

A Haunted Land

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Since the nineteenth century, Australian art and writing has had a double vision of the country; as a sunny land of opportunity, and as a place of loneliness and loss. From the diminutive figures of Glover's Aborigines in their sylvan setting to the weird bush and lonely bushmen of Clarke, McCubbin, Kendall and Lawson, the land is melancholy. Yet Leigh Astbury has shown that this settler view of the land is the product of selective vision influenced by English and American ideas of the exotic and the picaresque. It emphasised the lonely prospector or swagman rather than the miners and unionists and their powerful, if ultimately defeated, unions. The idea of sturdy independence, of "freedom on the wallaby", appealed to town-dwellers hoping to own their own homes at least as much as to bushwomen lining their rough huts with pictures from the Ladies Home Journal. As Brian Kiernan suggests, Lawson's early stories found their readership among people forced off the land and into the suburbs and slums of Sydney by the defeats of the 1890s. Recent fiction by white writers has, like Lawson, shown an awareness of the strangeness of the land, but it locates this strangeness more directly in the brutality and defeats of settlement. The sufferings of both settlers and of those they violently displaced continue to haunt their successors. This paper will examine the nature of this haunting in recent novels by white Australian writers.

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... the grand Australian bush—nurse and tutor of eccentric minds, the home of the weird, and of much that is different from things in other lands.

Henry Lawson.

He imagined a whole civilization haunted, like a house haunted by the ghost of a murdered man buried under it ... they were all haunted.

Judith Wright.

The harder we look at McMillan the more we see the patterns of our collective experience and the elements of our contemporary dilemma. The harder we look at him the more signs we see of the kindness and brutality, self-interest and charity, memory and amnesia, decency and hypocrisy that has characterised public and private dealings with Aboriginal Australia from the beginning to the present day.

Don Watson.

I

The white visitor who enters the National Gallery of Victoria's building in Federation Square and walks through its display of Aboriginal art enters a different Australia, not only from the urban crowding outside, but from the art and writing in which a settler society has sought to make its home in a new land. Inside, the planes of dot and line paintings seem to move with their own inner energy. The burial poles shine with the colours of the land; sculptured figures of tricksters and ancestral spirits gaze remotely back at the viewer. The Aboriginal writers and artists who have created these works show us a land of spirits disrupted by the coming of the whites, but their knowledge is not one we can enter without years of patient study. Such writers as Ronald M. Berndt, Stephen Muecke and the anthropologist and novelist James Bardon have done much to make Aboriginal culture available for all Australians to share, but their

work shows the difficulty and the limitations of their task. Those brought up outside Aboriginal culture lack the necessary language, and some symbolic meanings will always remain inaccessible. One of the major complaints of members of the “Stolen Children” generation was that they had been denied this part of their heritage, and that only the most powerful feelings of affiliation could enable those who found their families later in life to overcome the barrier imposed by their earlier separation. For most of the remainder of the population, Aborigines remain, in Vincent Buckley’s words, “part of the other which still challenges the colonists who have misunderstood and demeaned it”. This challenge is dramatised on another floor of the Gallery, where E. Phillips Fox’s monumental painting *Captain Cook Raising the Flag at Botany Bay, 1770* (1902), faces *Chase* (2001), a response by the sculptor, Julie Gough, in the form of a thicket of ti-tree sticks hanging from a metal grid fastened to the ceiling. The painting shows Cook stretching one hand imperiously to the viewer, or the continent, or the future, while his offside points backwards to where Aborigines are threatening with their spears the ship lying at anchor in the cove behind. The sticks in the sculpture could be Aboriginal spears, or nature against industrial technology, or just impenetrable scrub. However we interpret it, it denies the imperial promise of the painting beside it. The land may be conquered, but its enigmatic presence continues to haunt the settlers.

Don Watson and Paul Carter, amongst others, have written of the strangeness white settlers felt in their new land, of their inability to hear its space or its people, and their difficulty in accommodating the language they imposed on it to the reality of their experience. This discomfort was compounded by their relegation of the Aborigines to the margins of their consciousness, and of Aboriginal thought beyond it. From early in the nineteenth century white settlers resented immigrants from Asia. Yet by the end of the twentieth century, Australia had adopted an official policy of multiculturalism, and the lives of the Aboriginal owners of the land had become central to Australian politics. In January 1988 the peaceful demonstration held in Sydney as a counter to the official celebrations

of two centuries of European occupation became the launching pad for a broad movement for reconciliation that culminated in hundreds of thousands of Australians from all walks of life and all major political parties signing 'Sorry Books' and walking with Aborigines through all capital cities. But the circulation of the 'Sorry Books' was itself an acknowledgement of the divisions in the community over this very issue. They were intended as a protest against the refusal of the Prime Minister to apologise on behalf of the nation to the Aborigines for the acts of violent dispossession on which the nation was grounded. If the Prime Minister would not make an apology the people would. When the Prime Minister tried to justify his stance to a meeting called to discuss the issue, a large number of those present responded by rising quietly from their seats and turning their backs on him. The Sydney demonstration had marked the start of a march to reconciliation; this meeting symbolically marked the start of the culture war that is still raging. The culture wars were intensified when government policies led to the drowning of more than 150 boat people off the northwest coast, and the incarceration of hundreds of others in detention camps on the mainland and on Pacific islands. Australia had once again become fearful of the strangers in its midst and the strangers seeking refuge on its shores.

II

Christopher Koch from the first was interested in the history of Australia and, more specifically, Tasmania. The tradition of realist fiction was in the ascendancy when he published his first novel, *The Boys in the Island* in 1958: the same year that Russel Ward and Arthur Phillips celebrated the contribution of fiction and folklore to confident Australian democracy. Koch's book received a bad reception in some quarters because it questioned this tradition, suggesting instead a society that denied its past and repressed its present. This past however remains largely as a background, sensed rather than investigated by the boys as they grow up. In his most recent novel, *Out of Ireland*, history is used explicitly as a way of explaining the present that had been the subject of *Highways to a War*, a book that deals with uneasy attitudes both to the land of

Tasmania and the Southeast Asian countries where Australia has become embroiled in war. *Out of Ireland* takes the reader back to the time of early settlement, to the middle of the nineteenth century when the blacks have been displaced but the settlers have neither freed themselves from their source countries nor made the new land fully their own. The conflict at the heart of the novel is not between blacks and settlers, but between colonials trying to make the land over in an image of England and Irish convicts who have themselves been colonised, yet feel out of place in the new land. "And I'm aware again of the *weirdness* of this place, and of the weirdness of our situation, a world away from where we should be ... *In the northern hemisphere, we are giants; in the southern hemisphere, dwarfs*" (p. 440).

Koch develops this idea of the weirdness of the Antipodes through the reactions of his Irish rebels exiled in a land that at once draws them to it and fills them with a longing to leave, to return to the world of great actions. The pastoral setting is both charming and empty, lacking present action or past history, and is at the same time overshadowed by the threat and desolation of the wilderness. Robert Devereaux, the central character, remarks that it has the "sadness of vacancy." At its centre is a void, which his colleague, Thomas O'Neill, feels is its virtue. "I find here the beauty of a world unspoiled. The world as it was, before we humans filled it with our greed and our crimes" (p. 534). When the chance comes to escape, he declines it. Like Devereaux's convict lover, a peasant girl from Ireland, he finds happiness in the new land. "Out there is a land that is only half inside reality ... This landscape is still waiting for something. It will have its poets, some day" (p. 538). But the notion of a new beginning is an illusion; its prosperity is underpinned by the misery of the convicts and the bloody displacement of the Aborigines. During the carousing and quarrelling of the exiles, we are reminded that the forest is also the haunt of the Ribbonman and bushranger, Dan O'Donnell, who offers an immediate threat to Tasmania's cultivation and the little happiness it has offered to Devereaux and his associates. As another of the exiles remarks, just before taking his own life: "This island is beautiful, but demons lurk

in its forests and streams—and the British have brought demons of their own” (p. 613).

In *Gould's Book of Fish*, Richard Flanagan raises the uncanny qualities of Tasmania to mythic level. The structure of his book is built on a series of plates illustrating the native fish of Tasmania. He gives these plates, which have a material existence in the Tasmanian Art Gallery, a symbolic reference that both resembles human types and exceeds them. The fish belong; the humans they parody do not. The very act of producing the collection is an integral part of colonisation, subjecting the natural world to the dissecting and classifying gaze of the European. The narrative places the illustrations of fish in a narrative of greed, cruelty and megalomania that tears them, as it tears the convicts and their warders out of a native world where they belong and embroils them in a madhouse that eventually collapses under the weight of its own phantasmagoric ambition.

III

The two Tasmanian novels are written at a time when Tasmania seemed to be falling behind the rest of the Commonwealth economically and demographically. This made questions of identity more urgent, and the specific plight of Tasmania became a metonymy for the whole of Australia as it faced the issues of global homogeneity. Alex Miller's *Journey to the Stone Country*, on the other hand, was published in 2002, in the shadow of Pauline Hansen's One Nation Party, which had made racism again respectable in Australian politics. Alex Miller deals directly with the spirits that haunt the Australian landscape, which are both called forth and provoke a militant racist organization. Its plot revolves around Ranna station, in a valley in the Queensland ranges north-west of Mackay. Bo Rennie and Annabelle Beck, grandchildren of pioneers, come here to the old home of the Bigges, their former neighbours. Although the homestead has been deserted for thirty years, and is starting to decay and revert to nature, at first sight it still seems inhabited, furniture and stock-gear still in place, waiting for

the owners to come in from the paddocks. Only on closer inspection does Annabelle see that the dining table is piled with debris from the broken roof, the books in their shelves have been cemented by termites, and the rooms are littered with the droppings of rabbits. She feels that the house is wrapped in “The silence of the long-departed dead. Deep and unbroken until this moment of her entry, as if she were a tomb robber and would inherit their curse” (p. 171). Nevertheless, she is convinced that this relic of the settlers is as important as the heritage of the Aborigines, and sets about cataloguing it. As she works, she feels kinship with the spirits of the dead around her, until she is interrupted by the rude intrusion of Les Marra, elder of the local Aboriginal people, who is determined that the whole property will be drowned out by a new dam. His anger has no time for the past, and he looks only to the future.

The powerful but shocking climax to the novel seems to suggest that the white settlers can never be at home in their new land, and that the thousand year war can end only with total victory for the blacks. But in the final chapter, a kind of coda, Bo and Annabelle do achieve a kind of reconciliation that builds on the labour of Bo’s Scots Grandfather and native Jangga grandmother, who had made their property a meeting place for black and white, for the outcasts of all races. Yet, in giving herself to the rebuilding of this vision, Annabelle acknowledges that she cannot accompany Bo to the stone country of his Jangga people, for it belongs to them alone. This ending allows the Aboriginal people their full humanity, neither inferior nor superior to whites. The novel gives both people a land that they can share, while acknowledging that it holds mysteries that the settlers can never fully enter, not because the places of mystery hold some universal spiritual power, but because the contingencies of history have excluded them from our comprehension.

IV

The hauntings of the land take on an almost fairy tale form in Carmel Bird’s novel *Cape Grimm*. Although, like the works by Koch and Flanagan, the novel is set in Tasmania, its subject is not so much

local as national: the callous treatment of successive waves of refugees. The book takes its title both from an actual Cape Grim on the Northwest corner of Tasmania and from the brothers Grimm, collectors of fairy stories. The novel proper opens like one of their tales: "Once there was a fair country where the people lived in peace and prosperity until there came a time when a strange child appeared and the land was turned to dust, to dust and ashes." The remainder of the first chapter is not about prosperity but about the whole of eastern Australia turning into dust, and about death and disaster around the world. These events are presented in the style of fairy tale, of distant events recalled or dimly glimpsed, and threaded together by the voice of another fabulist, Dr Paul Van Loon, a psychiatrist walled up in his office in the enchanted tower of the Black River Psychiatric Detention Facility. The science of the mind provided the Facility's methods and its ethos, but its inmates leap straight from history into the darkest of fairy tales. Chief among them are Paul Van Loon and his subject or patient, the golden child, Caleb Mean. The first chapter serves to link their story to the wider world, where species hover on extinction, nation states brandish nuclear weapons, children read fairy stories and taunt each other in the playground, moonbirds circle the Pacific in constant quest of home, El Niño brings flood and drought and "Monsters and battles and wild storms are encountered along the way until the darkness closes in, and the land returns to dust and the girl in pink can wash her hands of everything" (p. 6). Through these events comes the cry of the little girl to her father as she wallows in the sea with other refugees after their boat sinks off Australian shores: "If I die in the sea, don't leave me here alone." This cry echoes throughout the novel.

Another drowning starts the history in the novel, as the sailing ship *Iris* sinks off Cape Grimm, and the man, woman and child who become forebears of the idealist community of Skye are miraculously rescued. The later story of these three and their descendants is told in a series of vignettes, not always obviously connected. The final event of this sequence is the destruction of the settlement, which again leaves only three survivors. The parallel of these three—man, woman and child—with the first three inhabitants

is one of a series of parallels and reversals which, rather than narrative, provide the structure of the novel. The Temple of the Winds at Skye parallels the tower at Black River Psychiatric Detention Facility. The name of this institution recalls the designation of the prisons where refugees to Australia are held. The death of the child Daisy, feasting on the food she has set out for the fairies, reverses the survival of the baby Niña, miraculously saved from the wreck of the *Iris*. Caleb, the golden boy, is the Chosen One, and also El Niño, both Christ Child and the destructive current that brings disaster to the lands of the Pacific. He brings death to the community that had its birth from Niña. The loss of the community of settlers follows the destruction of earlier Aboriginal communities at the hands of other settlers. Behind these conjunctions lies a spirituality that is both grounded in nature and ungrounded, sustaining and destructive. Caleb is Caliban, the wild one, and a mass murderer, and the community he destroys is, like such recent historical counterparts as California's 'Heaven's Gate' sect, dedicated to a purity and perfection of life that leads to death. The child's call, "If I die in the sea, don't leave me here alone," is a reminder of the specifically Australian refusal to accept strangers who might pollute our purity and a symbol of the desolation of the individual lost in the seas of the modern world.

In certain respects, Bird's novel is unfinished. We learn only of the beginning and the ending of the community of Skye, not its history. At the end of the novel, Paul and Virginia, Caleb's chosen bride, leave with her child for Florida, and presumably live happily ever after, but Paul has not taken us into Caleb's mind, as he had promised. We are led to believe that Caleb drowns after escaping from the Black River Psychiatric Detention Facility, but he leaves only fragmentary traces and, by the logic of the novel, could well survive elsewhere. A supplement to the novel provides chronological and alphabetical lists of recipes, biographies, myths and legends, snippets of historical and scientific information that feed back into the novel, suggesting other narrative and symbolic threads. More than this blend of fact and fantasy, Paul's comments on the memories

of Aborigines that haunt the pages of the narrative suggest the way we can interpret it.

I entertain a fanciful notion that the cataclysmic grisly violence of the nineteenth century infects the air and the land and the sea around Cape Grimm, and that this disease erupted again in the conflagration of 1992. But the fire did not cleanse, nor did it exorcise. The company of tormented souls that haunt the hills and cliffs has multiplied, and a greater sorrow moans its plaintive way along the winds, intones its deep laments across the groaning waters of the bays (p. 190).

To the legalistic and the mean-minded who would challenge the history behind this sorrow, Paul replies: "When people can listen with the heart of dreams and poetry, then they will know its truth." This novel is an attempt to discover the truths of love and death, nurture and destruction, which lurk behind the facts of history. The incomplete nature of its supposedly factual narrative points to the fullness of its imaginative function that each reader can finish, while knowing it will never be complete, other than through the death that such visionaries as Caleb wreak in the fullness of their egotism.

V

In *The Salt of Broken Tears*, Michael Meehan presents a different sort of mystery—one that finally is not resolved. Rather than dealing with people coming to Australia in search of a home, Meehan writes of people made homeless in a country they had considered as home. A strange girl drifts, or is blown in, to an isolated farmstead in the middle of the Victorian Mallee. After unsettling the family, she disappears in circumstances almost as mysterious, although there are hints that she has been assaulted by one of the farm labourers and has run off with the old Afghan hawker, Cabel Singh. The boy of the family goes in search of them, and the book is the story of his travels through the Mallee. As in all quest narratives, the real object of his search is his true self. The search leads him through his images of the girl and the tales of Caleb, and through the near trackless Mallee

scrubs, desolate with the memory of failed settlement. Meehan's prose is simultaneously allusive and concrete, suggesting mystery and hidden meanings even as it portrays a Mallee that remains harsh and unforgiving:

They picked their way through the dead forests, through the bright pools of rippled salt and crosshatched beds of tablet clay and the grey detritus of logs and fallen branches rotting among the salt. They passed by sandy banks blown up against toppled trees, and tufts of windsown saltbush that hosted hordes of insects that blew up in clouds and sang in circles as they passed. (p. 114)

As he travels, the boy meets the people driven from their land by the relentless salt and sands and winds, carrying with them everything they have hoarded against their future, riding into the wind with

all their deeds and titles, the papers of purchase thereby witnessing that the soil that carried them along, that mounted over roads and fences behind them and against them and their lives and dreams, was indeed theirs while content to lie on the flat face of the earth, letting all these presents know what had been theirs before the roots let loose their hold and the soil began to rise and cruise off upon the winds. (p. 87)

This land is alien to human aspirations, but rather than concealing within itself the memories of black deeds it is actively hostile to humans, mocking them with the reminders of its own past victories over their ambition. The deserted farms, dry wells, abandoned railways and towns, constantly shifting sand and blowing wind, mock any hope. Even sites of homeliness and settled beauty hide the tales of a demented man locked for years in a cellar, or a woman locked even more desolately with her dreams in a deserted house in

the middle of a busy town. Cultivation only renders the land still more comfortless.

By the late part of the morning they had moved beyond the fringe of scrubland and into a new kind of desert with trim netting fences and yellow toppled stubble and iron sheds that shone in the sun from many miles away. They crossed the bare flats of cleared and loose and shifting soil where even the spaces that lay to the side of the tracks had been cleared and burned, the country shaved and broken and submitted to the square, a map of neat white gravel roads and thin and filleted lines of timber and sometimes laden trucks that rolled up from the distance at a mighty sliding speed and s[prayed them with flying sand and gravel as they passed. (p. 173-74)

It is from this settled country that the final horror of the novel comes.

This is a novel with little dialogue. Its action moves between the twin poles of words and silence. The land the boy travels through is empty, trackless, yet marked by precise place names that we can find on a map. The few people he meets offer stories that the boy, or the reader, must fit together to supply meaning. Like the map, language is also a doubling, shutting the user off from the meanings that are contained in the silence.

Meetings and water become metaphors of illumination in the dry, silent land the boy traverses. Meetings provide meaning just as water supplies life. The two come together when, after he finally has come to the Murray, the tribes-people come on him while he is bathing joyously in its waters. They watch in silence,

Simply watching the white and naked boy alone with an old horse and a dog, playing together in the heart of the last of the unbroken land, playing at the heart of the last of the wild country, in the long belts of uncleared and unwanted scrub and deep river forest that was all that

was theirs when the last of the maps were laid out. (p. 163)

They take him in, give him succour. But his journey takes him on again. He leaves the blacks with their last refuge, where they live in a past rich in tales and a present marked by cast-off rages and wreckage, “and the cans and bags they had fished out of the river.” He leaves with the body of the man who has fallen with his secrets and dreams and loneliness into the river. He has now learned that only on the roads can people endure the secrets that remain buried in the houses—the secrets of unacknowledged or crippled love, death, war, loneliness that lie below the thankless and pointless toil of his family and the lives and deaths of those he meets on his travels.

For all its indifference to human presumption, the land remains an actor, like the gods in Greek epic and tragedy. It punishes those who defy its power and try to bend it to their own purposes. But it also brings a dreadful fate to those who are content merely to travel through it, asking for nothing but to be left to find their own path in life. Their lives affront those whose own desires remain thwarted, and who therefore must destroy what they cannot understand, taking what otherwise would be freely given. Their brutality contradicts the belief of Australians in their own essential decency and fairness. As a witness to the tragedy, the boy finally learns that he himself must remain a wanderer or deny his recognition of his common humanity with the outcasts. By accepting his existential loneliness, he also contradicts the settlement myth of the safe home built in the midst of a harsh and hostile world.

VI

These novels raise the question of why Australian novelists are so obsessed with history. A simple answer is that they feel the need of the novelistic imagination to correct histories that are bounded by written and oral records. The historians John Hirst and Inga Clendinnen have challenged this, suggesting that the novelistic imagination misrepresents history. In *Dancing with Strangers*,

Clendinnen demonstrates how far this imagination can take us in understanding an alien culture, and how much must remain forever unknown. The novelists discussed in this paper are not however trying to extend history so much as come to terms with the issues it raises. Their work comes from a time when Australia was deeply rent by conflicts about the nature of our past, and about our responsibilities to the rest of the world. Their works contribute to this debate, and in doing so look some way across the otherwise insuperable barriers that separate us from our settler predecessors and from the descendants of those who occupied the land before them. Yet what seems to be lacking are new Aboriginal writers confronting the present in terms of the past, in the manner of Sam Watson, or writers from any background who deal with the disintegration of politics and the demoralisation of dissent that has allowed problems of race and country to resurface.

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