

 TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE 

Wade Davis. *The Wayfinders: Why Ancient Wisdom Matters in the Modern World* (University of Western Australia Press, 2009)

There is something quite extraordinary about the kind of book that has the reader dreaming in technicolour about small boats and navigators of the ocean. Navigators named Nainoa and Ka'iulani who, Wade writes, 'would remain awake for twenty-two hours a day for the entire voyage' (57).

The description of the islands rising out from the sea to greet the boat, *Hokule'a*, hints at the need we have for a human interpretation of nature. This premise resonates throughout the book. Nainoa requires no additional skill, no compass, no map other than holding the ocean and the sky in his heart. He is the compass; and, just as I can read this book, Nainoa can read the ocean – a far more challenging task, worthy of awe and fascination.

The language the writer evokes is both poetic and profound. There are dashes of the omnipotent voice, the archaic all-knowing eye that can (and does) glimpse the end of this delicately beautiful planet we call Earth. The fact that this series of lectures, were originally *spoken* rather than written may well contribute to Wade's somewhat hyperbolic style, but the outcome comprises a wonderful and challenging array of thoughtful and highly knowledgeable discussion.

Is there anything, I ask myself, that Wade Davis doesn't know? His travels stretch to the Arctic, where he travels by dog sled with Theo and Jens, navigators in an ocean of snow rather than salt water, the arrival of a small robin in the snow signalling a much greater chain of events, a new dawning. The Inuit have no word for robin. We realise that at the basis of civilisation (in its *broadest* sense) is our human need to name and understand, to bring the unknown into the known, to name the robin.

Wade employs a chronological approach. We learn about the San in the Kalahari whose language consists of 'a cacophony of cadence and clicks' (20), the beginnings of human communication adding up to a total of 141 clicks. I wonder how we could sum up the use of language in our time, and stop. The thought breaks into a million fragments before I can grasp the enormity of such a task.

We learn about the sacred hunt, 'a ritual exchange that ends with the creature literally making of itself an offering, a sacrifice' (25). The description of San nature, solidarity, pride and fierce unity initiate the reader into the writer's eye as he casts his glance over all that he has seen and all that he wishes to share with us.

The clarification between a Western definition of Aboriginal Dreamtime and what this spiritual journey really means is endlessly fascinating.

A moment begins with nothing. A man or a woman walks, and from emptiness emerge the songs, the musical embodiment of reality, the cosmic melodies that give the world its character. (149)

Inevitably, the washing ashore of Europeans on the beaches of Australia must have its space on the page, and I for one wince to realise my forefathers' arrival had such a catastrophic impact. When speaking of the Aborigine, Reverend William Yates recalled. 'They were nothing better than dogs' (151).

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Further horrors follow. The depressing knowledge that ‘the state of California spends more money on prisons than on universities’ (195), and that in order to keep up with Western consumption levels we would need *four* planet Earths by 2100, to feed, clothe and keep us warm.

I find my thoughts turning to the panic I heard in my sister’s voice when she told me hydro-drilling would begin near her house in Ithaca, upstate New York. No amount of protest would make the drilling stop. The fate of the land was already settled. She knew little of the scientific composition of the chemicals to be injected into the earth, but was frightened enough to think about leaving her community behind, running with her family to a new and safer place.

Wade Davis would tell her such safe places are hard to find, yet his wonderful descriptions of the Indians of the Sierra Nevada give hope to all but the most cynical. ‘People are not the problem but the solution’ (142). These Indians call themselves The Elder Brothers of the earth, the caretakers of this delicate planet, and yet Older Brother has formally asked Younger Brother to learn and break through ignorance before it is too late.

Is it too late? My pessimistic belief is that indeed it is; therefore it is a heart-warming exercise to read the optimism that follows a heart-rending litany of misdeeds from Darwin to Cecil Rhodes (who is quoted as saying: ‘and the more of the world we inhabit, the better it is for humanity’ [12]). Thomas Whiffen, a British army officer turned explorer described the Columbian Amazon as ‘innately malevolent’ (13) – the list is endless. Underlining each point in subtext is (I feel) the creeping suggestion: how can human beings be so stupid?

Wade’s optimism is stalwart and focussed. There are, he says, ‘currently 1,500 languages gathered around the campfire of the internet and the number increasing by the week’ (217). These voices have really only one thing to say: climate change. The very topic scientist and politicians were denouncing as nonsense only a few years ago. Wade sets out to question why ancient wisdom matters, but ends his exploration having given us so much more.

The glimpse we have into his world is bright as a shiny new pebble, varied as any rainbow. One only has to read the names he reels out with such aplomb. The Arhuacos, Wiwas, Kogi, Kiowa and Makuna make themselves known to the reader – strange and magical; they are no longer the naive but the all-knowing. The message in this book seems to be of a way of pooling knowledge. This world (Wade states) is all we have, without it we are nothing, and sharing what we have resonates throughout ancient times, stretching through the decades to ask us to do the same.

One never knows when you will be that stranger turning up in the night, cold and hungry, thirsty and in need of shelter. As I watched Mohamed pour me a cup of tea, I thought to myself, these are the moments that allow us all to hope. (223)

Anne Lauppe-Dunbar