

Randolph Stow: A Memoir

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I first encountered the work of Randolph Stow in 1965. I had arrived at Monash University to tutor in English after an Honours degree that included a wide range of English and American literature, but no Australian works. Dennis Douglas was teaching a pioneering subject in Australian Literature and *The Bystander* was on the reading list. I bought a copy—for 11 shillings and threepence—and was immediately taken by its evocative power. Some years later I found *The Merry-go-Round in the Sea* remaindered for \$2.14 in a Newcastle bookshop and, recognising the author, bought a copy. It was love at first reading. I was captivated to an extent that very few books, Australian or otherwise, have engaged me in a lifetime of reading. Set in the West, on the other side of the continent, it resonated in an unforgettably rich and poetic manner with my own childhood. Having written about it at length elsewhere, I will only say here that after a quarter of a century of teaching *The Merry-go-Round in the Sea* to undergraduate students in subjects from first year to fourth year Honours, I don't recall a single one who didn't enjoy it, and I have never tired of revisiting its graceful construction, familiar images freighted with poetic significance, and emotional poignancy.

Not long after it was published, *The Merry-go-Round in the Sea* was prescribed for study for the NSW Higher School Certificate, and I gave talks on it to teachers and students for the English Teachers' Association. In 1973 a revised article based on these was published in *Meanjin*, and I remember receiving a modest payment for it from Clem Christensen, which he had thoughtfully converted to sterling, since I was on Study Leave in Oxford. I also remember having great difficulty locating *Meanjin* in the Bodleian: the librarians were not overly keen to look for an obscure colonial journal. When I persisted and they finally found it, they told me rather patronisingly that if I had given them its proper title, *Meanjin Papers*, they would have found it sooner—I wonder.

Incidents like that in Oxford persuaded me to turn my attention to Australian literature seriously when I came home in 1974, just as Stow was leaving Australia to make his home in England. I realised that if Australian scholars weren't going to provide critical and scholarly scrutiny of Australian texts, no-one else would. So I started teaching in the Australian Literature subject we had set up at Newcastle, where I was then working. I also progressively bought and read all Stow's earlier books, including an already rare copy of *A Haunted Land*. I was profoundly moved by the tragic intensity of *To the Islands*, and fascinated by the enigmatic religious confrontations of *Tourmaline*. I read all the poetry, the anthologised public satires and the private poems of alienation and grief. I waited anxiously for new Stow works, and was especially heartened when *Visitants* appeared in 1979 after a decade of ominously 'real' silence foreshadowed by the title of his 1969 *Selected Poems—A Counterfeit Silence*.

Elegantly constructed and superbly well written, *Visitants* was clearly another masterpiece, set in the Trobriand Islands where Stow had worked in 1959. Its harrowing account of the psychic disintegration of Alistair Cawdor, a visitant estranged from his own people, the Islanders and finally from himself, is hauntingly paralleled by the Islanders' descent into the self-destructive madness of a Cargo Cult uprising. When the tragic power of this *tour de force*

was followed a year later by the quieter intensity of *The Girl Green as Elderflower* a sequel tracing the recovery and return to human society of Cawdor's alter ego Crispin Clare, it was clear that Stow's long silence was over, and his seemingly stalled career was embarked on a brilliant new phase.

Encouraged by this renewal, I proposed a book on Stow to University of Queensland Press, and started work on *Strange Country*—at that time a rare book-length study of a contemporary Australian author—in which I set out to articulate my admiration and affection for his work. Writing a study of a living author in mid-career presents a particular set of challenges, as anyone who has undertaken that task will attest. I chose to address these by suggesting that I send each chapter in draft to the author for comment and correction, to which he agreed. As it turned out, and despite my initial trepidation, this worked extremely well. Stow was unfailingly helpful in correcting facts and suggesting additional sources of information, but did not dispute or seek to influence my readings and interpretations. The only comment he made was praise in passing for the epigraphs I chose for the chapters. I could not have hoped for a more generous and cooperative author with whom to work.

While the book was in process, I conducted a long distance interview with Stow for *Australian Literary Studies*. In the days before email, I posted a set of questions and he taped his answers on a cassette and posted them back. I transcribed and edited the answers, and sent the revised version back again for correction, amendment and approval. It was a long way from a face-to-face journalistic interview, and follow-up questions to answers travelled back and forth in a slow and cumbersome manner, but in its own way it suited us both to work at a distance. The interview, published in 1982, shed much light on the reasons for Stow's decade-long silence, and on the experiences in the Trobriand Islands and later in Suffolk that he drew on extensively in *Visitants* and *The Girl Green as Elderflower*.

In 1983 I travelled to Western Australia to research Stow's background. In Perth my wife Loretta and I were invited to meet his

mother Mary and sister Helen, who talked to us generously about their son and brother. In Geraldton we were again treated very hospitably by Sewell family and friends, who showed us the landmarks and told us stories of the young Mick Stow, as he was known. We were welcomed to Sand Springs station (Sandalwood in *The Merry-go-Round in the Sea*) by Eric Sewell (the original of Rick) and his wife Ayria, who outlined in fascinating detail the factual basis for many of the characters and scenes in the book. We were also taken to see Ellendale and the distinctive 'flat topped hills to the north' of the town.

Strange Country: A Study of Randolph Stow was published in 1986, including a chapter on *The Suburbs of Hell* (1984), the last book that Stow had published. And in 1988 I was invited to edit an Australian Authors volume on Randolph Stow. The format of this series dictated one complete novel, episodes from others, a selection of poetry, and some essays and interviews. The novel I chose to include in full was *Visitants*. More recent and less well known than *The Merry-go-Round in the Sea*, it was, in my opinion, just as accomplished, and deserved a wider circulation. I again consulted Randolph Stow and he was again generously helpful in preparing the selection. I was particularly pleased to be able to include all of the poems that he then wanted preserved, and it remains the fullest collection of his poems in print, including a number of uncollected poems written after the publication of *A Counterfeit Silence*.

In September 2009 I received an unexpected email from a reader in the Northern Territory. She had recently become enamoured of Randolph Stow's work and was, she said, 'ploughing rapidly through all his books.' She then asked me about his *Bird Scarer Boy*, which she had found on the internet. I was surprised by this query, as I had never heard of the book. So I went to the internet and there it was, 'Published on November 1, 1987' by Secker & Warburg (Stow's London publishers) with its cover displayed and its ISBN numbers listed. I must admit I was dismayed. I was supposed to be an authority on Stow, I had written a critical monograph on his work, but I

had never heard of a book of his that was published 22 years ago! I immediately ordered it from Amazon, where it was listed. When they couldn't find a copy, new or second hand, I tried Blackwell's, and I also tried to contact the publishers, though Secker & Warburg had years earlier been incorporated into Harvill Secker. They didn't answer and Blackwell's couldn't find a copy.

Increasingly desperate, I finally worked up the courage to admit my shameful ignorance to the author himself and asked him about the book. In October 2009 I received the following reply:

I'm amazed and rather saddened to hear of this phantom novel THE BIRD-SCARER BOY, with (as you tell me) an ISBN, jacket and projected publication date. Barley Alison (of Secker & Warburg and The Alison Press) used always to be nagging at me to write another novel, or lots of novels, and I must have told her in detail about the research I was doing into 'peasant poets' [mainly the Suffolk poet Robert Bloomfield, who described the bird-scarer boy and much else in THE FARMER'S BOY] with a view to writing a Suffolk historical novel. Other poets I studied included John Clare (of course), the Australian John Shaw Neilson and the illiterate Gaelic poet Rob Donn (Robert MacKay). This must have led Barley to make lots of notes and plans, and someone going through her papers after her sudden death (circa 1994) must have jumped to the conclusion that this phantom book actually existed. In fact, I had decided that the research was its own reward, and that I'd lost interest in writing fiction. It makes me sad to think of Barley taking it so seriously.

That explanation was a great relief to me, as well as a salutary caution about accepting what is 'documented' on the internet. Later, in March 2010, I finally received a reply from Harvill Secker informing me that they could not trace the book or its ISBN.

In 2000 I was asked to write an entry on Stow for the *Dictionary of Literary Biography* volume dealing with Australian Writers

1915–1950—it was published in 2002. I sent a draft of the article to Stow for his approval, which he gave. I wanted to ensure, in so far as I could, that he would appear in all the appropriate reference sources, and after I retired in 2005 I volunteered an entry to the online *The Literary Encyclopedia*. A commissioned entry is also forthcoming in Blackwells' *The Encyclopedia of Twentieth-Century Fiction*. When I offered to submit these to Stow for his approval, he politely declined, citing increasing ill health and confidence that they would be appropriate. While I was grateful for the latter, I was very sorry to hear of the former.

The last piece I wrote was a *Commentary* article for *Australian Book Review* in 2009 celebrating his work. When I sent it to him he replied: 'It made me feel rather like Fanny Burney, of whom it was said that she lived long enough to hear the judgment of posterity upon her.' Sadly that was my last letter. As it happened, the *Commentary* piece proved to be timely, and I was particularly pleased that he was able to see that his work was remembered and celebrated in his native land.

Stow's silence since 1984 and his long residence in England has meant his work is less widely known in Australia. When he died, I was surprised to receive calls from journalists, including some literary journalists, who were largely or even entirely unfamiliar with his work. It was not, however, forgotten. In 2009 the *Australian Book Review* asked its readers to vote for their favourite Australian novel. I was delighted when *The Merry-go-Round in the Sea* came in at number 18 out of 290. I had voted for it as my favourite Australian novel, just ahead of *Visitants*.