



# Journey into the heart of a massacre

It took Alex Miller 50 years to find a way to write about the bloodbath at Cullin-la-Ringo, **Corrie Perkin** reports

**O**N October 17, 1861, in the Queensland central highlands, an entire community of newly arrived European settlers was murdered by indigenous Australians at a property called Cullin-la-Ringo. Nineteen people were killed, with no casualties among the attackers, the largest recorded massacre of Europeans by Aborigines.

Alex Miller first heard the story as a 16-year-old British migrant working on a central highlands cattle station. Miller had hitchhiked from Sydney to Queensland in search of the outback, which had fired his young imagination and encouraged him to leave his family and a grim post-war London. As he recalls, "The dramatic escarpments of the central Queensland ranges and the fast-flowing streams and open ironbark forests were not Nolan's outback, but I fell in love with the country."

The Cullin-la-Ringo story added to Miller's fascination with his new homeland and it has stayed with him for more than 50 years. In *Landscape of Farewell*, the 70-year-old writer has finally found the right setting and characters around which to tell the tale.

Miller sets his book in present-day Hamburg and remote Queensland. Ageing German historian Max Otto, having decided to kill himself following the death of his wife, changes his mind after a chance meeting with Vita McLelland, a feisty, intelligent and passionate Aboriginal academic, and when she invites Max to attend a Sydney conference she is planning, he accepts.

The two become friends and during his visit Vita takes Max to stay with her uncle Dougald Gnapun, who lives at Mount Nebo in Queensland's central highlands.

A quiet and respectful friendship evolves between the two men. Max's grief is deep and Dougald does not interfere. Dougald, meanwhile, has unfinished business with his ancestors and his land.

When he finally shares with Max the story of

his great-grandfather, the brave indigenous warrior Gnapun, the two men reconcile old ghosts and personal histories.

Dougald Gnapun first appeared in Miller's *Journey to the Stone Country*, winner of the 2003 Miles Franklin Award. The character is based on one of Miller's close friends from the Queensland region, Frank Budby, elder of the Barada people. Despite his earlier outing, Miller felt Dougald had more to say.

"Frank has a brilliant mind, he has the true qualities of a leader," Miller says. "There's a reason, I suppose, why I linked him through the Dougald character to Gnapun, who is purely fictional. And it's why I linked him, in a sense, to my boyhood idea of what that leader meant."

As Miller describes it, the appeal of the Cullin-la-Ringo massacre "was this story of a huge massacre of white people by Aborigines which was so bloody well organised. They obviously had somebody in charge who was an extremely gifted and persuasive leader, capable of organising people in a way that makes it difficult for white Australians to deny that Aborigines were capable of such organisation and precision.

"It doesn't reconcile with the stuff you usually read about attacks by Aborigines, which describes them as a band of wild savages running around and waving their arms about."

Our discussion takes place in Miller's home in Castlemaine in central Victoria. It's the kind of house in which you'd expect an author to live: a cosy, rambling place built in 1863 with a sunny kitchen, fresh coffee on the stove and a study lined with bookshelves that heave under the weight of titles, wisdom and dust.

Miller and Stephanie, his wife of 30 years, moved here from the city seven years ago. It is the ideal rural setting from which to plan an Australian epic. Yet the story first took shape when Miller was in Hamburg a few years ago, attending a conference on indigenous culture. There he met Anita Heiss, an Aboriginal academic and author on whom he based Vita. In



his hotel room at night, "I first began to see the configuration of an outline to how the whole Cullin-la-Ringo massacre story might be told."

In the early 1960s Miller, who left school at 15 and spent several years doing different jobs in Australia and New Zealand, studied his matriculation at night school, then went to the University of Melbourne to study history. He had always wanted to write fiction but he loved history and appreciated the discipline and academic grounding this might provide when the time came to tell his own stories.

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Wouldn't it have been tempting, then, for the former historian to present a matter-of-fact account of the Cullin-la-Ringo massacre, rather than a fictional piece?

Miller agrees, but adds that while in Hamburg, "I thought, 'I don't want to write a historical reconstruction, I simply don't want to do that.' For me, it would be too cumbersome."

Ramona Koval, presenter of Radio National's *The Book Show*, says Miller's massacre narrative is "absolutely extraordinary writing".

"It's inventive," she says. "If it was anywhere else in the book it would be in the wrong place

and would look trite. It was perfectly placed."

She adds: "When I read it I felt it was another leap into another dimension of his writing."

Miller's family history was also a significant catalyst for *Landscape of Farewell*. His father had served in the British army during World War II, a subject that "I'd never examined, or the role my mother played, and the destruction of so much of our lives", he says.

Miller's father was badly injured during the 1944 battle for Caen in France. He died in 1982 but never spoke intimately to his son about the war, what he'd seen or what he had done.

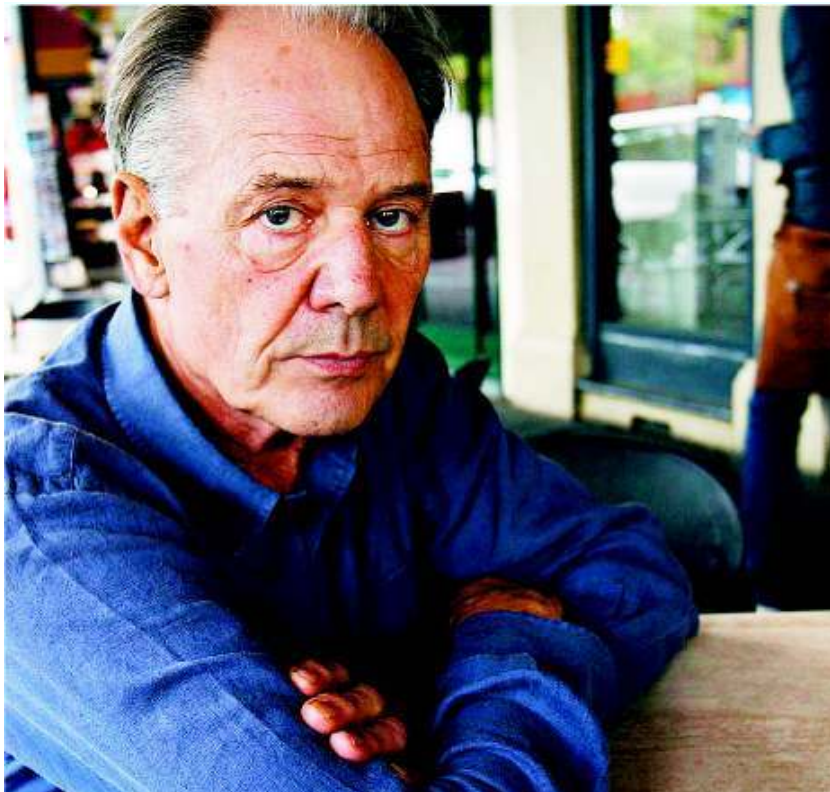
"Recently I tried for 12 months to do something based on the idea of my father's war," Miller says. "I wrote 65,000 words and I enjoyed doing it. Some of it was quite disturbing, interesting, some of it was a battle in research, like getting my dad's wartime records.

"In the end I left it for a while, I went back and had a look at what I'd done and thought, 'Yeah, it might be interesting to me, but it's not what I want to do.'"

In *Landscape of Farewell*, Max Otto, whose father was a Nazi soldier, shares with Miller the desire to know more about his father's past. ("I think Max's based on me, more than anybody I know," says the writer with a smile.)

"What he (Max) has done, as he realises after writing Dougald's massacre story, is identify with the killers, and then with the Germans responsible for the Holocaust.

"The Holocaust is something I believe haunts the Germans and will haunt them forever. It



**A matter of tone:** Alex Miller in Carlton

Picture: David Crosling



haunts me and my generation and pretty well everyone I know. And how could it not? It was just massacre on an unprecedented scale.”

The emotional impact of writing Gnapun’s story is huge. “Max had opened a door which had been closed up, and in the end it becomes his requirement that he goes through the door and examines what lies beyond it.”

A winner of literary awards, a crowd favorite at writers festivals and a frequent contributor to magazines and journals, Miller is comfortable talking about his work. He is humble and self-deprecating, however, and genuinely pleased when people like his books.

But he is also astute enough to know that *Landscape of Farewell* has already made its mark on the local publishing world.

When did he realise its potential? He laughs. “I think on about the 17th time I wrote the first chapter. I finally felt I got the tone right and at that point I showed it to Stephanie, which is something I very rarely do early in a book.”

Stephanie’s response took her husband by surprise. “She has read my work from the word go and has always been highly critical of it.

“We were living in Carlton at the time and she came down the stairs with tears in her eyes and said, ‘It’s wonderful.’ Then later, in a sober moment, she said it was the best thing I’d ever written. That felt pretty good.”

*Landscape of Desire* is published by Allen & Unwin. Alex Miller will be a guest at the Perth Writers Festival.