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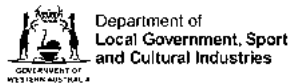
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64.1

New Writing from
Western Australia
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Westerly

The Randolph Stow Memorial Lecture

Saturday 23 February, 2019
Andrew Lynch

Andrew Lynch is Emeritus Professor of English and Literary Studies at The University of Western Australia. His recent and forthcoming publications, as co-editor and contributor, include *A Cultural History of Emotions*, 6 vols, (Bloomsbury, 2019) and *The Routledge History of Emotions in Europe, 1100–1700* (2019). He is also an editor of the journal *Emotions: History, Culture, Society*.

It's a great honour for me to be asked to give this memorial lecture for Randolph Stow. Thanks to the Westerly Centre and the Festival for inviting me. Stow's writing has been a part of my life since my early twenties, when I was given the Penguin *To the Islands* (1962) as a birthday present. I didn't know then that when Stow wrote it he was the same age as me reading it, or that it was his *third* published novel. After that, I read *The Merry-go-Round in the Sea* (1965) and *Tourmaline* (1963). Then in my early years here at the University of Western Australia (UWA) I first read two more: *Visitants* (1979) and *The Girl Green as Elderflower* (1980). Quite a few years later, after many re-readings, I think of Stow as a great artist, a poet amongst the English-language novelists of his time.

This lecture exists to honour Randolph Stow as an Australian writer, and especially as a West Australian. It takes place in the state where he was born and raised, in the city where he went to secondary school, and at this university where he lived (at St George's College) and was a brilliant student and literary and theatrical figure. Stow had long left Australia when I first came to Perth, but there were plenty of people around the English Department who knew him, and who feature in the recent biography by Suzanne Falkiner—including Peter Cowan, Bruce Bennett and Bill Dunstone. Also Dr Helen Watson-Williams, to whom he once submitted an essay beginning 'Dear Mrs Double-W, I hope our prose will not trouble you'. He must have been daunting to teach. One of his tutors remarked:

He invaded authors (as someone said) like a monarch. Instead of being content with the necessarily thin selections of the syllabus, he would sink himself into everything he could find by each author we came to. (Falkiner 78)

What really comes across to me about Stow's time at UWA is the breadth of his interests and studies, and how deeply the formation of his identity as an Australian writer was marked by both local immersion and world awareness. As Suzanne Falkiner tells us, by the end of Stow's four years at UWA, he had a BA in English and French, had written three novels (one unfinished), published thirty-five poems and numerous skits and dramatic pieces, and had work broadcast on the ABC (from the age of eighteen) (Falkiner 104, 82). He knew German and Latin, taught himself Italian, Spanish and Scots Gaelic, and read widely in anthropology—this was before UWA had an Anthropology Department—and in art. Stow's educational and intellectual environment was confident, outward-looking and active. During his time as an editor of *The Winthrop Review*, an ancestor of *Westerly*, it published Australian writers, including WA locals Donald Stuart, Olive Pell, Mollie Skinner and Mary Durack, but also work on French, British, American, Irish and Hungarian literature, art and theatre, and it stood in opposition to censorship and the White Australia policy. It's not what you might expect of mid-1950s Australia, deep in the Menzies era, and often characterised as a time of second-hand Britishness and cultural cringe. From the beginning Stow was finely attuned to his local landscape. Yet he always saw and heard things in a larger mindscape of language, place and time. He's famous for his evocation of particular places, whether it's the Kimberley, the Mid-West coast, the dry inland, New Guinea or East Anglia, but in other ways his books are about interpenetrations of times, places and languages. He learned languages and you might say he learned voices too. He heard voices, from the living and the dead, and let them speak in his books about the conditions of life in time and place. That's one reason why I think of him as a true historical novelist. My talk tonight is going to wander through this landscape and mindscape, looking at some of the interconnected themes that preoccupied Stow throughout his novels—trauma, myth, love and home.

The first of these themes is trauma. All Stow's novels are about crises in which individuals and communities face historical changes and revelations in consciousness that threaten their sense of being in the world. His novels are all acts of recovery, creatively working over the past. Stow's distinctive method of working was first to construct the details in his head, then to write the narrative down on pen and paper at high speed, and usually at a long distance in time and place, before revision. *Tourmaline* was written in Leeds; *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea* in New Mexico; his New Guinea novel *Visitants* in Suffolk. His work can't be divided into 'Australian' novels and 'other' novels, because his idea of consciousness and his artistic

methods didn't work like that. Consciousness is layered. Disparate images connect. Memories persist. Voices from one place are heard in another. Old events and words return out of time.

Trauma

I'll go back to *To the Islands*, first published in 1958 when Stow was twenty-two. It's set in 1957 on an Anglican Aboriginal mission station in the Kimberley. It has, in Stow's words, 'a *King Lear*-like theme' (Stow in Falkiner 180), of an old man's madness and self-realisation in the wilderness, and is shot through with reference to medieval lyric, Jacobean drama, hymns and liturgy, folk song and the poetry of Baudelaire, Hopkins and many others. It also contains an oral history, sourced from Stow's friend Daniel Evans, of a massacre of Indigenous people in 1926 (Falkiner 165). In this novel, Stow tries to come to terms with the incompatible in his consciousness as a settler Australian: his family love of the land, his European education, his knowledge of Indigenous culture, and also of the criminal history of white colonisation. The protagonist of the story, an ageing Anglican missionary, Stephen Heriot, has lost his sense of purpose in life, and believing he has killed an Indigenous man, wanders into 'Dead Man's Land', thinking about 'being born out of crimes': "It was because of murders that I was ever born in this country. It was because of murders that my first amoebic ancestor ever survived to be my ancestor. Every day in my life murders are done to protect me. People are taught how to murder because of me" (*To the Islands* 159–60). Heriot feels personally implicated in an endless cycle of violence. Part of this feeling comes from self-obsession and melancholic introversion, but part of it comes from his increasing inability to disconnect the work of his mission from the broader mission of colonial exploitation. In his pastoral life, he looks for a fusion of Indigenous and European cultural expression. But, as a white man, he comes to see himself as an aggressor to the local people, and his attempts to identify with them create a sense of survivor guilt. Typically of Stow's protagonists, Heriot's ending is to find himself alone. Yet in his aloneness he takes the next step on an inner journey, as at the land's edge he looks out over the sea for the islands of the dead:

The old man knelt among the bones and stared into the light. His carved lips were firm in the white beard, his hands were steady, his ancient blue eyes, neither hoping nor fearing, searched sun and sea for the least dark hint of a landfall.

'My soul,' he whispered over the sea surge, 'my soul is a strange country.' (208)

Stow once wrote, 'The environment of a writer is as much inside him as in what he observes' ('Raw Material' 4). His books are famous for the sense they give of the physical environment, but I think they were also ways for him, a very private man, to discover and share through visible signs the invisible nature of his mind and soul. The 'country' of his novels is his shared soul. Their existential bleakness and constant awareness of loss and death are not depressing; they are the default conditions in which he celebrates acts of shared love, and creates moments of benign connection.

Take for example the scarifying passage in *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea*, when Rob realises the loss of his childhood home,

asking himself how a country town on the sea had become a provincial seaport, how a world so congruent, so close-knit by history and blood and old acquaintance, had become fragmented into a mere municipality. (215)

As Rob comes to think:

The world the boy had believed in did not, after all exist. The world and the clan and Australia had been a myth of his mind, and he had been, all the time, an individual. (283)

Stow is not usually seen as a 'realist' writer, more as a novelist of consciousness, but his work is full of insights into how consciousness is formed within the surges of historical and social change. The young man of *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea* goes through the same kind of grief for lost community and faith as the old man of *To the Islands*. Each grieves for a lost myth. But the grief brings understanding and new discovery, and re-affirms strong attachment to place and lived time. Our sense of Rob's loss depends on our knowing what he has had, through the amazing early chapters of the book which create such an intimate community of the land, the family, the young boy and the reader. Death and loss make communion all the more important. The book gives us, permanently, what it takes away. In this sense, the 'myth' exists in reality.

Myth

This brings me to the next theme, Myth, and to the two books by Stow I want to talk about most: *Visitants* and *The Girl Green as Elderflower*, published in 1979–1980. *Visitants* tells the story of Alistair Cawdor, a patrol officer in the Trobriand Islands in the late 1950s, at a time when Papua New Guinea was an Australian dependency. Cawdor's wife has left him. Because of this, he feels an increasing sense of shame in his dealings

with the local people. He is excited by reported sightings of a 'star-ship' above the islands, which he half-connects with the story of Christ's nativity. He is filled with epiphanic 'joy' at the news of the star-people's ship—"His face was moved, he was suddenly like a child. "In the star-machine, you saw people?"; "O Christ, no. Don't you see?" (106–107) But he tells the Islanders that it is merely "crazy talk": "I think it is a machine of the Americans" (107). "It is a story, that is all. [...] There are no people in the stars" (101). He is desperate to believe, and to hold communication with the world beyond time and space, yet constrained by rational norms. He loses himself between the 'It is' of his desire for the myth and the 'It can't be' of modern scientific convention.

The sightings also stir up a belief in some of the Islanders that they are about to receive restoration of wealth stolen from them by the European settlers. At the end of the disturbances that follow, Cawdor suicides. He has become prey to psychotic delusions through cerebral malaria: 'It is like my body is a house, and some visitor has come, and attacked the person who lived there' (189). But his last words are "I can never die" (186) and his last writing is a version in the local language of the words of Julian of Norwich, a 14th-century mystic: 'All shall be well and all manner of things shall be well' (188). They hold a promise of an obscure meaning to existence and consolation for suffering.

The Girl Green as Elderflower is a version of these events in which recovery is possible, and Julian's words that 'all shall be well' are tentatively fulfilled. Stow wrote the two books partly in tandem. He was not able to finish the dark ending of *Visitants* until he'd finished *The Girl Green as Elderflower*, written first though published later (Stow in Hassall 311). Its narrative runs over the course of a year as Crispin Clare, a version of Alistair Cawdor who has survived, gradually recovers from his trauma in the Suffolk village from which his ancestors originally came to Australia. In its outline this looks like a story of recovery achieved by coming 'home' to a place of origin and in some ways the novel stages it as that, as a re-affirmed sense of heritage and belonging. This kind of thing is exemplified by the dust-jacket notes of the first edition, probably supplied by Stow himself. The notes speak of Stow's 'forebears, East Anglian on both sides of the family', and state that 'much of his adult life has been passed in his ancestral county, of which his great-great-grandfather was an industrious historian'. The later identification of East Anglia as 'home' might seem intended to silence four intervening settler generations, in a mood of cultural rejection. In the manuscript of *Visitants*, written close to the same time, Stow's acknowledgement of a Literature Board grant 'during the heady early days of the Whitlam government' (191) is followed

by the later deleted words: 'before the lumpen-bourgeoisie re-established its Nixonian dictatorship. This book is *pour prendre congé* of my native land'. But for all this talk of forebears and inheritance, we can note that the Australian family dynasties in Stow's earlier novels are mainly very unhappy: there, ancestry is trauma. In interviews, Stow claimed to 'feel like a Suffolk boy' (Kinross-Smith 20), but *The Girl Green as Elderflower* complicates the 'ancestral' relation to country with many hauntings and temporal displacements.

Clare is possessed by memories of his recent time as a colonial patrol officer, which has culminated in a psychotic episode and attempted suicide. This back story, frequently recurring in the novel through dream, voice or somatic memory, closely associates *The Girl Green as Elderflower* with *Visitants*, and breaks down the boundaries between ideas of an ancestral 'home' and its implied colonial alternatives. These are revealed as strategic constructions within the same psychic struggle, rather than fixed locations or separate states of being. Is Clare really at 'home', or in exile? How do you find 'home' after grief and loss?

The Girl Green as Elderflower deals with this conflict between myth and science in an indirect way by introducing into its framework a series of stories based on English authors of the 12th and 13th centuries. They are medieval tales of marvels but written to engage with the lives of the modern characters in the story. They include: a wild man of the sea captured and brought on land; a mischievous sprite named Malkin; a phantom dog mourning the death of his master; and several versions of the central story: two green children of unknown origin are discovered in a pit; the boy dies, but the mysterious green girl lives on and eventually marries a local man. She is called both Mirabel—the girl to be wondered at—and Amabel, the girl to be loved. She becomes for the text an emblem of desire, curiosity and creative potential. Mirabel/Amabel complicates ideas of fixed 'origin', 'home' and 'exile' by telling different stories of where she has come from to anyone who asks her. She answers the question 'where are you from?' in different idioms, according to the nature of the questioner. To a farm labourer she is the worshipper of a fertility god; to a knight she is an orphan needing protection; to a priest she is a Christian devotee of St Martin, patron of generosity; to a young and timid clerk she is a sorceress; to the sole survivor of a massacre of Jews she is a Tartar child sold into slavery (125–134). In each case, the questioner's wish to know the stranger's origins intersects with her different wish to be loved and to find a 'home'. The variety of answers mocks the ethnographical and theological terms which are used to describe her: "My test has failed," says the priest "and therefore I am forced back to my first position, which

is that they have fallen from the moon” (120). Mirabel/Amabel leads on her interlocutors with inventions suited to their favourite discourses. She disallows their pretence of scientific distance and exposes the erotic investment in anthropological enquiries. She refuses definition, refuses to allow a distinction between myth and science, marvel and reality. Through her, the wish to understand is frustrated by multiple answers, yet consoled by the continuing renewal of desire, and kept from the possibility of tragic finality. The point for her is not to ‘know’ but to be able to love, to find home.

Stow uses the middle ages in this novel to extend the sense of what is ‘there’ in the conceptual landscape, much as he involves *Visitants* with eye-witness reports of the ‘star ship’. These narrative supplements make up for perceived absences in straight history. The point of their inclusion is as much about relativities of the real and hierarchies of knowledge as about literal truth-content. Much of the uncanny material in the novel is communicated by the invisible sprite, Malkin, also taken from a 12th-century chronicle, who speaks in Latin, Suffolk dialect, and the language of the Papuan region where Crispin Clare has been traumatised. She is a kind of counterpart to Clare’s own troubled psyche. Through her intervention the borders of the ‘real’ are opened to include myth, legend and other marvels, what the historian Nancy Partner calls ‘the dazzling variety of 12th-century “reality”’ (140). The medieval communications that Clare channels through Malkin slowly involve him in a more benign version of the ‘voices’ that have been a part of his mental illness—“people talking too fast and too low for me to understand” (75). He is still ‘possessed’, but now by an intelligible and conversable spirit, which allows the products of delusion and over-imagination, the irrational, conventionally the ‘medieval’ in modern culture, to be faced and brought under discrimination.

Stow’s medieval does not console the modern by offering escape. Clare’s medievalist stories are themselves forerunners of modern traumas: race-hatred, genocide, rape, homophobic violence. The massacre at Lynn is linked to the Holocaust; the tale of the ‘wild man caught in the sea’ references the hatred of the National Front ‘for foreigners swamping the country’ (92–93), and the latent hostility in the anthropological study of ‘wild’ people. Rather, the point in Clare’s medievalist creations is their ability to acknowledge likeness in difference, and to establish a more equal dialogue with otherness. To Clare, as an exiled stranger in the place, the medieval tales of abandonment and dislocation, with their lost, alien figures subjected to scrutiny by the ‘priests’ and ‘psychotherapists’ of the period, present a likeness to his own situation. The tales recall his grim history as colonial anthropologist, but in a benign difference from the fate

of Alistair Cawdor, they bring him to see the inevitable occurrence of pain within a cycle of death and remaking, rather than as infinite trauma—what he earlier calls ‘the everlasting terror of a process without term’ (32). The point of the medieval tales lies in their imaginative communication and desire for connection with others. Although Clare’s medievalism might seem unpromising, a confirmation of his status as ‘relic of the past’, it symbolises the bridging of distance, the acceptance of difference, and the necessary co-existence of incommensurable and inexplicable data in consciousness. The novel is about being able to live with things you don’t understand. In its broader context, Clare’s new life in Suffolk becomes not just a personal therapy but a statement of how the world and community might be re-imagined and re-inhabited after grief and disaster.

Love and home

Finally, and briefly, my last theme—love and home. All Stow’s novels are about love. For him, love brings grief, but it is the creative energy that survives trauma and death, and allows continuity. It’s not so much that the novels are ‘about’ love. For Stow, writing is a form of creating love, a way of bringing about intimate connection and communion. That’s overt in the fabulous ending of *The Girl Green as Elderflower*, when Mirabel/Amabel finds her peace at last: ““Oh my love,” she said, “Oh my own one. Oh my home”” (165). The creative ‘green’ energy in the book is inseparable from Mirabel’s search for love. Her story realises in surprising ways the network of desires that makes up Clare’s re-admission to community, and finally offers him a glimpse of ‘home’. It’s not ancestry—‘where are you from?’—but where you love that makes ‘home’. The priest at Mirabel/Amabel’s deathbed invests grief and love with religious significance. ““In love is grief... In grief is love... Pity my grief. Let my grief teach you to love mankind”” (166). That language clearly attracts Stow, but the book doesn’t give it final endorsement. I’d like to end here in a different idiom. In a short essay on poetry he wrote in 1957, Stow says he met ‘an old man in a pub in the north of South Australia’.

He lectured me on the value of poetry in life. ‘Poetry,’ he said, ‘is a veneer.’ And then, ‘You see that door up there? It looks solid. Maybe it’s rotten all the way up with white ants, but it hangs together on the outside. You know why? Because the white ants inside are all holding hands.’

[...]ater [Stow says] it struck me that he had his metaphor reversed. It is poetry that causes white ants to hold hands. (Stow in Falkiner, 183–184)

To me, this is a great description of what Randolph Stow's novels do. They're ways of letting us hold hands as community, and of making the disparate phenomena of the world 'hang together' in our consciousness. Thank you for letting me share my enjoyment of them with you tonight.

Note on the Text

Some of this lecture was drawn from an essay published in *Australian Literary Studies*: Andrew Lynch, "I have so many truths to tell": Randolph Stow's *Visitants* and *The Girl Green as Elderflower*, *Australian Literary Studies* 26.1 (2011): 20–32. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.20314/als.ddb41c538d>.

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Bracing Ground

Anne Elvey

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