The Story of a (Post)Colonial Boy

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In many ways Randolph Stow was a solitary figure, someone content with his own company, happier in silence than in small talk. The fact that he published five novels and two volumes of poetry and had won the Miles Franklin Award before he was 30, and that after turning 50 he more or less maintained a writerly silence, means his life was also strikingly singular. While acknowledging the obvious importance of these intensely individual elements to Stow’s character, in writing his biography I am aware that these are only part of the story, that his life must also be understood in the context of a collective, a clan. What follows is a discussion of Stow’s colonial heritage, how this influenced his sense of self, framed key experiences in his early life, and is reflected in his representation of indigenous-settler relations in two of his most widely read novels, *To the Islands* and *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea*.

When, over ten years ago, Stow and I first corresponded about the possible shape his authorised biography might take, he admitted to being ‘a bit of a genealogy-nerd’ and suggested the book include ‘a short introductory section on family history; not everyone’s cup-of-tea these days, of course, but I think, in the case of colonial
families, it’s interesting to know where people came from…” I was not surprised by this suggestion, because by then I had already come to understand the importance of Stow’s colonial heritage to his sense of self. While elements of Stow’s paternal line can be traced to the Domesday Book (1086), it is his colonial forebears which most fascinated him. These date back to Francis Eppes I, who, in the early seventeenth century, was among the first Europeans to settle in the colony of Virginia. One of his descendants, Elizabeth Randolph Eppes—a second cousin of Thomas Jefferson—married the Reverend Thomas Quinton Stow, Randolph Stow’s great-great-grandfather. An Independent (or Congregationalist) minister from the small Suffolk village of Hadleigh, the Reverend Stow was a member of the London Colonial Missionary Society. Soon after the Colony of South Australia was declared in 1836, Reverend Stow was appointed its Colonial Missionary and, in October 1837, he and Elizabeth and their four sons arrived in Adelaide. Two years earlier, Stow’s maternal great-grandfather, George Sewell, had travelled from his home in Maplestead, Essex, to the Swan River Colony. There he met and later married Elizabeth Logue and, in 1866, after the birth of their sixth and last child, George Ernest Sewell (who was to become Stow’s grandfather and who died in 1935, shortly before Stow was born), the family moved to Champion Bay (now known as Geraldton). It was there that Stow’s great-grandfather occupied land which he called ‘Sandsprings’ and which Stow renamed ‘Sandalwood’ in The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea.

Many of the descendants and relatives of these early immigrants have lived interesting lives as, among other things, prominent pastoralists, jurists (including a Judge of the Supreme Court of South Australia), an editor of the South Australian Advertiser, a Kalgoolie prospector, a renowned painter of wildflowers (Marian Ellis Rowan), and a pioneer of Australian ethnography (Catherine Langloh Parker, author of Australian Legendary Tales). As a rule, though, Stow was never terribly impressed by his forebears who, he said, ‘did the practical, worthy things’,
But what did excite me...was the idea that my family had been colonists since the reign of James I, and they had gone on being colonists, not only in Virginia, but in St. Kitts, and Western Australia, South Australia...I liked the idea of that adventurousness...about sort of setting out into the blue to found the colony in Western Australia and South Australia—it just is absolutely amazing.

It is the sheer audacity, the courage, that so captured Stow's imagination; the willingness of these adventurous ancestors to leave the secure certainty of Suffolk and Essex to travel to the other end of the world, to the unknown.

Yet, Stow's pride in and celebration of his colonial ancestry is held in constant tension with his sorrow regarding the historical victims of European settlement and his affinity with indigenous people. Explaining his youthful attraction to the Jindyworobaks' desire to embrace 'the original possessors of the soil' and 'forge a new Australian identity and sensibility which would be a product of the land itself', Stow wrote in 'Settling In':

My own picture of the Aborigines could be described as cloven. I lived in a district where White settlement began in 1850. Among the settlers who dispossessed the Aborigines were my great-grandfather and his wife's brother, whose descendants still own those two stations, with their remnants of rock-shelter paintings and stone circles. (9)

Stow's first novel, written when he was only twenty, was called A Haunted Land, and the sense in both this book and even more so in The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea, is that any wealth or enjoyment his family has derived from these properties was ghosted by the violence of Aboriginal dispossession.

Stow's sensitivity to his ancestors' dispossession of Aborigines was part of his broader interest in indigenous cultures which, in turn, led to his own first-hand involvement in a colonial-type enterprise.
In 1957—the year in which his second novel and first volume of poetry were both published—Stow, still aged only 21, came to an arrangement with Bill Jamison, the newly appointed Superintendent of the Forrest River Anglican Mission in the north Kimberley. According to the Mission’s records, Stow told Jamison of his desire to do some anthropological fieldwork and asked if he might work for the Mission while pursuing his interest in Aboriginal culture. The Superintendent agreed and for three months, from April to July, Stow paid one pound a week to live in a mud and grass hut. Working as a volunteer in the Mission store, he spent his spare time talking with Oombulgurri people and exploring the stunning Kimberley landscape, often going on long walks and camping out by himself. Inspired by these experiences, in September of that year he began writing To the Islands, which, when published in 1958, won both the Australian Literature Society Gold Medal and the Miles Franklin Award.

To the Islands tells the story of Heriot, a sixty-seven year old mission superintendent’s existential crisis. Renouncing his faith and declaring himself ‘a wicked man who wants to be dead’ and who ‘hates everyone’, Heriot concludes that his life of philanthropic work has been a sham, that in fact he ‘was a misanthrope all the time’ (72). Amid the confusion of a violent storm, Heriot throws a rock at Rex, a rebellious young Aborigine whom he blames for the death of his Aboriginal god-daughter, Esther. Thinking he has murdered Rex, and consumed with remorse and self-loathing, Heriot flees into the harsh country beyond the Mission in search of the islands; the Aboriginal resting place for the spirits of the dead. When another young Aboriginal man, Justin, successfully tracks Heriot down, he saves him from despair and certain starvation and guides him on a journey towards wholeness and reconciliation. Along the way, they meet a number of other lost souls wandering in the wilderness, one of which is Rusty, a man who once murdered his business partner and is now, like a guilt-ridden Godot, waiting for something to happen to him, for the gods to take their revenge. Having listened to Rusty’s story, Heriot tells him of the things he once knew, but until now had forgotten.
About crimes. About being born out of crimes. It was because of murders that I was ever born in this country. It was because of murders my first amoebic ancestor ever survived to be my ancestor. Every day in my life murders are done to protect me… Oh, God…if there was a God this filthy Australian, British, human blood would have been dried up in me with a thunderbolt when I was born. (1958: 156)

Later, talking with another of these lost souls, Sam, the hermit, Heriot describes his life as being marked by three expiations. The first being his birth as a human which drove him to charity; the second, the massacre, done by his race at Onmalmeri, which compelled him to work at the Mission; and the third, his hatred, which resulted in his violence towards Rex and which has rendered him lost (178–9). The story of the massacre at Onmalmeri provides an historical context and narrative parallel for Heriot’s own act of violence. A footnote appears at that point in the text informing the reader that, ‘This narrative was taken down verbatim from an account by Daniel Evans of a notorious massacre’ (Fn. 54). Daniel Evans was Stow’s closest Aboriginal friend during his time at Forrest River. He would often drop round to Stow’s hut in the evenings and have a wongi, usually about aspects of Aboriginal culture. On one such night, Daniel related the story of the Umbali massacre. ‘[T]he next night’, Stow explained to me, ‘I got him to come back and tell it again, slowly, while I took it down on the typewriter.’

In 1928, a white stockman called Mr Hay was riding the boundary of Nulla Nulla Station when he discovered a couple of old Aboriginal women collecting gadja (or lily-roots) from a billabong. Seeking to punish them for this supposed trespass, he flogged and beat the husband of one of the women who had been sleeping under a nearby tree. His desire for retribution still unsated, he then broke all of the old man’s spears. Despite being bloodied from the beating, the Aboriginal man managed to pick up his broken shovel spear and hurl it at Hay, who was about to ride off on his horse. The spear lodged in the white
man’s lung. The horse galloped away, but after a short distance Hay fell from its back, dead. Once Hay’s body was discovered by his fellow stockmen, they, along with policemen from Turkey Creek, set off in search of his killer. With their investigations proving futile, their desire for justice became a blood lust for revenge, resulting in them massacring men, women and children up and down the Durack and Gulgudmeri rivers. Daniel Evans told Stow:

At Umbali there was people camping near the river. They shot the old people in the camp and threw them in the water. They got the young people on a chain, they got the men separate, shot the men only. While they was on the chain the policemen told the police boys to make a big bonfire. They threw the bodies in the flame of fire so no one would see what remained of the bodies; they were burned to bits. They took the women on a chain to a separate grave, then the police boys made a big bonfire before the shooting was. When they saw the big flame of fire getting up, then they started shooting the women.\(^7\)

Stow published the unamended transcript of Evans’s oral history in *The Bulletin* in 1961. In the note accompanying this article, Stow wrote, ‘Daniel’s account of this tragedy seems to me most valuable, not only as a very concise and impartial statement of what his people have suffered at our hands, but also as an example of the legend-maker in action.’\(^8\)

In the Preface of the revised, 1982 edition of *To the Islands*, Stow explains that he in part wrote the novel as ‘propaganda on behalf of Christian mission-stations for Aborigines, in particular for one Mission on which I had worked for a short time, and which seemed in danger of closing down’.\(^9\) In the retrospective light of the *Bringing Them Home Report* (1997), which alerted us all to the tragic consequences of the policy of forced removal of so-called ‘half-caste’ Aboriginal children from their families, this seems an ignoble cause for which to fight. And in that Preface, Stow concedes that in the
early days some of the missions ‘deserved their low opinion’. He goes on to say, though, that by 1957, ‘the year in which the novel is set, it seemed to me that at least one of them was performing a valuable service to the Aboriginal community which it housed and employed, and which, indeed, it could be said to have created’.  

Reading To the Islands now, over fifty years after it was written, what is most interesting is not the way certain aspects of it have dated, but how the spirit of it has become so contemporary; the way Heriot’s desire for forgiveness and reconciliation pre-empts current debates. Perhaps now, more than at the time of its publication, it has the capacity to expand our sympathetic imagination. By the book’s end, the old colonial power relationship between Heriot and Justin has been totally inverted, with Heriot having become a dependent, frightened figure, and Justin his protector. Still wracked with guilt about Rex, Heriot tells Justin to explain to everyone at the Mission that he acted out of love, not hate.

‘It’s my only defence. It’s the world’s only defence, that we hurt out of love, not out of hate.’

‘Yes, brother.’

‘It’s a feeble defence,’ said Heriot, with sadness, ‘and a poor reconciliation. But we have nothing else.’ (198)

To acknowledge the fact that some people who implemented policies like the forced removal of Aboriginal children were acting, if not out of love, then with good intentions, in no way lessens or excuses the hurt they inflicted on their victims. And it certainly should not obscure the fact that the intentions and actions of many others who implemented these policies were totally dishonourable. Even on those rare occasions when non-indigenous people have wanted to help, their arrogance and/or ignorance has often only caused more injury and pain. This gap between intentions and outcomes is itself reflected in To the Islands. For if the text is read as propaganda in defence of the Aboriginal missions, then it too is a ‘feeble defence’.
The story of Heriot’s journey away from the Christian Mission and towards the indigenous cosmology of the islands questions the role of the Mission too deeply to be counter-balanced by any of the text’s surface affirmations of mission life. In this way, To the Islands can be seen as an expression of Stow’s complex response to the legacy of colonialism; one which at times celebrates the adventurousness and good intentions of some colonists, but also laments the dispossession and oppression of those colonised and suggests that for reconciliation to occur the colonisers must embrace indigenous ways of being.

In 1965, while travelling through the United States on a Harkness Fellowship, Stow rented a shack on a small ranch in New Mexico and, in seven weeks, wrote The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea. While taken with the suggestion of fellow Western Australian author, Tom Hungerford, that he write an autobiography about his childhood, Stow had, to that point, not done so because he had been unable to discern a storyline in his boyhood experiences that would sustain either a childhood memoir or an autobiographical novel. Speaking to me in 1999, he said:

I had to import, to give the thing a plot. I had to import experiences from another time in my life when I was very attached to an ex-POW, which didn’t happen at the same time, but happened later… [I]t occurred to me when I was in the States. Actually I was driving through Alabama and it suddenly clicked. I thought, ‘That’s how to do it!’ And that’s the way I did do it.

What he did was borrow the war-time experiences of his friend Russell Braddon, the author of The Naked Island, and merge his emotional attachment to him as a young adult with the sense of awe that, as a boy, he had felt towards his shy and rather remote second cousin, Eric Sewell. The creation of this composite character provided the narrative with both an emotional centre and a plot element that
juxtaposed the autobiographical character, Rob’s gradual discovery of self within the warm, insular circle of the Maplestead clan with that of the Braddon/Sewell character, Rick’s experiences of the horrors of life as a POW in Changi. So, when in 1974 Stow declared that ‘there is nothing in it [Merry-Go-Round] that didn’t happen in life’, he was talking loosely. He was, he said to me, ‘being fairly flippant’. What he meant by this statement was that nearly all the episodes and emotions in the novel are representations of remembered events and experiences. However, the book remains a novel rather than an autobiography because the chronology of these events and the relationships they have been given to each other is, in many instances, entirely fictional. Studying autobiographical novels for biographical insights always involves a certain amount of complicated algebra, but here at least the formula is reasonably clear cut: the events and emotions experienced by the fictional Rob were also experienced by Randolph Stow, though not necessarily between the ages of six and thirteen.

Unusually for a novel, even an autobiographical one, The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea begins with a family tree. As with the text that follows, it is only superficially fictionalised; the family and place names have been changed, but the characters’ familial relationships accurately reflect those of Stow and his maternal forebears. From the outset then, the reader is alerted to the fact that the small boy they are about to read of is an individual member of a much larger collective. This tension between individualism and collectivity runs throughout the book in parallel with its other great theme, the paradox of our experience of time as being both circular and linear. Rob’s life is linear to the degree that he is an individual, that he was born at a particular time and date, that he lived out and was shaped by certain experiences, and that, in keeping with the book’s realism, he fully expects to die. Early in the book, Rob (like Stow, who in 1999 still vividly remembered the moment) has a revelation about the linear aspect of time and its unsettling, unavoidable repercussions for the individual life.
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He was thinking about time and change, of how, one morning when he must have been quite small, he had discovered time, lying in the grass with his eyes closed against the sun. He was counting to himself. He counted up to sixty, and thought: That is a minute. Then he thought: It will never be that minute again. It will never be today again. Never.

He would not, in all his life, make another discovery so shattering.

He thought now: I am six years and two weeks old. I will never be that old again. (14)

This realisation is echoed towards the book’s end when, riding a horse, Rob comes across a dead fox.

For the first time in his life he knew that he was young, and knew, with agreeable sadness, that he would not be young for long.

Time and death could stain the bright day, and the leaf-brown foxes that traced green paths in the dew could die poisoned and in agony among the flowers. (269)

Counterbalancing this perspective, Rob’s life is also portrayed as a continuation of a recurring pattern of birth and death, a pattern that has no known beginning and no foreseeable end. This of course ties in with the novel’s central motif, the merry-go-round, but is made even more explicit through Rob’s fascination with blood. Rob’s world, like that of Stow’s as a child, is one of relatedness; nearly everyone he knows is an aunt or uncle, or a cousin once or twice removed. With the possible exception of Rick, Rob’s favourite relative is his Aunt Kay, who was modelled on Stow’s great aunt, Sutherland Macdonald, or ‘Arp’, as she was known to the children of the Sewell clan. Along with the moving poem, ‘For One Dying’, the depiction of Arp in The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea is meant as a tribute to the relative who, above all others, lavished time and attention on the young Stow and encouraged his interests and talents. She was, he told me, ‘my
teacher in every way — reading, writing, music, anything...she taught me." Despite the seemingly unique closeness of Stow’s relationship with Arp, when he introduces the reader to Aunt Kay, he has her misremembering Rob’s name.

Aunt Kay was always getting his name wrong, and always referring to his grandmother as ‘your mother’. She lived a good deal in the past, and her past was full of little boys...Often she could go on for a long time getting his name wrong, fumbling her way through three generations. (20)

This passage goes on to talk of Aunt Kay’s Scottish heritage, the Gaelic names of her brother and cousin, Iain Mor and Iain Vicky, the way her father had gone to school to learn to speak English, and how Rob is enchanted by this direct connection with places where there is snow. It ends with: ‘He kept the names in his memory as a sort of password to the fatherland, his blood’s speech’ (20). Later, but again with the aid of Aunt Kay, Rob learns that his blood carries more than the mysterious language of his Scottish forebears. It also animates physical reminders — facial features, gestures — and temperamental traits that have been passed down through the generations.

Blood. It seemed that all through his life there had been a chorus about blood. ‘Couldn’t you pick that one for Charles Maplestead’s grandson? — He’s his father’s son — If only Dr Coram had known Rob — When you said that you looked exactly like our brother Jack.’ (105)

With form mimicking content, this sentiment recurs a number of times in the text, most notably in one of the final scenes between Rob and Rick. Here the tension between the mortality of the individual and the continuation of the clan is heightened to poignant effect. When Rick tells Rob he is going deaf in one ear, Rob protests on the grounds that deafness is an old person’s condition and that his beloved cousin
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is still young. Rick, though, explains that the deafness was caused by the beatings he received from Japanese prison guards.

The boy got up and stood in front of him and stared intently into Rick’s blue eyes with his own blue eyes, which were the same eyes, coming from their great-grandfather. ‘Aw, Rick,’ he said, ‘you’re not getting old are you?’ (280)

Within the circle of Rob’s extended family, the future is predicted by the past; the blood encodes the limits of what is individually possible. Uninterested in repeating the dominant pattern of lawyers and pastoralists in his family’s history, Rob is always on the lookout for a more romantic vein in his bloodline, and variously discovers that Aunt Kay’s father fought on the Rebel side at the Eureka Stockade (105), that his great-great-grandfather knew Lord Byron in Greece (102) and that even the most respectable branch of the family tree managed to produce a distant uncle who had hunted Ned Kelly and another who fought the last formal duel in Australia; a comic event which ended before it began, with Rob’s relative literally shooting himself in the foot (106). These remote connections with poets and rebels fired Rob’s and his creator’s boyhood imaginations; the thinking being that if a distant relative had lived a romantic life then that possibility lay dormant in the blood, mixed in somewhere with the less thrilling fates of jurists and farmers.

For the young Stow, blood not only determined the possibilities of what he might become, it also defined and defended him against what he was not, what he must never be. The broader social currents of class and race coursed through his family’s veins. In *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea*, class difference becomes a source of increasing tension between Rob and his working class mate, Mike. As they grow older, Rob’s Pommy accent and his talk of family properties irritates Mike, to the point where it threatens not only their relationship but the very fabric of Rob’s certain universe. ‘His world was not one world after all, and might fall apart over an issue as simple as the way to
say Mrs Grant’s name’ (224). These tensions were, Stow confirmed, part of his growing up. His mother, he said, was genuinely distressed by the prospect that she might one day be forced to meet the mother of Mike’s real-life model. A similar attitude is revealed in Rob’s grandmother, when Rob, still pondering the mysteries of blood, asks her if he has any ‘nigger blood’ in him.

‘Of course not,’ his grandmother said, shocked.
‘Have I got any convict blood?’
‘Certainly not,’ said his grandmother. (106)

In this instance, Rob is disappointed by such absences, because they rob him of the possibility of being ‘related to just about everyone in Australia’ (106). However, in an earlier scene, when his mate, Kevin, teasingly suggests he has ‘nigger blood’ (99), Rob takes offense and pushes his friend in defence of the purity of his blood. As the repellent language suggests, Geraldton in the 1940s was a racist town. In The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea, Stow portrays himself as both a product of that environment, but also as someone who, despite his upbringing, developed an affinity with and sympathy for the descendants of those his forebears dispossessed. This bifocal perspective is betrayed in the language Rob uses when he naively interrupts the racist talk around the drover’s campfire, ‘“I like them,” the boy said. “There’s some nice boong kids at school”’ (186). Talking to me in 1999, Stow attributed much of his early sensitivity to the issue of Aboriginal dispossession to his experience of mixing with indigenous children at his school.

I think it came from primary school, actually. I knew some of them and I liked them. I found them interesting. Generally they were older than the rest of us...and a bit more interesting...I used to rather admire them. Because they were ‘cool’, I suppose you’d say these days. We didn’t have that word in those days. I just liked them.
An earlier, less mundane, more epiphanic experience occurred when, as a six year old, Stow’s mother and some of her cousins took him to the Hand Cave on the Sewell family property. Envisaged as a bit of a lark, as a nostalgic trip to one of the scenes from their own childhood, the women could not have imagined the impact the cave would have on young Mick (as Stow was known). The description of Rob studying the stencilled hands on the cave wall in *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea* is as Stow recalls it.

He felt the cold rock under his hand, where a dead boy’s hand had once rested. Time and change had removed this child from his country, and his world was not one world, but had in it camps of the dispossessed. Above the one monument of the dead black people, the sheoaks sounded cold, sounded colder than rock. (66)

Rob’s discovery of this and another cave bearing the ancient silhouettes of Aboriginal hands (230), along with the recurring image of an old stone shearing shed with ‘slits in the walls for rifles’ (28, 32, 283), projects the simple joys and dramas of his rural childhood onto the disquieting backdrop of colonial invasion.22 Hence the boy’s conviction, that despite Australia’s youthfulness the country feels old, that the land itself is haunted.23

At the very end of *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea*, an adolescent Rob is devastated by Rick’s announcement that he is leaving Australia for good, that he has ‘outgrown’ his young cousin’s love and does not want a family (281). The book’s final scene once again juxtaposes circular time with linear time, the continuity of old colonial families with the finitude of modern individuals.

By the fresh green patch in the dam paddock, which was a rose-tree, dead Maplesteads lay. And on the rise beyond was the old stone shearing shed, with slits in the walls for rifles, where dead Mapletsteads, led by John Maplestead with the spear-scar on his hand, had withheld or expected to withhold dead aborigines [sic].
And beside the shearing shed were the grey timbers of the stable-yard, where a blue patch, which was Rick, was now unsaddling.

He stared at the blue patch of Rick, feeling bitter, uncryable tears. Rick was going, although the boy loved him, and he had taken back the lines that he had written in the boy's book at the end of the war. [A quotation from John Donne's 'A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning': 'Thy firmness makes my circle just/And makes me end, where I begun'.] 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)

Given Stow's long, self-imposed exile from Australia, it is tempting to interpret these sentiments autobiographically, to assume that he, like Rick (and by association, Rob), had become disillusioned with Australia's 'arrogant mediocrity' (281) and had severed ties with a family he wished to disavow. This, though, would be a mistake. In leaving Australia for London in 1966, then in 1969 settling in East Bergholt, Suffolk, and later in Harwich, Essex, Stow left the haunted land of his immediate family and returned to the ancestral land of his forebears. In terms of the linear trajectory of his individual life, this represented a geographical break from the clan he had so lovingly portrayed in *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea*. But in a broader view of his family's history, this move can also be seen as a circling back, a return. In effect, Stow was repeating the older family pattern of leaving kith and kin to venture forth, to migrate, but in doing so, he inverted the colonial impulse.

To what degree this move represented some kind of personal resolution of the tensions between settler and indigenous cultures that Stow experienced and later expressed in *To the Islands* and *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea* is a matter of conjecture. What is certain though is that one of the central themes in my biography of Stow will be the tension between his sense of belonging to and his abiding interest in a family with a long and troubled colonial history, and
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his recurring experience of feeling like a bystander. In this way, his highly singular life will be seen to be in part a response to, but also a variation of, the family history that so captured and worried his imagination.

Notes

1 Randolph Stow, personal correspondence with the author, 9 March, 1999.
3 Randolph Stow, interview by the author, 16 November 1999.
4 Forrest River Mission Records, Battye Library, MN545. Most of this information derives from a letter from Jamison to the Secretary of the Mission’s Board, 16 April 1957, Item No. 2389A/54.
5 This point is underlined when Helen, the Mission nurse says, ‘I don’t believe in heaven and hell, but I believe in sin, and sins that aren’t wiped out on the earth stay on the earth forever echoing and echoing among the people left behind. We’re trying to wipe out the sin of the white men who massacred these people’s relations, but we can’t ever do it, because we’re not the same white men. And Mr. Heriot has to come back, he’s the only one who can wipe out his hatred of Rex’ (1958, 90).
8 ibid., p. 45. For further discussion of the historiographical debate about the Umbali (Oombulgurri) massacre and Stow’s role in documenting it, see Klaus Neumann’s article, ‘Remembering Victims and Perpetrators’ UTS Review, vol. 4, no. 1, 1998, pp. 1–17.
10 ibid., p. vii.
11 Of course, another more cynical and complex reading of Heriot’s plea is that it is, in fact, disingenuous, given that he has earlier declared himself a misanthrope masquerading as a philanthropist (72). If this were so, the exchange with Stephen would then become a classic death-bed scene, with Heriot desperately seeking personal redemption rather than any existential and/or cross-cultural reconciliation. The contradictory
evidence regarding Heriot’s motivation is compounded by Helen, who declares that, 'If he [Heriot] tried to kill Rex, it wouldn’t have been because he hated him, it would have been because he thought the mission was in danger from him’, and then later in the same conversation with Nixon and Gunn says that Heriot is ‘the only one who can wipe out his hatred of Rex’ (1958, 90). The only coherent interpretation that can be made of this is that although Heriot hated Rex, his violence towards him was not motivated by this hatred. Despite this evidence and given the final scene between Stephen and Heriot and the general thrust and spirit of the narrative, this ungenerous reading of Heriot’s plea is, I think, ultimately unsustainable.

13 ibid.
14 ibid.
17 ‘Maplestead’, the family name Stow uses in place of his mother’s maiden name, Sewell, was the name of the village in Essex that Stow’s great-grandfather, George Sewell, emigrated from in 1834. It was also the name George Sewell gave to the station he established after arriving at the Swan River Colony.
18 Randolph Stow, interview by the author, 16 November 1999.
20 ibid.
21 ibid.
22 In another reference both to blood and Rob’s colonial forebears, when Rob’s father presents his son with a book about their Virginian ancestors, Stow writes, ‘But the book was fascinating, it was pure darkness, and parts of it were not very nice at all. And these were his relations. He had dark blood’ (1965, 217).
23 See The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea, pp. 64, 214, 230.
24 Stow’s last visit to Australia was in 1974.
25 This geographical break did not reflect an emotional rupture in Stow’s relationships with his family and old Australian friends, many of whom he kept in contact with and welcomed when they visited him in England.