

# Moving across familiar terrain

## FICTION

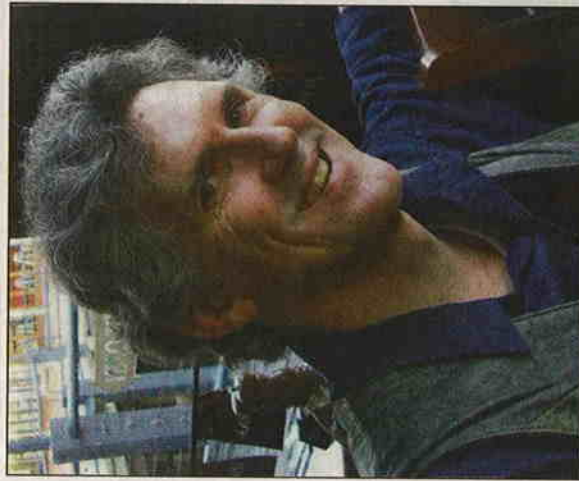
**OF ONE BLOOD: The Last Histories of Van Diemen's Land.** By Craig Cormick. Australian Booksellers' Association. 410pp. \$25.

Reviewer: **PETER PIERCE**

In his introductory note to *Of One Blood: The Last Histories of Van Diemen's Land*, Craig Cormick makes two claims which – although they might at first seem to be at variance – turn out to be complementary. This is a novel (short-listed for the Vogel Award for the best unpublished fictional manuscript) which is “based on broad historical research”, but whose island setting is “a land of the imagination”. In the latter respect Tasmania (as it has been named since 1856) grows paradoxically larger, and darker, in the national imagining.

Cormick concentrates on the crucial decade of the 1830s in Van Diemen's Land, at the end of both the the bushranger challenge to civil authority, and of the Black War that Lieutenant-Governor Arthur had initiated against the Aborigines. Two outlaw leaders are depicted, as shadowy figures of legend and as bloody menaces to order: the Irish bushranger Finn (based on Martin Cash) and the Aboriginal Magpie (based on the black tracker Musquito brought over from the mainland). But the novel's focus is mainly on two misfits and self-promoters: the convict Jorgen Jorgensen, one-time ruler of Iceland, and the Protector of Aborigines, George Augustus Robinson.

These two morally ambiguous and parasitic characters have commanded much fictional and historical notice. If, as the blurb professes, “this is a novel that wades boldly into the battlefield of the History Wars”, Cormick still takes us over some much-travelled terrain. Irish political



Canberra author Craig Cormick: Tasmanian tale. Prisoners – notably Meagher and Mitchell – have had distinguished attention from Thomas Kenneally and Christopher Koch. No Van Diemonian narrative fails to give at least a cameo to the convict cannibal and trail-blazer Alexander Pearce. The records abound with other chequered lives that await resurrection in story. Still, Cormick prefers his pair of complaints.

Nonetheless – if at excessive length and with atrocious proof-reading that might explain the low price of the book (“rouges” appear singly and in bands) – Cormick creates an imaginatively consistent and engaging world. Much is familiar – crazed governors, floggings to death (a fate faced by Tasmania as a literary subject), murderous roving constables, the risible Black Line. Nor could any story of Robinson, and what



historian James Boyce calls “the west coast clearances” in his brilliant new study of Van Diemen's Land, be complete without his native associate and accomplice: “Danger and Trugemanna were his constant companions.”

*Of One Blood* (a title more optimistic than the events of the book warrant) is sympathetic to most of its actors. The style is usually disciplined and sometimes eloquent, especially when imbued by the lament for loss. If Robinson once enjoys “an erection the size of the Tasman Peninsula”, he is also chastened by the rebuke of the child of a sealer and an Aboriginal woman whom he seeks to “rescue”: “... you come to steal me away to the island of death”. For one of its governors, the island is “a land of unending tortures and demons”. In the last days of his freedom, Magpie “was leading more ghosts than warriors”.

Here alike are defeated idealism and desperation. Many stories of Van Diemen's Land find little that is consoling apart from the rich lode of misery and violence so often, and misleadingly, seen as the key resource of its history. Cormick has attempted with some success to make the well-known feel strange, and as if experienced for the first time, but it is certain that neither this novel, nor the journals of its principal agents, will constitute “the last histories of Van Diemen's Land”.

**Peter Pierce is a former professor of Australian literature.**

# People make book about me. I don't like.

## BIOGRAPHY

**SACHA BARON COHEN: From Cambridge to Kazakhstan.** By Kathleen Tracy. HarperCollins. 278pp. \$32.99.

Reviewer: **FRANK O'SHEA**



Sacha Baron Cohen has been so successful in his different guises that it is doubtful if there is anyone left on the planet who could be taken in by him. As I was reading this book, the news agencies were announcing that he had decided to retire the man-child character Borat and the delusional gangsta rapper Ali G. Their very success had precipitated their demise.

Cohen was not the first to use the disguise of an inept interviewer as a vehicle for getting laughs. Gary McDonald did it with his alter ego Norman Gunston and the various incarnations of *Comedian Camera* are based on a similar idea. What distinguished Ali G and Borat was that they set out to offend; the humour of their work comes less from the outrageousness of their statements than from the reaction of their guests.