

# Vanishing wunderkind

## *The great oeuvre of the enigmatic Stow*

by Tony Hassall

The judges of the early Miles Franklin Awards clearly knew what they were about. Their inaugural award went to Patrick White's *Voss* in 1957; the second to Randolph Stow's *To the Islands* in 1958. At the time, White was in the early stages of a distinguished career that would bring him Australia's only Nobel Prize for Literature, while the precocious Stow also promised great things. Hailed as a literary wunderkind, he had published two novels, *A Haunted Land* (1956) and *The Bystander* (1957), and his first collection of poetry, *Act One* (1957), by the time he was twenty-two. When *Act One* was awarded the 1957 Gold Medal of the Australian Literature Society and *To the Islands* won it the following year, plus the Melbourne Book Fair Award and the Miles Franklin, he seemed to be embarked upon a stellar career.

Stow regards his early books as prentice work and has not allowed either *A Haunted Land* or *The Bystander* to be reprinted. Nevertheless, they begin his exploration of the territory he would make his own: a fascinated unease with the landscape of his native Western Australia; the failure to sustain love; and the alienation of the self from a psychic other that it fears but cannot escape. The novels and the early poems also evoke his native landscape with a spare and resonant clarity that few other Australian writers have matched. Happily, these talents and preoccupations were brought to bear fully in *To the Islands*, Stow's first major novel and a worthy successor to *Voss*, with which it shares a spiritual quest into the arid heart of Australia.

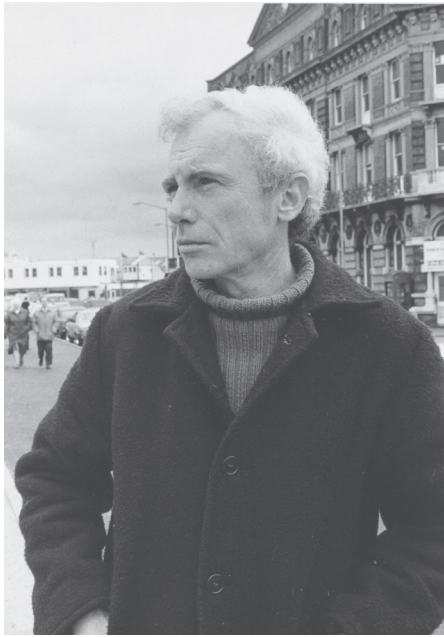
Set in the harsh landscape of northern Australia, where Stow worked at the Anglican mission to the Umbalgari people in 1957, *To the Islands* explores some of the darker recesses of the European annexation of Australia with an authority that the passing of half a century has not diminished. It tells of the last days of the ageing, Lear-like missionary Stephen Heriot, who has devoted his life to atoning for a massacre of Aborigines at Onmalmeri. The legend of this massacre, which is closely based on the historical Umbali massacre of 1926, focuses on the continuing conflicts between European settlers and the indigenous inhabitants. The alienation of the Europeans in a landscape they have claimed but not yet truly possessed is reflected in the inner alienation of

Heriot, who has lost belief and love, and finds himself imprisoned in a sterile ritual of atonement. Heriot is a richly human character engaged in an agonised search for a home in an alien universe. The final tableau of him alone on a cliff above the Arafura Sea, confronting the strangeness of his soul and looking out towards the Aboriginal islands of the dead, is one of the unforgettable images of Australian literature.

*To the Islands* enjoyed immediate critical and popular success, and rapidly acquired the status of an Australian classic. In recognition of this, Stow revised it in 1981, eliminating what he saw as some youthful faults. In 1959, however, after four books in as many years, he began work as an anthropologist and cadet patrol officer in Papua New Guinea. There followed what he has described as the first of his silences. He did, however, eventually return to writing, and his second collection of poetry, *Outrider*, was published in 1962, and his fourth novel *Tourmaline* in 1963.

The reception of *Tourmaline* was in stark contrast to the enthusiastic welcoming of *To the Islands*: it received no awards and bewildered many of its readers. Another spiritual fable, it is set in the future in an isolated Western Australian mining town after a nuclear holocaust. Where *To the Islands* contrasted missionary Christianity with a disregarded but not unknown Aboriginal culture, *Tourmaline* juxtaposes an American style of revivalist Christianity with the quietist Chinese philosophy of Taoism. The unfamiliarity of the latter contributed to the unease of its first readers. Provoked by their incomprehension, in 1966 Stow published '*From The Testament of Tourmaline: Variations on Themes of the TAO TE CHING,*'[sic] which linked the novel to a series of translations from the sacred book of Taoism. In the years since that initial controversy, *Tourmaline* has come to be regarded as a deeply considered meditation on the spiritual malaise of white Australia and, like Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, as a searching exploration of how human life might struggle to survive after the self-immolation of Western society. It is also one of Stow's most dazzling prose poems.

Stow once surprised a radio interviewer in his hometown of Geraldton by 'reading' some of his poems without a text. His habit of completing poems men-



Portrait of Randolph Stow, Essex, 1985  
photograph by Alec Bolton (NLA)

tally before committing them to paper extends to his novels, which he completes in his head before writing them down in short, intensely sustained bursts. It is no surprise then that, while not simply prose poems, they have the graceful symmetries and the sustained imagistic patterns of poetry as well as the quotidian detail of novels. As the example of *Tourmaline* and the poems from the *Tao Te Ching* illustrates, there are many connections between his poetry and his novels. When, for example, the hauntingly cryptic poem 'The Land's Meaning' is read as a

gloss on the landscape of Heriot's soul, which has lost its love of man in the waste places of his Kimberley mission, the poem emerges as a reflection on the strangeness of Australia and of the estranged souls it harbours: 'The love of man is a weed of the waste places. / One may think of it as the spinifex of dry souls.'

Much of Stow's poetry remains less accessible than his novels and, apart from his fellow poets, it has attracted fewer readers; but it rewards those prepared to tease out its images and hear its haunting rhythms. His elegy for Miss Sutherland MacDonald, the original of Rob Coram's beloved Aunt Kay in *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea*, is one of the best. Stow's second collection of poetry, *Outrider* (1962), illustrated with a series of paintings by Sidney Nolan, is now a collector's item. Stronger, denser and more consistent than *Act One*, it shows that his poetry had matured as rapidly as his fiction. It was followed in 1969 by *A Counterfeit Silence: Selected Poems*, and in 1990 by *Randolph Stow: Visitants, Episodes from Other Novels, Poems, Stories, Interviews and Essays*, which includes a complete collection of all the poems he then wanted preserved.

There are strong links between the central group of poems in *Outrider* and the later novels *Visitants* (1979) and *The Girl Green as Elderflower* (1980), all three of which draw on Stow's experience in Papua New Guinea in 1959. He spent much of his time there in the Trobriand Islands, learning the local Biga-Kiriwina language, but he eventually contracted a bout of cerebral malaria, which saw him invalided back to Australia. He first explores this deranging illness in the *Outrider* poems that chart an anguished journey into and out of the psychic crisis precipitated by the malaria. Disturbingly

dense and cryptic, they recall the later poems of Frances Webb, and Bruce Beaver's *Letters to Live Poets* (1969).

Stow returns to that experience in *Visitants* and *The Girl Green as Elderflower*. *Visitants* was published after a decade of virtual silence. As the years passed with no new books, that silence began to look ominous. Admirers feared that Stow had finally abandoned the 'counterfeit silence' of writing for a real and permanent silence. It would have been an unhappy end to a literary career that showed such early and abundant promise, but this was not the case. The first three parts of *Visitants* were written in 1969–70. The final section was also fully composed: 'I don't start writing until I've written something through to the end, so by the time I started on *Visitants* in 1969, I had written the whole thing, in effect.' He could not, however, bring himself to set down the final section, 'Troppo', because it was too painfully close to an experience not yet exorcised. The block persisted for almost a decade, while he researched the novel that was to follow and complement *Visitants*. He began to write this new book, *The Girl Green as Elderflower*, on New Year's Day in 1979, and completed it in a month. The writing of this positive sequel to *Visitants* fortunately proved therapeutic. Like Crispin Clare, the writer-protagonist of *Girl Green*, Stow found the writing of this book a 'rebeginning'; and in the wake of its completion he wrote the last section of *Visitants*.

While its gestation was difficult and protracted, *Visitants*, as many reviewers observed, was worth waiting for. As economical as the best short fiction of Conrad, which Stow admires, *Visitants* is tautly and vibrantly written, and brilliantly evocative of its Trobriand Islands setting. Its complex multivocal and multicultural structure is managed with an assurance that both contains and intensifies a narrative that throbs with political violence and the terror of psychic disintegration. Its action takes place in a tropical colonial outpost prior to independence, where the white characters occupy a position of uneasy authority over the restive Islanders. Failures of communication between the two cultures are heightened by the sightings of four human figures in a disc-shaped craft in the sky above Boianai in Papua in June 1959. The white Patrol Officer Alistair Cawdor increasingly sees himself as a visitant, losing his sense of contact with other human beings and dreaming instead of contact with the star-people in the Boianai flying saucer. In the background, the Islanders carry out a political coup against the ageing Paramount Chief under the cover of a Cargo Cult uprising. The two narratives, entwined by their pervading tropical imagery, echo one another: the ruthless political takeover is juxtaposed against Cawdor's personal torment as he falls prey to a psychic usurper. Cawdor is Stow's most harrowing study of alienation, and the account of his decline eclipses even the tragic intensity of Heriot in *To the Islands*.

The novelist Crispin Clare, Cawdor's alter ego in *The Girl Green as Elderflower*, recovers from the illness he

contracted as a colonial anthropologist. This is the first book Stow set in East Anglia, where he had lived for more than a decade, and it is in that softer landscape, and within the pattern of its seasons, that Clare is brought back to life by his newly rediscovered family and by old and new friends. Stow works all of these people into his adaptations of three twelfth-century Suffolk legends, originally recorded by Ralph of Coggeshall and William of Newburgh. In their different ways, these legends all address the isolation and alienation that are part of Clare's illness, and in revisiting them he is repossessing the house of his spirit – which has, in the imagery of *Visitants*, been invaded by an alien – as well as discovering the country of his ancestors that is, in an atavistic sense, already his own. A gentler and more hopeful alternative to the bleak intensity of *Visitants*, *Girl Green* fictionalises a vital stage in its author's spiritual autobiography, and is understandably a favourite of his.

Stow's last book, *The Suburbs of Hell* (1984), is both a traditional murder mystery and a meditation on the random depredations of death. A serial killer stalks the streets of Old Torwich – like the Nedlands monster in Perth, in 1963 – and the inhabitants are terrified by a string of seemingly random and motiveless murders. Readers are left with a number of suspects, but no confirmed killer, and no end to the terror that has been aroused. One prime 'suspect' is death itself, which looks over the shoulder of the gunman in a number of the book's sequences. Stow has described the book as a modern version of Chaucer's *Pardoner's Tale*, with its parable of death, and while the characters are contemporary, the stark morality of Chaucer's medieval tale is retained. The Essex landscape here replaces the Western Australia and the Trobriand Islands of Stow's earlier work, but his abiding preoccupation with loneliness, alienation, terror and death is again starkly dramatised.

In the years since the publication of *The Suburbs of Hell*, Stow's reputation has largely rested on *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea* (1965). Continuously in print since its first publication, this much-loved masterpiece has recently been included in the Popular Penguins Series. Pitched between fiction and autobiography, *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea* draws closely on the author's 1940s Geraldton childhood. That childhood is, however, poetically transformed to contrast the secure circling of nostalgia with the remorseless progression of time and change. Rob Coram grows from six to fourteen, from a safe, enclosing childhood to an uncomfortable sexual awakening, and from his early discovery of time and mortality to his adolescent discovery that 'the world and the clan and Australia had been a myth of his mind, and he had been, all the time, an individual.'

His story begins as a recreation of a lost childhood world. As the boy grows older, however, and the war takes his beloved role model Rick away, the emotional tone of the book is complicated by the sufferings of

war, and the pain of growing out of childhood into a troubled, restless adolescence. The book captures the contradictory feelings of its author as he looks back on a golden childhood with fierce nostalgic longing, while at the same time seeing it as transient and irrevocably separate from mature experience. Explaining why he is leaving Australia, Rick tells Rob: 'It was a good country to be a child in. It's a childish country.' Left alone at the end of the book, Rob looks out towards his merry-go-round 'most perilously rooted in the sea', as early generations of Australians looked out to an image of Britain beyond the sea, a homing beacon in the flux of antipodean existence. In its sensitive exploration of Rob's reluctant progression into a world of divided allegiances, *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea* stands alongside earlier Australian classics like Henry Handel Richardson's *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* and Martin Boyd's *Lucinda Brayford*.

With the publication of *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea* in 1965, his children's book *Midnite* in 1967 and *A Counterfeit Silence* in 1969, Stow completed the body of fiction and poetry that drew on his twenty-five years in Western Australia. In 1960 he went to England for the first time and, like Peter Porter and others of that generation of literary and artistic Australians, he has continued to live there. During the early 1960s Stow travelled extensively in Britain, Europe and the United States before settling in Suffolk. He last visited Australia in 1974, and his long absence, his distaste for self-promotion and the twenty-five years that have elapsed since his last book have contributed to a decline in his reputation. His books are no longer on bookshop shelves, but many are still available. In addition to *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea*, his other major novels remain in print, and the fullest collection of his poetry is also in print in his *Australian Authors* volume.

As Gregory Kratzmann pointed out in the July–August 2009 issue of *Australian Book Review*, 'Amnesia about writers of the past, even the not too distant past, is one of the besetting ills of our culture'. It would be a sad loss to that culture if its amnesia were to extend to Stow's defining contributions to it. A private rather than a social observer, he confronts us, in achingly beautiful writing, with men who are alone, adrift in the outback, the desert or the jungle, searching for peace within themselves and with God. Like their search for love, their search for personal reconciliation is seldom rewarded, but always intensely and empathetically imagined. His novels and poetry embody a uniquely rich and strange account of the land and people of Australia that we can ill afford to lose. ■

**Tony Hassall's** *Strange Country: A Study of Randolph Stow*, and his Australian Authors volume: *Randolph Stow: Visitants, Episodes from the Other Novels, Poems, Stories, Interviews, and Essays* are published by UQP.