

V. Van Rij

CONFLICTS OF LOVE, LOYALTY AND WAR: FROM AUTOBIOGRAPHY TO FICTION IN JACK LASENBY'S *THE MANGROVE SUMMER* AND MAURICE GEE'S *THE CHAMPION*

Award-winning New Zealand writers, Jack Lasenby and Maurice Gee, have been described as “children’s writers whose themes, originality, and sheer literariness make them almost as important and entertaining to adults” (Robinson and Wattie, *Oxford Companion to New Zealand Literature*, 1998). Products of a period of New Zealand history when traditional perceptions of masculinity and ties to Great Britain as motherland were challenged by the counter-culture’s pacifist, feminist, bi-cultural, and nationalist movements, Gee and Lasenby incorporate dichotomous elements into their novels for children. However, their messages are not always simple for, although challenging the old ideologies, they do not necessarily conform to the new.

This article examines themes of love, loyalty, and war in two adventure stories: Lasenby’s *The Mangrove Summer* and Gee’s *The Champion*. Set during World War II, these novels depict political battles on personal levels, and taboo topics such as racism and death. The article explores first the geographical and historical realism of the stories, their settings in identifiable locations, and the authors’ use of autobiographical material to depict childhood in 1940s New Zealand. The article then considers the shift from realism to fiction, the investment of the landscape and the characters with an emblematic dimension that includes elements of Christian mythology, and the construction of social symmetries involving loyalty and trust as ways of counterbalancing the negativity of war. Taking each novel structurally, and the overall movement of the protagonists from innocence to experience, the article next examines the varying degrees to which myth, symmetries, and friendships hold firm. Finally the article sets individualism against socialism and questions Lasenby’s and Gee’s subscriptions to these different sets of belief.

Keywords: New Zealand, World War II, landscape, social symmetries, death, intertextuality, myth

INTRODUCTION

With a population of some four million, and located in the distant waters of the South Pacific Ocean, New Zealand may be a small country,

but it is capable, nevertheless, of producing great authors. Two of these are the multi-award winning Jack Lasenby and Maurice Gee who, along with internationally recognised Margaret Mahy, have been described as writing children's novels "whose themes, originality, and sheer literariness make them almost as important and entertaining to adults" [Robinson, Wattie 1998, p. 300].

Lasenby and Gee have much in common. Born in 1931, both were brought up in rural areas of New Zealand's North Island, Lasenby in Waharoa and Gee in Henderson. Both attended Auckland University, trained as teachers, and were influenced by the 1960s' counter-culture. And in their books for children, both demonstrate a strong moral consciousness while confronting the darker side of the national character, and taboo topics such as child abuse, murder, wanton cruelty, and death. However, in representing war on a personal level, Lasenby and Gee ultimately differ. Nowhere is this difference more obvious than in Lasenby's *The Mangrove Summer* [Lasenby 1988] and Gee's *The Champion* [Gee 1989], two novels that depict similar territories of conflict, but that philosophically are worlds apart.

MAPPING RURAL NEW ZEALAND

The Mangrove Summer and *The Champion* were published within one year of each other, in 1988 and 1989 respectively. In each novel the point of view is retrospective, with a first person narrator recalling a childhood adventure. In *The Mangrove Summer* an indeterminately aged George remembers spending a Christmas holiday in 1941 with his siblings Jill and Jimmy, and cousins, Graham, Ann, and Derek, while the adult Rex in *The Champion* remembers two weeks in February 1943 spent with friends, Leo, Dawn, and an African American soldier, Jackson Coop, also known as Jack. That these are the years of World War II is significant as are the settings in rural New Zealand during summer, a season associated with seaside activities and the Christmas spirit.

Lasenby and Gee draw on locations known from childhood to create geographically accurate novels. In *The Mangrove Summer* the place names, often in te reo Maori (the language of New Zealand's indigenous people), refer to real places. Hence, when holidaying in 1941, George and his family follow a route from their hometown of Waharua, through Te Aroha and Paeroa, and up the Thames coastline to Whauwhau Beach in the Bay of Plenty that is consistent with the New Zealand map. Born and raised in Waharoa (an alternative spelling of the novel's Waharua), Lasenby knew this area well, more so because "the Bay" in the novel

(also named “Whalers Beach”), is a version of Mercury Bay, his mother’s birthplace, and location of many of his childhood adventures¹. In particular, Lasenby and his friends enjoyed camping at Mercury Bay’s east end by the mouth of the Purangi River, the model for the fictional Mangrove River. Indeed, both real and fictional rivers have tributaries that span the surrounding countryside, flood at high tide, and are bordered by mangrove swamps that are visible at low tide. Included in the novel’s fore and after pages, and as if to confirm that this story is indeed real, two maps recall the Coromandel coastline with its beaches, bays, rivers, and tidal estuaries.

Like Lasenby, Gee locates *The Champion* in geographical reality. The fictional township of Kettle Creek which is “thirty-five miles from Auckland” [Gee 1989, p. 18] is based on Gee’s childhood hometown of Henderson, some thirty-five miles west of Auckland. So closely do the novel’s domain, jam factory, orchards, and vineyards resemble their historical counterparts that they are easily identifiable with those today. Similarly, the novel’s Barrington Road and Rex’s home are versions of Newington Road in which the Gee family lived, and their weatherboard house at number 52. Most significantly, Kettle Creek in which Rex has many adventures is based on Henderson Creek where the young Gee had many adventures². Recalling Lasenby’s protagonist, Rex enjoys the mangrove swamps. In Chapter Two he notes that Kettlecreek has “its feet in the mud and its head in the hills”, and that from the hills he can see to where “the sea stretched away beyond the bar, where sea birds gathered at low tide”. Observing “the mud <...> in the estuary, acres of it when the tide [is] out [and the] acres of mangroves”, he adds, “I can’t imagine growing up without <...> mud, mangroves, warm brown tidal water” [p. 18]. As a map of the area indicates, the view east from Henderson’s hilltops is indeed towards the sea and the Henderson Creek estuary with its mangrove swamps emerging at low tide³.

WORLD WAR II AND PARTISANSHIP

Lasenby and Gee create a strong sense of historical realism in their novels by setting them during World War II. Lasenby, who would have been ten in 1941, captures the flavour of war in New Zealand as he would have experienced it, and gives his experiences to the approximately ten-year-old George in 1941. Thus George alludes to the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbour [p. 3], the possible invasion by the Japanese of Singapore, Malaya, Burma, India, and then New Zealand, and the sinking of the British warships *Repulse* and *Prince of Wales* [p. 40]. Aware of a convoy

of warships at Devonport (in the 1940s, a naval base on Auckland's north shore), and hearing his mother and aunt discussing news of war gained from the *Herald* and the *Woman's Weekly* (real New Zealand periodicals), George takes war seriously. Accordingly, during "a mock air raid <...> in Auckland" [p. 24], George and his siblings (who are Scouts and Guides) carry messages, and play their part in the war effort.

In similar vein to Lasenby, Gee has his protagonist echo his boyhood experiences of war. Like the twelve-year-old Gee in 1943, the twelve-year-old Rex in 1943 participates in air-raid drills, is "NCO of the school cadets" [p. 21], and contributes to "the War Effort", shouting to his platoon, "Left wheel, right wheel, shoulder arms, present arms, attention, stand at ease" [p. 21]. Using broomsticks as rifles, he and his platoon form "the honour guard" as the Union Jack is raised each morning, and sing "God Save the King" before marching into school to "the Colonel Bogey March" [p. 23]⁴.

Several wartime events anticipated in *The Mangrove Summer* have taken place in *The Champion*. Rex notes: "The Japanese had scared us for a while. They came down the Pacific so fast, taking Singapore <...> and taking the islands one by one, and sinking the *Repulse* and the *Prince of Wales*" [p. 9]. Nevertheless, war encroaches on Rex's world for where historically, injured American soldiers sought respite in Auckland, so Jack, injured in Guadalcanal, seeks respite with Rex's family.

In grounding their novels in geographical and historical reality, Lasenby and Gee emphasise the partisan views typifying the war years, and construct fallible narrator-protagonists who exhibit the extremes of attitude and behaviour that they despise in the enemy. Hence, the children in *The Mangrove Summer* believe the Americans are heroic, and the Japanese are "the yellow peril", and "slant-eyed yellow dogs" [p. 5]. Contributing to George's partisan view is his sympathy for heroes, real and fictional. These include "Cobber Kain" [p. 72], a New Zealand flying ace with the Royal Air Force (RAF), and the young Amyas Leigh from Charles Kingsley's rather racist novel, *Westward Ho!* Lasenby brings Leigh, "a tall and fair boy <...> in his scholar's gown" [p. 58], into *The Mangrove Summer* naturalistically through having George quote *Westward Ho!* and identify with its scholarly hero. At the same time, Lasenby invests the realism with a fictional dimension, for Kingsley's depiction of two adventurous brothers, one of whom dies, contextualises the eventual death of George's younger brother Jimmy. Similarly, in naming his protagonist George, Lasenby recreates the flavour of the wartime period when many children were named after George VI, the reigning English

monarch, but also draws an ironic parallel between his gentle protagonist and the shy king, reputedly a reluctant leader⁵.

Gee's Rex is as partisan as George. Learning that an American soldier will stay with his family, and anticipating a hero, he salutes the American flag. He sees Tojo (the Japanese general) as having "slanty eyes <...> and buck teeth" [p. 8] and, pretending to shoot him, cries "Die, yellow dog" [p. 9]. More aggressive than George, Rex recreates himself in the face of the enemy, ironically expressing the savagery that he is fighting against.

In his identification with fictional and real heroes, particularly Rock-fist Rogan (a character from the British comic, *Champion*) Rex again resembles George. Recalling Cobber Kain, Rogan is a fighter pilot with the RAF and, like Kingsley's protagonists, reflects the period's racism, referring on an African adventure to indigenous people as "coloured boys", "pop-eyed", and "a black tide" [p. 141, 151], before brutally opening fire⁶. Using a technique similar to Lasenby's Gee invests *The Champion*'s realism with a fictional dimension by having Rex project Rogan's and his own brutal prejudices onto the gentle Jack. On meeting the African-American soldier for the first time, and shaking his hand, Rex then wipes his own hand clean on his trousers, and later alone with Jack, fears that he is a savage killer. Like Lasenby, Gee gives his protagonist a name popular during wartime and, drawing an ironic parallel with George VI, known as George Rex, has the fictional Rex replicate the monarch's warring side⁷. Thus Lasenby and Gee refer to similar themes, characters, and events, while seamlessly blending realism and fiction, and creating novels that are intensely intertextual.

THE EMBLEMATIC LANDSCAPE

In both novels the authors play out an intimate connection to the rural landscape, particularly its beaches, rivers, mangroves, and mud which, as previously noted, they had known during boyhood. However, George and Rex project their changing perceptions onto the landscapes which become charged with significance. For example, Lasenby's beach scene and his use of present participles, run-on sentences, and imperialist imagery suggest George's innocence, and a place that is anthropomorphic, realm-like and eternal. At the same time, the conjunctive sentence-starter, and images of fragmentation, fighting and falling suggest death and war. Lasenby's writing here, therefore fuses the points of view of the author-narrator and child protagonist, and the dichotomies of innocence and experience:

There were miles of sand-hills rippling like another sea all the way to Mangrove River at the other end of Whalers Beach, covered in marram grass and lupin; miles of sand-hills, curved and sculptured by the wind, pointed and smoothed, jumping, slumping, tottering, blowing, singing, leaping, falling, yelling and shoving sand-hills. And it was all our own for another summer, our kingdom by the sea. [p. 31].

Lasenby's seascape acquires a further resonance from its allusion to the "kingdom by the sea", the name given to the sea-side town of Oamaru in *To the Is-land*, an autobiographical novel by internationally acclaimed New Zealand writer, Janet Frame [Frame 1983, p. 174, 181]. In addition, the passage above precisely recalls Frame's poetic style in her short story "Swans" which depicts another beach scene. As the following quotation from "Swans" demonstrates, the points of view of the author-narrator and the child protagonists fuse in free indirect discourse, to convey a sense of suspension between the dichotomous states of innocence and experience, and the impingement of life and death on each other:

But the sea roared in their ears it was true sea, look it was breaking white on the sand and the seagulls crying and skimming and bits of white flying and look at all of the coloured shells, look a little pink one like a fan, and a cat's eye. <...> And look at the seaweed look I've found a round piece that plops, you tread on it and it plops, you plop this one, see it plops, and the little girls running up and down plopping, and plopping, and picking, and prying, and touching, and listening <...> [p. 135-136]⁸.

Recalling Lasenby's beach scene, Gee's imagined Kettle Creek landscape is idyllic and anthropomorphic, while suggesting a fall. Hence its muddy little beach is seen by Rex in terms of the Africa and Guadalcanal of Rockfist Rogan and Jack respectively, to become primal, exotic, and almost human, as well as fecund, threatening, and deathly, with features of war:

We glided over the water <...> heading along the edge of the cliffs and past the fringes of the mangrove jungle. It was half tide and the incoming water helped us along. The nearer mangrove trees had drowned trunks. A fizz and crackle sounded further in, where advancing water ran into crab holes. A smell of salt and rot and ripeness hung in the air. It would have been easy to imagine crocodiles basking in the mud and snakes sliding in the crooked trunks. <...> High mangroves reached down with crooked arms. The only sound was the splash of paddles. As the creek got narrower I said, "Jap subs could hide up here" [p. 33-34].

Like Lasenby, Gee is indebted to another writer for his landscapes, namely Zane Grey whose westerns he read as a child. Gee has noted these as taking him beyond "the purple sage, the dry gulch, the endless range", to allow him "below the level of full consciousness" "to take [his] first long look at the human condition" [p. 25]⁹. As we see in the passage

above, in the conflation of the natural and human, and joy and terror, the human condition in all its complexity is indeed present. Lasenby and Gee therefore fuse the realistic and the imagined to invest their landscapes with a significance extending far beyond the everyday.

SYMMETRIES

Providing a counterbalance to the conflicts of war, both authors create symmetrical social groupings. Lasenby organises his group according to interfamilial relationships and age. There are two sets of cousins, first Jill, George and Jimmy who have been brought up by their mother in their father's absence at war, and second Graham, Ann, and Derek who have been brought up by their father in their mother's absence through death. The two oldest cousins play together, as do the two youngest cousins, while George and Ann, the two middle, more affectionate cousins, provide the semblance of a still centre. Together the three sets of cousins form a whole, extended New Zealand family thus echoing the whole novel's structure which moves from thesis, to antithesis, to synthesis.

Gee's grouping of four spans mixed ethnicities that represent the family of the world: Rex is Anglo/Pakeha, Leo is Croatian/Dalmatian, Dawn is Maori/Pakeha, and Jack is African/American. Although not organised into three distinct parts, *The Champion*, like *The Mangrove Summer*, moves from thesis, to antithesis, to synthesis, with each of these sections involving a set of six chapters.

THESES

Suggesting an ideal wholeness, the symmetrical structures provide a measure of characters' unity. For example, in Part One of *The Mangrove Summer*, under the command of the older Jill, the six children work together in troupe-like fashion to complete the building of a seaside fort, to install a driftwood cannon, construct a guardhouse with sandbags, to look out for spies and submarines, and to patrol the beach [p. 41]. However, their collective war effort is more fun than serious. As the older narrator says, "I realize <...> we had been playing with the idea that the Japs were coming" [p. 66].

In the first section of Gee's novel, the four characters are at odds, largely because of Rex's racial prejudices. Indeed, the naïve, young Rex believes *The Maori Race* (Elsdon Best's classic history of New Zealand's indigenous people) to be about running! Hence he refers disparagingly to Leo as a "squarehead" [p. 23, a slang word for Dalmatian], Dawn as "barmy" and "only a Maori" [p. 35], and Jack as "chimpanzee" and "jungle face" [p. 45, 46].

Although initially Lasenby's group of six is in harmony, and Gee's group of four is in disharmony, change in both cases is imminent. Mindful of war, George sees the predominantly idyllic landscape in Part One of *The Mangrove Summer* as increasingly threatening. Depictions of the pohutukawa tree (known for its December flowering as New Zealand's Christmas tree) measure George's growing fear. Hence, during the drive to "the Bay", the pohutukawa that "is just beginning to flower" seemingly heralds "good luck for summer" [p. 13], but a little later is displaced by "a pohutukawa hanging out from a rock [with] red stamens floating down" [p. 28], and later still by a pohutukawa that "leans above its reflection <...> its stamens [floating] like blood on the new tide" [p. 56]. Finally the pohutukawa, as seen by George, is "losing its last flowers [and looking] rusty" [p. 86].

Mangrove River and its swamps also chart George's fears. On arrival at "the Bay" it is a scene of innocence and primal mud play: "Ann came racing out of the mangroves, grabbed us, and the three of us fell over together into the black mud. We were all in long frocks. <...> We were filthy with black mud and wet through, crying and laughing at once", [p. 48, 49]. But later, threatening to flood, the river appears to be infested with crocodiles [p. 61], and to hide Japanese submarines.

Nature therefore seems far from benign. Jimmy slips on the seashore and is swept up by a wave [p. 33], "an invisible hand of air" and "long arms" of seaweed [p. 36] almost pull George through the top of a sunken cave, "heavy rain [rips] the water like "machine gun bullets" [p. 57], and killer sharks and a stingray lurk in shallow waters [p. 44]. Images of mortality similarly cast a shadow on the summer holiday. George's father is a prisoner of war, George is carsick on the way to the bach, Brown, the dog, is lost, and a local resident has died "on the bar" [p. 44]¹⁰.

The potential for future disharmony exists as much in the children's relationships as it does in the landscape. George hates his older sister's bossiness, and everyone else for taking her side. Eventually persuaded by Jill of the seriousness of a possible Japanese invasion, he puts play and personal responsibility aside and fatalistically comments: "Nobody could do anything about it. From then on, we were just going to follow [Jill], and everything that happened seemed unavoidable" [p. 66]. Jill's and George's assumptions of more aggressive and passive roles respectively, undermine the group's unity. Although depicting a golden period of innocence and adventure, Part One of *The Mangrove Summer* therefore anticipates what occurs in Part Two, when the conflicting sides of nature and the children come into sharper relief.

Where harmony in Part One of Lasenby's novel is underpinned by disunity, the disunity depicted in the first section of Gee's novel is underpinned by the possibility of harmony. In Chapter Four the imagined landscape of Rex, the older intervening narrator, reflects his childhood despair at the destruction of his romantic dream of a soldier-hero. At the same time, the landscape paves the way for the younger Rex's identification with Jack who, wounded in battle, has himself suffered loneliness and despair. Indeed, Gee's clever repetition of images in the two passages quoted below, which describe Rex and Jack together in Rex's moonlit bedroom, conveys a sense of Rex's empathy with Jack. While suggesting the asymmetry of the younger Rex and his friends, and of Rex and Jack, the imagined landscape thus emphasises the socialist ideal of human cohesiveness that Rex does not at this point have, but eventually finds:

Down in Fiordland you can see huge scars of rock shining in the bush on the mountainsides. The trees can't put down roots. They hold each other in place until one loses its grip and then they all go, acres of them, down into the waters of the fiord. This is called a tree avalanche. I felt as if something of that sort had happened to me. Something I'd thought surely rooted had slid away and a glistening scar was in its place [p. 43].

[Jack's] skin glistened in the light from the moon, <...> His face <...> had, it seemed to me, smoother shining patches <...>. The moonlight struck a scar on his shoulder and made it shine. <...> I looked at the scar, wondering if a bayonet had made it [p. 43–44].

Gee's characters, like those of Lasenby, operate in tangency. Where George adopts a more passive role that counterbalances his sister's aggression, Rex becomes less aggressive in relation to Jack's increasing assertiveness. Accordingly, when Rex's autocratic school teacher suggests that "the darkies of America" have "brains not formed <...> like fruit that [isn't] ripe" [p. 53, 54], and Jack parodies her racism by dancing around her in Al Jolson style, Rex begins to see him differently "as sharp [and] clever" [p. 53]. Furthermore, playing war games on his grandfather's homemade amphibian, Rex notes Jack, Leo, and his grandparents clustered in a balanced foursome, examining its gears, and realises that it is he, not Jack, who is marginalised and "left out" [p. 66].

ANTITHESES

Fearing Japanese invasion, the children in Part Two of Lasenby's novel, escape to the Mangrove River area. Described as a "Garden of Eden" [p. 105, 109], it is a land of plenty with a river teeming with fish, and a fertile orchard. In true Robinson Crusoe style, the children feast on the produce of the land and sea, and develop survival techniques, but

in Chapter Sixteen, when acknowledging this Biblical world, Ann cries. Thus in Part Two sadness and death counterpoint happiness and life.

Indeed, the novel's Part Two landscape mirrors in reverse the landscape of Part One. Darkness predominates over light, the exotic permeates the natural, and dangers, imagined and real, come to the fore. Paddling deeper into the mangroves, the children see the curving sandbank as "a crocodile's tail" [p. 112], shags are "sinister bombers" [p. 113], and muddy quicksand sucks Graham down [p. 139]. And in the parallel movements from impression to seeming reality, and simile to metaphor, the rain that in Part One has ripped the water like "machine gun bullets" [p. 57], becomes the river which is "torn up by machine-gun bullets" [p. 111]. When the children are confronted by a hermit's decaying body, and a family's gravesite, death becomes explicit. Finally, hearing real gunshots, and seeing a rescue party as Japanese soldiers, the children ironically create in their imagined reality the destructive forces that they fear.

With the encroachment of water, mud, death, and war onto the idyllic world, the children's relationships progressively deteriorate. Jimmy becomes infantile, the authoritarian Jill metes out corporal punishment, and George in the middle is fearful and passive. Their symmetry destroyed, and no longer united in the face of the enemy, the children are at war with each other. This, then, is an Eden on the brink of a fall, while the tone of doom prepares the reader for the novel's shocking climax.

The second section of Gee's novel depicts the rise in Rex's imagination of Jack from "jungle face" to hero. A gala to raise money for the War Effort heralds this change. Reversing earlier images of war, which now appear as forms of entertainment (a shooting range, a tug of war [p. 90], amphibian rides), it also accommodates images of community and social rapport in Jack's music and the crowd's response. Primal, pre-linguistic, and sensual, the music Jack plays on his mouth organ ranges between antitheses. It is wild but soothing, wailing but sweet, and threatens life but animates. Most significantly, in a further ironic inversion of war, the music frees the spirit yet captures the heart. Effectively wooing not only the crowd, but also Rex, Jack fills the centre of Rex's horizon and wins his love:

Jack's music was soothing — and later on, throaty, wild, vibrant, wailing, sweet. It made me catch my breath. It made my heart swell until I thought it would leap out through my mouth on to the grass. <...> Jack stood up and played with his body swaying. Sometimes he bent forwards and sometimes he leaned back, and his hands, cupped over the instrument, imprisoned and let free wonderful sounds. <...> The music went out and over the crowd, it looped out like a rope and caught them in. If you'd been high in a tree you would have seen them flowing in to a point, and Jack there like the hub of a wheel [p. 97–98].

As Rex notes, “I had my <...> Rockfist Rogan” [p. 100]. Hence the second section of *The Champion* completely reverses the earlier relationship of Rex and Jack. At the same time Gee preserves symmetry, for now the four protagonists play at war, with Jack both friend and hero. Indeed, engaging in a primal mud fight much as Lasenby’s child characters did in his novel’s Part One, the children and Jack are equalised, with the mud reducing individual and racial differences:

Dawn and Leo <...> splattered [Jack] with mud, and he, dipping down, came up with great handfuls and threw back. <...> I went ploughing in and a mud fight raged, Jack and me against Dawn and Leo. We drove them back but they split up and took us from the sides. Up and down the fringes of mangroves we went, all of us plastered inch-thick with mud. No side won. In the end everyone threw at everyone else [p. 82].

The mud fight anticipates the greater symmetry the children find in teaching Jack to swim. With “one on each side of [Jack] and one underneath” [p. 110], the four are perfectly balanced, while Rex becomes a more rational human being:

It was his helplessness in the water that calmed me down and made me start behaving in a reasonable way again. I think we all felt the same towards him — protective, and yet somehow protected by him. Equal to him, accepted, yet innocent and simple and silly alongside Jack and all the things he knew [p. 110]¹¹.

In contrast to Part Two of *The Mangrove Summer*, the second section of *The Champion*, depicts ironic versions of war and heroism and, preserving symmetry and harmony, anticipates the resolution that finally occurs.

SYNTHESES

That Jimmy runs away in Part Three of *The Mangrove Summer* is no surprise. Cruelly treated by Jill, fearful of war, missing his father, and with the group’s symmetry destroyed, he constantly cries and wets himself. However, his death in the penultimate chapter comes as a shock. Lasenby extends his novel’s Christian dimension by depicting Jimmy’s death as a crucifixion while making the myth fit the moral message, for this is no cross at Calvary but a mangrove tree in a New Zealand swamp. Hence any emblematic significance is undercut by a hard-hitting realism: Hanging on the tree, Jimmy has drowned, and has been invaded by the mud in which earlier he and the others had played:

Jimmy hung across the branches of a mangrove where the tide had left him last night. In another hour, it might have lifted him again, carried him up the channel, and laid him on the beach where we had spent that first night. His head hung back, his broken leg stuck out. Mud clogged his hair and clothes. His eyes and his mouth were full of mud [p. 172].

Thus Lasenby suggests the destructiveness of the imagination un-tempered by reason, and the dangers of individualism for, if the children had not been deluded and disunited, and if George had acted on what he saw, Jimmy might never have died.

Like *The Mangrove Summer*, *The Champion* ends with an escape and death by drowning. But where Lasenby's child characters, unaware of Jimmy's diminishment, become disunited, Gee's child characters work together to try to save Jack who goes AWOL (a term for "absent while on leave"), and runs from the Military Police. Recalling Jimmy's progressive diminishment, Jack regresses beyond childhood towards a pre-existent state. First his colour seemingly changes from "faded black" [p. 124], to "yellow" [p. 127], to "white" [p. 135]. Second, again recalling Jimmy, he becomes engulfed by the beach landscape. Having earlier paddled on its surface, he wallows in it thigh-deep like a "hippo", then descends waist-deep, and then up to his chin [p. 134], finally to drown in the very beach on which Rex once so innocently played. Like Jimmy, Jack therefore fades out of the symmetrical group, the landscape and the book.

In similar manner to Lasenby, Gee presents death as an ironic sacrifice — Jackson Coop (whose initials recall those of Jesus Christ), is the scarred soldier who has fought to save mankind, been persecuted, and died. However, in contrast to Lasenby, Gee refrains from explicitly depicting death, and dwells instead on the adult Rex's dream of Jack's survival:

Perhaps he tried to swim ashore. He could dog-paddle after all. He wouldn't give up. And sometimes I wonder if he made it — just kept on kicking, paddling, as we'd taught him. Reached the other shore and pulled himself through the mangroves there. Was that someone moving, someone slipping quietly away? And he hid in the bush, up the coast where Dawn had shown him on her map; and somehow managed to survive <...> and travelled to Chicago after the war. He's in Chicago now, living happily... [p. 173]

At the end of *The Mangrove Summer* the children are once more in sympathy. Jill cries, George acknowledges that she is "one of us again" [p. 174], Ann hugs everybody, Brown the dog is found, and George and Ann remain close. Jimmy's death seems to have saved George who more thoughtfully takes collective responsibility for it. But Lasenby's emphasis on the individual as solitary and powerless supersedes his ideal of the social group. With the family now "broken up" [p. 177], the novel's landscape reflects not peace, but spiritual depletion: Jimmy's grave site is "dull red with the dead flowers of pohutukawa" [p. 175], "the grass <is> burnt brown by summer, and the sky <is> copper-coloured with smoke from peat fires" [p. 177]. Turning his attention to Brown the dog,

George remains unresolved, while his fragmented family drives in their car beyond the novel's ending and into New Zealand's drought-stricken Waikato landscape. And, long after the novel's conclusion, Jimmy's shocking impalement remains in the reader's mind. Hence Lasenby's symmetry breaks down, and *The Mangrove Summer*'s linear structure allows content to move beyond form.

The Champion's circular structure, on the other hand, allows content to be controlled by form. In returning finally to the adult narrator's modifying view, Gee emphasises the lasting effect of the balanced social group, and constructs a satisfyingly rounded novel that frames Jack and encapsulates conflict. Indeed, the resolved, adult Rex puts dreams aside, and acknowledges his debt to Jack for his more mature moral consciousness. In a double irony, then, Jack has, after all, been Rex's saviour, while Rex equally is saviour of Jack, whom he restores to life, albeit imaginative, by painting his portrait as "the champion" in the novel. As the adult Rex notes in measured tone, "It's a dream. Perhaps I don't need to dream it anymore. I've never forgotten Jack, and never will" [p. 173]. Inseparable parts of each other, Rex and Jack are as unified as Gee is with them in presenting them in his novel.

Similar in setting, theme, and structure, *The Mangrove Summer* and *The Champion* are semi-autobiographical, realistic adventure stories. However, Lasenby's novel moves from unity to disunity, while Gee's novel moves from disunity to unity. Lasenby, therefore, is the romantic individualist who confronts brutal truths but leaves them unresolved, and writes a survival story with tragic overtones, while Gee is the rational socialist who downplays brutal truth by preserving symmetry, and writes a romance with comic undertones. Finally, although depicting themes that are universal, Lasenby and Gee philosophically are poles apart.

References

¹ In a personal communication Lasenby has noted: "The Mangrove Summer was set at Mum's birthplace, Mercury Bay, where we spent great amounts of time" (Jack Lasenby, email to Vivien van Rij 31 July 2014). Lasenby also notes that he uses the term "the Bay" "partly as an allusion to Mansfield, partly out of loyalty to childhood". He is referring, of course, to Katherine Mansfield's well-known short story "At the Bay" (Jack Lasenby, email to Vivien van Rij 3 August 2014).

² "Creek" is a New Zealand term for "stream". Gee has often recalled the influence of Henderson Creek on his childhood and his writing. See for example [Gree 1977; 1987].

³ For further information on Gee's use of Henderson in his novels see [van Rij 2008]. The thesis includes photographs taken during van Rij's exploration of Henderson and Newington Road, and information gained from interviews with two elderly residents who remembered Gee as a boy.

⁴ For information on Gee's childhood see [McLeod 1989, p. 29].

⁵ For King George VI's character see: URL: <http://www.biography.com/#!/people/george-vi-9308937#abdication-and-a-reluctant-king> (accessed on 04.08.2014).

⁶ For Rockfist Rogan's African adventure see [Wilton 1950].

⁷ For a description of King George VI's temper see: URL: <http://www.biography.com/#!/people/george-vi-9308937#abdication-and-a-reluctant-king> (accessed on 04.08.2014). The name "Rex" is from "regis" which is Latin for king.

⁸ See [Frame 1997, p. 132–138].

⁹ See [Gee 1975]. Interestingly, Zane Grey, a keen hunter and fisherman, frequently visited New Zealand for its unique fishing.

¹⁰ "Bach" is a New Zealand term for a small beach house.

¹¹ For a consideration of the significance of symmetry in Gee's fantasy novels see [van Rij 2010, p. 148–161].

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