

THE SILK MERCHANT'S SON

PETER BURKE

ABOUT THE BOOK

In 1845, a young linguistics professor is unceremoniously removed by his father from a life of luxury and pleasure in Lyon. Carrying a quantity of silkworms and a huge donation from a wealthy benefactress, Fabrice Cleriquot is instructed to assist the native inhabitants of the Swan River Colony – an English Protestant outpost on the verge of financial collapse.

Joining Fabrice on his reluctant voyage are twenty-eight mismatched Catholic missionaries. Bishop John Brady has a diocese half the size of Europe and not a penny left to run it; Dom Salvado seeks to create a Spanish Benedictine monastery deep in the bush; and the Irish Sisters of Mercy hope to 'rescue' little girls from the bush to raise as Christians.

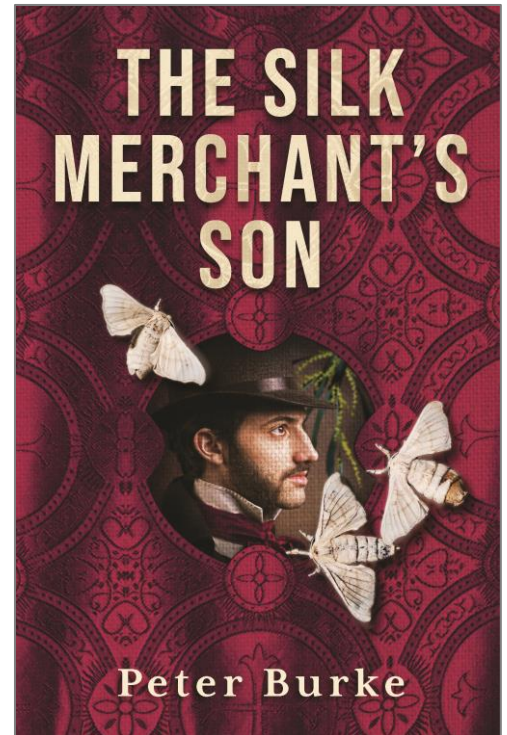
As France descends into turmoil and the cosy world Fabrice has left behind crumbles, this atheist embarks on his own spiritual journey, bearing witness to the actions of his misguided companions as they attempt to rescue the colony and the original inhabitants from themselves.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Peter Burke is a Perth doctor and writer of Western Australian historical fiction. He was born in East Fremantle and educated at Catholic schools, starting with St Benedict's in Applecross, which perhaps left its mark on him after all. His first novel, *The Drowning Dream*, a pearling mystery set in Broome in the early twentieth century, was shortlisted for *The Australian/Vogel's Literary Award* and WA Premier's Book Awards. *Wetwening Auralia* is set in the 1890s goldrush and tells the story of the malign forces that hounded the pipeline engineer C.Y. O'Connor to his death.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Fabrice is sent off to Western Australia by his father to allow time for a scandal to be forgotten about. His father suggests Fabrice is a disappointing son and 'typical of his generation' (p. 16). Do you think these familial relations and attitudes are still present today?
2. On p. 23, Bishop John Brady and Fabrice discuss the true intentions of the Church in Western Australia. Brady claims that unlike in Europe, the Church will be on the side of the poor this time. What do you see as Brady's motivations for his missionary work in Australia?
3. 'Great principles, he noted, made no sound as they collapsed.' (p. 25) What is Fabrice feeling when he has this thought? What other principles collapse during the course of this novel?
4. Why do you think the author has chosen an atheist as the main fictional character in this historical novel? What role does Fabrice have in how we receive this story?
5. How would you describe Salvado's attitude toward Fabrice's atheism when he states 'I can only admire your faith.' (p. 32)
6. Why do you think chapter three is entitled 'The Rot Sets In' (p. 50)?
7. The impoverished state of Ireland during this time is remarked upon extensively throughout the book. What parallels in the treatment of the Irish people do you see in what is happening in the new colony?
8. During his time in Western Australia, Fabrice, being a linguist, learns some Aboriginal language from the people he meets. How do you think this impacts his opinions about the treatment of Aboriginal people by the missionaries? What role can language play in promoting empathy and relatability?
9. Salvado quotes Captain Irwin from Ogle's book: 'the natives will be gradually deprived of their hunting and fishing grounds and are so forced, unprepared, into new modes of life and new conditions of society.'



- (p. 84) To what extent do you see the Church being accountable and aware of its actions and its role in the establishment of a new colony? Do you think the missionaries themselves are aware of the consequences of their actions?
10. 'A revelation came to him, not from some fraudulent priest, but from his own pure observations of the natural world. Atheism, he saw now, was a sort of blindness.' (p. 194) How is Fabrice changed by his experiences in Australia?
 11. Characters like Roger Smith appear to strive for equality: 'Man or woman, Athenian or Corinthian, white or brown, freeman or slave, these things were no consequence to Epicurus, and nor shall they be to us.' (p. 116) To what degree is that reflected in their actions and attitudes?
 12. Why has the author chosen to write a moment in which humanist Roger Smith and Dom Salvado shake hands thinking 'what an excellent convert the other would make, if only the fool could be made to see the light.' (p. 120)?
 13. Sam Moore discusses the 'unhappy interactions' between colonists and Aboriginal people in the context of similar encounters in Africa and the Americas (p. 134). Are violence and conflict inevitable outcomes of colonisation?
 14. On the matter of raising aboriginal girls in their convent, Sister Ursula Frayne is made to say: 'Such are the necessary cruelties, for the orphans will no doubt by nature want to see their mothers again.' (p. 215). What forms of dramatic irony does the author play with in this text?
 15. "It was not your fault, Léandre," Fabrice whispered, embracing his friend. "You are free." (p. 227) What are we supposed to make of Léandre? Are there any characters which invite our sympathy more than others?
 16. According to Fabrice, the Pope is just '... a rich and powerful king. All the rest is subterfuge.' (p. 325) Do you think there is truth to this statement? Does it still hold today?
 17. On leaving Italy, in frustration with the Church, Dom Salvado removes his cloak and considers throwing it overboard. Why does he finally decide New Norcia could not work as a secular project?
 18. Salvado's lonely pilgrimage along the camino to his old monastery in Santiago de Compostela is an invention by the writer. What purpose does it serve?
 19. The final words in the book mirror the last words from Voltaire's *Candide*. Pauline Jaricot suggests, just as Pangloss does, that the answer to life's difficulties lies in gardening. Does it?

INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

The Silk Merchant's Son is inspired by a chapter in Western Australia's recent history. What for you made this history a story worth reimagining?

Well, the New Norcia story is just such a fantastic tale, and happily for me has never been told well. The version I learned at school in the 1960s and 70s was written by Catholic hagiographers, with Salvado being a living saint and the aboriginal people hapless victims he was protecting through God. I wasn't interested in 'correcting' this by writing an equally untruthful reverse version, i.e. to portray Salvado as some force for evil, because my readings of his own words told me this was not the case. Instead, there seemed an opportunity to contemporise the story by restoring the complexity. Look at all the elements; colonialism, racism, petty sectarianism, missionary zeal, bad behaviour of people living at the frontiers, clericalism, anticlericalism, power struggles between nuns and their bishops, and so on. It was quite exhilarating unpacking all the pieces actually, and putting them back together as a coherent, slightly fictionalised story. I never got bored exploring these issues, and have tried to reveal both sides of every coin. I hope the reader catches some of the writer's enthusiasm and perhaps is provoked to do some moral head-scratching at times.

What were the challenges of structuring this novel? At what point did you decide Fabrice was a necessary part of the narrative?

I suppose the main challenge was, whose POV do I tell the story from? There are so many in this tale. Inventing Fabrice partly solved the puzzle for me. This book was to be read in the 21st century, obviously, not in 1846. Readers' views have changed. Many, perhaps most, readers will be broadly secular in their views. Some will have a hostile view towards organised religion, most would disapprove of proselytising, and of colonialism, and of empire, and of European hegemony, and so on. Well, my fictional characters share those

modern views to an extent. Fabrice is a bit marginalised, finding himself exiled from Lyon, and he is a kind-hearted man really with a sceptical view of organised religion. His involvement with the humanist Roger Smith amplifies this a bit, but also helps trigger his own spiritual journey. My hope is that this device makes it harder for the modern reader to switch off or feel disengaged with the story...perhaps even have a bit of a spiritual journey of their own! The book might say to the reader who has already made their mind up on such matters...all right, you're in the story, so what choices are you going to make, smarty? Remember, it's 1846. Quite apart from all that, telling the story largely from Fabrice's sceptical viewpoint allowed me to inject a bit more humour and irony in the book than may have been possible if it were told from the POV of a saintly bearded Spanish monk in a black cloak. And anyway my Salvado can well hold his own against academics; he is an educated man and greatly enjoys teasing the atheist for his 'faith'.

What kinds of exciting things did you discover in the process of your research?

So much we didn't learn at school. The New Norcia / Salvado tale we got was half morality tale, half boy's own adventure. And it was boring. All the good bits were expurgated. Who would have known that these missionaries were gathered from all over Europe, spoke seven different languages, that some were escaping a wave of European anti-clericalism. That Bishop Brady was stony broke when he arrived? Who knew that the Spanish mission was the only one talked about because the other two were such flops? Of the poor French priests sent to Lake Mollyalup to survive on frogs and rice, or poor Don Confalonieri sent to a half-abandoned naval garrison at the tip of the Coburg peninsula, north of modern day Darwin? Who knew of the adversity suffered by Ursula Frayne and her nuns, penniless and baking in their heavy gowns designed for a Dublin winter, and her battles with Brady? That the Benedictines were so fiercely independent? That they were dumped by Captain Scully in a stupid location in the middle of a hot dry summer? And above all, who knew about the wonderful, gossipy, selfish, deeply-flawed French novice, Léandre Fonteinne? He was a gift to this writer, for which I must thank the translator of his diaries, Peter Gilet. Discovering Fonteinne's diaries really decided me that this was my project. I had no idea at the start of the tragic deaths of so many of Brady's missionaries, variously caused by tropical fevers, madness, tuberculosis, cholera, drowning at sea, or being shot at close range by a French novice in a hut on Victoria Plains. I was surprised to learn that Salvado was never bishop of Perth, nor of New Norcia, but of that terrible outpost on the north coast of Australia called Port Victoria, for reasons known only to Rome. That the early colony had an official interpreter for the natives, in Frank Armstrong. I learned of various frontier altercations, including spearings and retributive murders or public executions. And I was always mindful of the many stories I am missing; that half of our colonial era history which was not written down and remains only in the oral tradition, or else must be guessed at.

What ultimately should we think of the morality of Bishop Brady's missionary experiment, and of Salvado and New Norcia?

Well, that's a question that I hope lingers on every page of the book without there being any one neat answer at the end. I hope there is not any character in this book who might be described as thoroughly evil or thoroughly good. I don't think that is predominantly how harm happened in colonial times. Harm inevitably happens with colonialism, even colonialism with professed benign intentions, because colonialism is always a form of invasion, and to maintain a colony on land previously occupied requires a sort of annihilation of rights and culture no matter how prettily the colonists might dress it up. Perth does still think itself a very polite, benign place, and so did most of our ancestors think they were. But collectively, of course, great harm was done to aboriginal people here from 1829. The Catholic priests and nuns that came out in 1846 probably thought they were not the problem but the very antidote to it, but the outcome of their actions was just as destructive. How could it not be? The taking of aboriginal children to Rome and Dublin to display or to turn into priests seems to me emblematic of their 'misguided benevolence', if we can call it that. The monks and nuns may seriously have believed that they were being terribly enlightened to give these children such a wonderful opportunity. Perhaps they thought they would make a positive point about their innate capacities. But those children all died away from country.

So, how should we judge historical figures? In the context of their times, I suppose, and with an ounce of humility and generosity from we readers and writers, for it will be us being judged one day, and we too will no doubt fall short of posterity's lofty expectations.

What's next for Peter Burke?

Something short and light. I may not have quite finished with C.Y. O'Connor. I did enjoy feisty Kate O'Connor in *Wetting Auralia* and she may reappear in a little *Famous Five* type detective story set in the weeks after the tragedy of her father's suicide. And I have one tentatively called *Jesus of Narrogin*, set a little into the future, where a hairy fellow from the WA wheatbelt journeys to the sun to escape a modern world that is doing his head in. Another spiritual journey, but this one culminating in incineration!