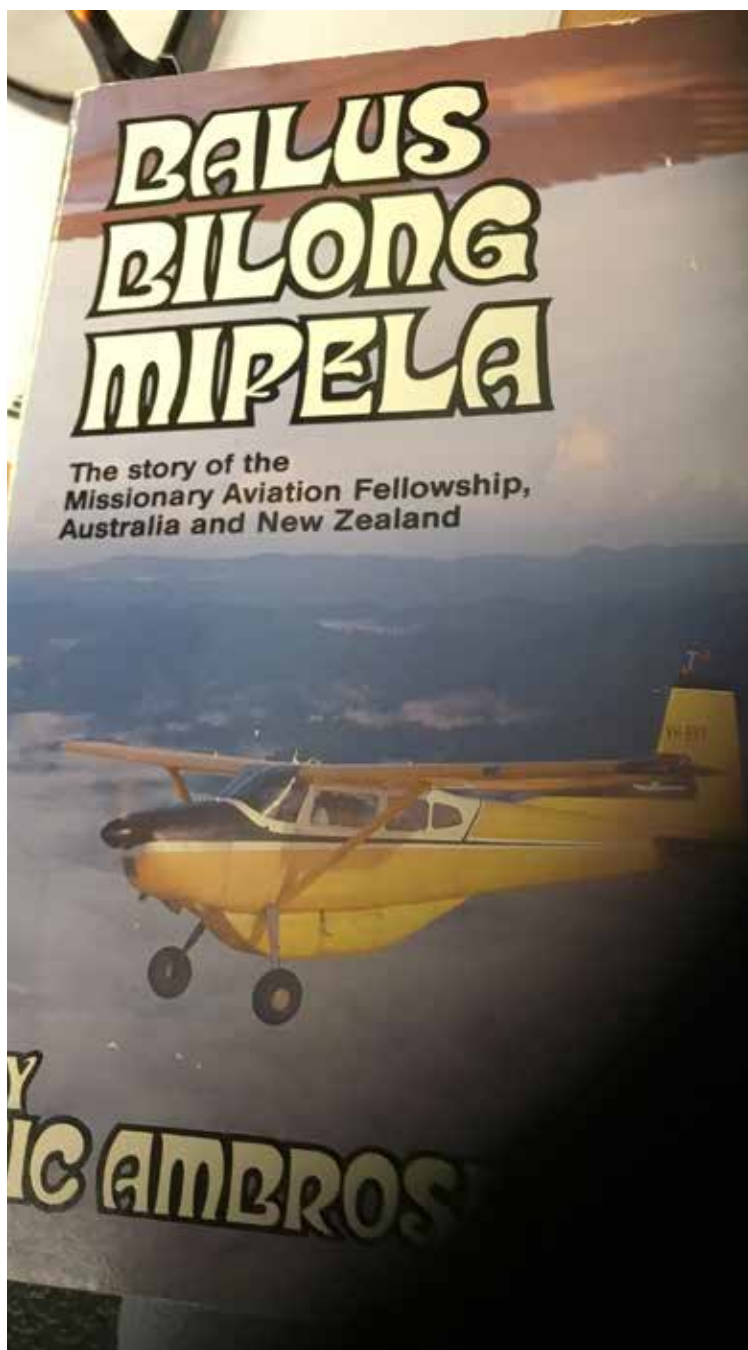
the north. Anthropologists have a poor record in this regard. Contemporary society owes a great deal to the struggles of the Yorta Yorta as the Yolngu, and the struggles of Fitzroy and Shepparton and Nowra and Redfern are just as important, poignant and noble as any in White's coveted homeland of Donydji.

Watson and I crossed paths in our lives at Stewarts in Carlton, in Canberra through our mutual best friend Terry Counihan and vaguely in Arnhem land: Watson, White and I all stayed in Max Pearson's shed, and anyone who knew Max had penetrated deep into Yolnu land. Max occasionally told me of the mysterious trips Watson was making in his coveted hi-lux down the worst road in Australia, the Central Arnhem Highway. When I first knew that our paths had crossed in Arnhem land, I suspected that Don must have been writing about one of the great heroes of modern-day Australia Donald Thomson. It is a great and as yet unwritten yarn. Don writing about Donald seemed logical, the academic anthropologist/naturalist who somehow convinced the University of Melbourne Vice Chancellor to fund an expedition and a lugger to Arnhem land that ultimately saved Yolngu culture from a "war" that might have led to their destruction, and what

Charles Warner called, for the anthropological world, one of the world's remarkable civilisations. (Warner) Watson does pay tribute to DT noting his words and contribution:

"There is something indefinable, a quality, a permanence, about the nomadic hunters that abides with one. I for one cannot bear to think of their passing, these lithe, splendid, unspoiled men, from their last stronghold in the oldest continent". p. 93 There was a moment in time when we might have talked about these things.

But Watson was looking beyond Thomson to another deep story. Neville White, in the spirit of Thomson, was advised by one of the legendary Aboriginal leaders of Galiwinku/Elcho Island, David Burramurra, that the people at Donydji had never left their country and practiced their nomadic traditional life with cultural life intact and alive. Thus began a forty-eight year odyssey which began when White ".. clambered out of Methodist Aviation Fellowship MAF plane, [an airline with another astonishing history] with an army mosquito net and a plywood box containing enough food to last him for two or three months. The plane flew away." p. 21, 132 White has now written dozens of academic studies of the people of Donydji. All written out of passion but with the steely eyes of a



scientist wanting to ensure that no fool could dismiss fundamental facts and realities.

There are so many interesting stasimas or riffs in this book. I loved and relished many of them. They take the form of an aside by the author to the audience and they all become vortexes of thought and contradiction and complexity. I imagine fights taking place between the audience in the wings of the main narrative as often happens in Aboriginal affairs.

* Donydji is closer to the West as to the most eastern points of Arnhem land, and it was the degrading influence of the Roper River Anglican boarding regime that had a pervasive influence. This was the same story as for most of Australia. "By the end of two decades, the missions designed to bring a new moral order to the region had created something more like mayhem..." p. 90 I think you can still feel the terrible influence of the original Missionaries on this part of the country today. To the East though it was a different story, the original Methodist missionaries at Millingimbi, Yirrkala and Galiwinku were comparative heroes for their encouragement of language and many cultural traditions. Edgar Wells was a key component to the bark petition and church



panels that have become a foundation stone of national Aboriginal and particularly Northern Territory land rights. {Wells} Harold Shepherdson was also one of the key reasons why dozens of "homelands" became possible, ironically more feasible due to his support from the 1940s to the 1970s than today. {Shepherdson} It is an uncomfortable fact that these Church missions were better in terms of "sustainable homelands" than government run and funded missions and towns after 1967. Noel Pearson's views of poisonous welfare (Pearson) and Richard Trudgen's *Why Warriors Lie Down and Die* (Trudgen) have their origins in this unexpected and profound failure. In short, passionate, divinely-inspired, creative, hard-working, lifelong missionaries were replaced by salaried, passionless, often indolent, bureaucrats and managers who wanted above all, in most cases, a seamless life, ruled from the regional capitals or Canberra, they were sea-gulls flying in and out, or were on country for the most minimal time possible as Watson so fiercely notes.

* The unsung linguist, Bernhard Schebeck, who in 1968 first suggested the word Yolŋu as the most suitable name for the common malas of North East Arnhem land and who Watson notes

in a footnote was, forty years later, working in a library in outer Melbourne with very little money.

* Watsons wonderful forays into the “homelands service organisations” like Marthakal and to a lesser extent Lanhupuy are something to cheer about. They are as stirring as any of his writing in comedy or politics. In a nutshell: “In all of the years of Doyndji, governments had done nothing. Marthakal and Laynhapuy had been no good either. The vets had done everything, and the people from Melbourne who had given money, and now these lawyers from Melbourne. The people listened in solemn silence”, p. 271 Ultimately, I can tell you from personal experience the lawyers and business people are even more disappointing than the rest.

* White confronts the mind-curdling impossibility of creating some small level of community infrastructure in the remote north in contrast to the trillions invested in the cities with their constant intergenerational improvements. Were the academics any better than the bureaucrats, did they simply want things to remain the same, the noble savage a fitting and endlessly giving academic subject?



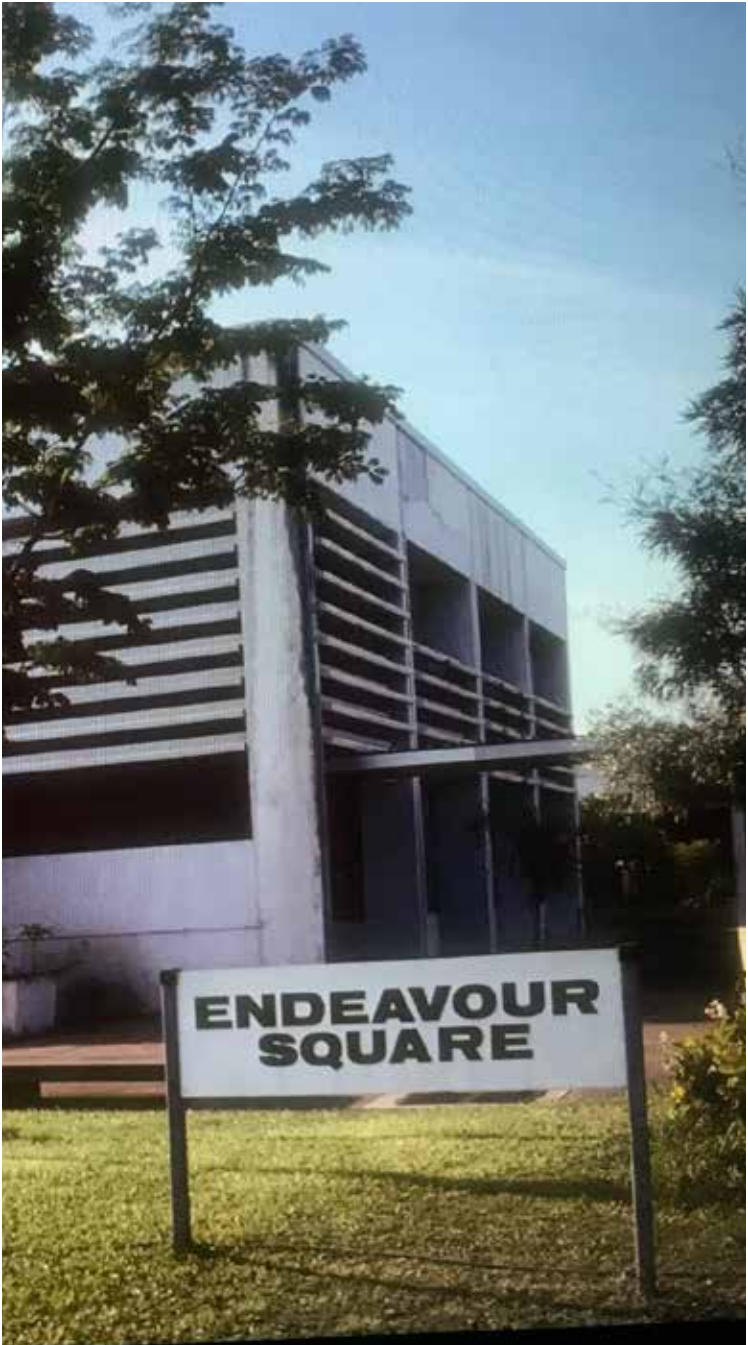
* Academicians who made a living off the communities, created academic careers and wrote a myriad theses and journal articles but left little of any tangible substance behind. "For all their prodigious scholarship, their heroic effort, the wonders they uncovered, the gaps in knowledge they filled and the misconceptions they corrected, they talked mainly among themselves, and as the end of their long careers approached, Australians knew as little about the wonders as they had a half a century earlier".p. 151

* The 'ceremonial economy' is what matters in NE Arnhem land.. "The enlightened West made myth and superstition – a sphere of the human imagination alive and ineradicable in all cultures – the stuff only of the enlightened. In imperial ideology few conceits were more influential than this: fer made a greater contribution to the invaders' invincible self-regard, or so effectively insulated them from curiosity or enlightenment about the cultures they were trampling". p. 155 "Every dogma religion has hitherto produced is probably false, but for all that the religious or mystical spirit may be the only way of apprehending some things, and these of enormous importance. These things of 'mystical apprehension' they have rather to be felt and

lived than uttered and intellectually analysed; yet they are somehow true and necessary to life". It is surprising that this quote comes from the pre-modern Jane Harrison of the early twentieth century. In our time it is hard to find many academics who hold this view despite the fact that every material good: cars, houses, and even money, does not compare with the importance of ceremonial life: the fundamental difference between Yolŋu and balanda.

* Galkas. "Galka is a fearsome and inscrutable personage, at once a shocking creature of the imagination and probably a real-life hitman". p 157

* Garray/Jesu. "Neville became convinced it was a kind of cargo cult, driven in the main by young man who saw the ecstatic rites of the faith as a path to material comfort and easier lives". p. 163 I don't think so. In so many ways, even beyond the evangelical wave that threatened Donydji in the early 1980s, Jesu was a balanda ancestral hero with ritual, dance, song and tradition. Looking beyond the evils of Roper River Anglicans, this might be something of the balanda world that might be respected by a traditional man or woman. Perhaps our inability to consider such possibilities is too a



limitation of secular, scientific human ecology and anthropology. It is certainly worth some discussion. Yet at the same time Munuma, who had died a few months earlier, appears as a huge stick insect when Neville walks with Tom and others to Bunguurrundyji. p. 167 Theophany for one but not the other?

* The sheer perversity of "servicing homelands" with private contractors paid exorbitant sums while jobs for Yolŋu went begging time after time. "The follies came one upon another. When the workshop was finished and the new school almost complete, the Education Department paid a consultant \$15,000 to find out if sacred sites at Donydji had been damaged in the process. It seemed an odd thing to do, given the building was already up, the community had chosen the location, and the protection of the sacred sites was the reason for the homeland's being. But the consultant flew in, asked if any sites were likely to be damaged in the construction of the buildings, and then he flew out". p. 213

* Food and health. In the early 1970s "the Donydji people had the best nutritional profile of any Aboriginal group in Australia and it was for one reason – they lived substantially on

what the bush provided them". p. 183 Toyotas, planes and groceries, sugar and processed food changed all that. Now, unlike Watson and White, who thankfully fought off their health sentences, comparatively young men and women die like flies and the pain seems unending.

* "Doyndji had a new school, a new schoolhouse and a new workshop, but less than half a teacher". p.251 Same old, same old. Capital funding is easy for some politicians to promise and give, recurrent funding is something altogether different.

Exodus: The cathartis of this tragedy is about the journey of White "Was he Gwen White's son, Leo White's, the boxing gym's, Dhulutarama's, or was he a son of Vietnam? Were his motives benevolent and empathetic or more those of a control freak, a missionary, a masochist, a fanatic? Was he a marvellous hybrid of empathy and pragmatism – like Christ; or a man trapped in a delusion and drawn to mortification of the flesh – like Christ? Was it all to redeem himself, the fallen self of Vietnam (if somewhere in the darker corners that is how he saw it), or to redeem the whole world? Was it always war with him, always duty-bound? Always under

fire and returning it? To reproach the world or himself? He did know doubt. His doubts were monsters. It was no accident when Galka turned up in his nightmares. Doubt was more than asking himself what the point was. It was not ennui, but more like terror.. Whatever it was that drove him -empathy, ego unrestrained, a crease in his psychology – all that mattered to him was what could be fixed, the concrete expression of a man's duty to others."... p. 227-8

"All I knew was that when the lawyers and academics, teachers, students and charitable donors left – when the vets left – he was still up there filling out forms, putting money in accounts, listening to complaints and holding on in that infernal phonebooth while he tried to resolve their problems with an air-conditioned bureaucrat". p. 275

In the end White diarises he cannot keep on 'going back'. His main collaborators are gone. But Doyndji continues.. and White does keep going back year after year. Second hand vehicles come and go. The crusade for better food and education continues. Madness and frustration follow one another continuously. And as I think on all of this and our great national tragedy I wonder whether we are

still in this country at the stage of white fellas talking to white fellas about blackfellas, the 2023 referendum might indicate whether we have the capacity to change. One day we may hear blackfellas talking about crazy white fellas with all their hang ups and foibles. I suspect that will be a very good and healthy day.

Milingimbi, February 2023

References

Elkin, A. P. (1979). *The Australian Aborigines* (Rev. ed.). Sydney: Angus & Robertson. (Original 1938)

Pearson, N. *Mission : essays, speeches & ideas.*

Trudgen, R. I. *Why warriors lie down and die : towards an understanding of why the Aboriginal people of Arnhem Land face the greatest crisis in health and education since European contact : djambatj mala.*

Warner, W. L. (1937). *Black Civilisation A Study of an Australian Tribe:* Harper Torchbooks.

Watson, D. *Recollections of a bleeding heart : a portrait of Paul Keating PM* (Anniversary ed.).

Watson, D. (1979). *Brian Fitzpatrick : a radical life*. Sydney: Hale & Iremonger.

Watson, D. (1997). *Caledonia Australis : Scottish highlanders on the frontier of Australia*.

Watson, D. (2003). *Death Sentence The Decay of Public Language*. Sydney: Knopf.

Watson, D. (2008). *American journeys*. North Sydney, N.S.W.: Knopf.

Watson, D. (2014). *The Bush*: Penguin.

Watson, D. (2022). *The Passion of Private White*. In: Scribner.

