

## **Douglas Stewart Prize for non-fiction (\$40,000)**

**James Boyce, *Van Diemen's Land*  
Black Inc.**

For a non-historian – possibly even for some historians – this book offers original and unsettling insights on Australian history. James Boyce avoids the ‘oddly resilient obsession with passing moral judgement’ on the convicts and positions them – not the much smaller number of free settlers – firmly as the building blocks of later Tasmanian society, forming as they did the basis of its labour market in almost all occupations. He emphasises the environment’s impact on these men and women rather than the reverse – though he cites ample evidence of the devastation wreaked on the land, its flora and fauna (particularly by imported hunting dogs) and its original inhabitants.

Boyce’s meticulous research reveals – often in shocking detail – both the degradation of the environment and the policies which led to the destruction of Aboriginal society. While the topography, wildlife and people of Van Diemen’s Land differed significantly from those of the mainland, much of what happened there resonates with developments in other parts of the country. Boyce argues convincingly that the true horror of Tasmanian history is the record of ‘government-sponsored ethnic clearances’ rather than violent clashes between Aborigines and settlers.

This is important environmental and social history, accessible to the general reader and elegantly written.

**Robert Gray, *The Land I Came Through Last*  
Giramondo Publishing Company**

Robert Gray’s memoir is the story both of his parents’ life and his own. Much of the early section is played out against the sunlit landscape of the north coast of New South Wales, the brightness of which only serves to heighten the darkness that stalks the family as a result of the father’s drinking.

Gray’s words rise out of the narrative to stay with the reader the way a poem or image presented in a painting might: the picture might be of his alcoholic father pausing to eat a lush persimmon or two before emptying the outside dunny can, or of the silvery sleekness of fissured logs in the bush at the edge of a tropical valley that he explores as a boy. As the book progresses, Gray the adult poet offers insights into the way he thinks, how he has lived and loved, and the friendships he has forged. His conjuring here of a crusty, aging Patrick White is a tour de force. The memoir winds up back with his parents, and the scenes with his mother, where her mind has gone but her body resolutely lingers on, are perhaps the most striking and haunting of the entire book. This is the circle of life; the land Gray has come through shown in all its sadness, ironies and beauty.

**Chloe Hooper, *The Tall Man: death and life on Palm Island*  
Penguin Group (Australia)**

On 19 November 2004 Cameron Doomadgee, an Aboriginal inhabitant of Palm Island – off the coast near Townsville – was arrested by Sergeant Christopher Hurley for creating

a public nuisance. Doomadgee was very drunk and, according to Hurley, was using abusive language. When they got to the local police station, Doomadgee punched Hurley on the jaw. They went into the station, they fell to the ground, and an hour later Doomadgee was found dead in his cell. A few days later, two hundred of the Islanders attacked the police station and set it on fire with several officers inside. This was the start of a lengthy legal saga: an inquest that was aborted when the coroner had to disqualify himself; a second inquest, interrupted by a court hearing about disputed evidence; and a trial of Hurley on a charge of manslaughter at which he was acquitted.

The clarity and sharpness of the writing in this book is perhaps its most striking feature. Whether describing the landscapes of northern Queensland or portraying the diverse cast of characters, Chloe Hooper creates a vivid impression of a world that most of her readers would never have encountered. It is never easy to write simply about complex legal issues but the book treats the inquest and the trial as arresting dramas while still maintaining a rare analytical skill. Always present in the narrative are the two protagonists – Hurley and Doomadgee – whose history and character are woven seamlessly into the story.

**Dmetri Kakmi *Mother Land*  
Giramondo Publishing Company**

In Dmetri Kakmi's *Mother Land*, boyhood memories, the sense of a mythic past, and poetic language all intertwine to illuminate an aspect of twentieth century history – one perhaps not well appreciated, or even known, by many Australians.

Set on the Turkish island of Bozcaada, or Tenedos as it was once called, it is an account of a brief period of the author's childhood, from when he is eight and a half years old until he leaves for Australia in 1971, just before his tenth birthday. On this island, Greeks like Dmetri and his family live side-by-side with Turks in an atmosphere of distrust and hostility. His mother's hidden unhappinesses and often barely-concealed frustration with her marriage also impact on the boy, as do his fisherman father's periodic violent explosions of anger towards her.

By concentrating on this one period of his youth (except for topping and tailing it in the present), Kakmi immerses readers in his own emotional life and the drama of that period as surely as his island home was sea-surrounded. The immediacy of the descriptive passages makes them achingly real. Finally, although the narrative is above all pertinent to Kakmi's own and the reader's understanding of what transpired on Bozcaada at that time, *Mother Land* is also a poignant reminder of why many people may wish to start life over again in Australia.

**Jacqueline Kent, *An Exacting Heart: the story of Hephzibah Menuhin*  
Penguin Group (Australia)**

Hephzibah Menuhin was born in 1920 in San Francisco. The dynamic of her family was the huge talent of her brother, Yehudi, who became an internationally famous violinist. Hephzibah was a serious musician in her own right and performed with her brother when they were young. But in 1938, aged just eighteen, she abandoned this career to marry a wealthy Victorian grazier and went to live on his property in the west of that State. In the late 1940s and the early 1950s Hephzibah resumed her career as a pianist, first in Australia and then on the international stage. Then in the mid 1950s she left her

husband and children for another man, moving first to Sydney and then to London, which became a base for her worldwide musical engagements.

Jacqueline Kent skilfully traces Hephzibah's professional and private lives through a range of settings. The driven days of her childhood are sharply captured and contrasted with life on a grazing property in Victoria's Western District. The book explores, searchingly but sensitively, Hephzibah's complex relationships with the key persons in her life – her parents, her brother, her husbands, her children and her lovers. This is an intriguing story of musical talent and restless emotion, told by a biographer who has laid open the exacting heart of her subject.

**Christina Thompson, *Come on Shore and We Will Kill and Eat You All*  
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc**

Despite its unconventional mix of serious history, personal and family memoir, travel, anthropology, and cross-cultural interaction – and a rather startling title, drawn from an historical incident and explained in the text – this book works admirably on all these levels. Christina Thompson strikes a skilful and engrossing balance between her various themes. She has been an academic in both Australia and the United States and has immersed herself in the history of the Pacific, its exploration and its peoples. Her book draws widely on historical sources, but wears its erudition lightly. Thompson has also been editor of *Meanjin* and the *Harvard Review*: her writing is straightforward and unadorned, though not without lyrical passages, and free of any hint of academic jargon.

On a personal level, her account of her unlikely meeting and later relationship with her Maori lover/husband Seven and his extended family, and of his with her middleclass American family, and the resulting cultural tensions, is both touching and instructive. Australian readers will learn much about the history and people of our neighbour across the Tasman, of which most of us know disgracefully little, from this diverting account.