

Randolph Stow

1935–2010

Bruce Bennett

A couple of years ago literary scholar Tony Hassall described Randolph Stow as the ‘Vanishing Wunderkind’ of Australian literature.¹ A writer who left Australia for Britain and international travels in 1960 when he was 25, Stow lived in England more or less continuously from the age of 34—a remarkably opposite trajectory to that of Patrick White, with whom he shared many similarities.

Stow’s autobiographical novel, *The Merry-go-Round in the Sea* (1964), is a classic of Australian literature, as is *To the Islands* (1958), written when he was only 23. His poetry, especially *A Counterfeit Silence* (1969) has been highly praised.

Randolph Stow, known to family and friends as Mick, was born in Geraldton, Western Australia, on November 28, 1935. His infancy and childhood were spent in regional Australia. He attended primary and secondary schools in Geraldton before moving to Guildford Grammar School in Perth for his senior high school years and the University of Western Australia where he studied Law (his father was a solicitor) before switching to Arts. By the time he graduated with a BA majoring in French and English, in 1956, Stow was the author of a novel *A Haunted Land*, published in London, which

was followed by *The Bystander* and a first book of poems *Act One* in 1957.²

In the late 1950s Stow took a succession of short-term jobs, mixing university tutoring at Adelaide and the study of anthropology and linguistics at the University of Sydney with jobs in Australia's north-west—where he was a storeman at the Anglican mission to the Umbalgari people at Forrest River. In 1958, as a youthful 23-year-old, Stow had his third novel *To the Islands* published in London and the United States. He was government anthropologist and later a cadet patrol officer in the Trobriand islands, where he contracted malaria and suffered a serious breakdown and depression, as does his protagonist in *Visitants* (1979), his first novel completed in England, which is considered by some critics to be his finest work.

Stow's period of expatriation commenced in 1960 when he travelled to England and signed the contract with Macdonalds for the publication of a second book of poems, *Outrider*. But he kept moving, with winter in the Scottish Highlands in 1962–3 and the summer of 1963 in Malta. He had not yet shaken Australian soil from his feet as he returned for a temporary lectureship at the University of Western Australia in 1963–4 and to Perth in April–May 1966 where he wrote *Midnite*, his much loved children's book for adults.

During a Harkness Fellowship to the US in 1964, Stow visited 46 states and wrote *The Merry-go-Round in the Sea* in a snowed-up orchard in Aztec, New Mexico. By the mid-1960s, the whirling dervish may have slowed a little. In May 1969, at the age of 34, he began to 'settle' in England at East Bergholt in Suffolk—in the Suffolk/Essex area from which both sides of his family were descended. In 1981, he moved to the port town of Harwich in Essex, where he lived until his death in 2010.

Stow received the Patrick White award in 1979, an award that enabled the then middle-aged Australian to buy the first house he had owned, near the docks in Old Harwich. White had sympathy and some understanding of Stow. But he could also be critical: *To the Islands* was 'magnificently done' but *Tourmaline* had 'Come to

grief in a lush labyrinth of poetic prose' (*Letters* 304). What seems to fascinate White is the elusive, will o' the wisp wanderer in Stow, the man who had mysteriously by the 1970s retired to the 'dank' English countryside of Suffolk.

More provocatively, White wrote to Stow in 1980 that his own self-portrait *Flaws in the Glass* would 'show those censorious heteros that some homosexuals can beat them at their own game'.³ Despite such confidences—aimed perhaps at winning some confidences in return—White seems to have remained baffled by Stow⁴—an admission shared by other observers who content themselves with describing him as a 'loner'.

When Randolph Stow was asked to write his short essay 'Raw Material' for *Westerly* in 1961, he was in England and aware of a general British ignorance about Australia and Australians. This was compounded in Australia itself. What could the creative writer offer? Stow invoked the modernist Australian art of his time in the work of Drysdale, Nolan and Tucker as possible models. Such artists could evoke:

The feeling, the sense, what a Spaniard would call the *sentimentio* of Australia: the external forms filtered back through the conscious and unconscious mind; that is what these artists convey, and what I would hope to convey if I were capable of conveying all I can conceive.⁵

Instead of social realism, Stow sought 'the concept of a literature based on figures in a landscape, more naked and disturbing than a Border ballad or a Spanish *romance*, in which eternal things are observed with, always, the eyes of the newborn'.⁶ This literary sophistication in search of the child's-eye view reveals the romantic in Stow and why he appealed to fellow romantics in Australia such as Dorothy Hewett.

At his death, aged 74, Randolph Stow was still living in Kings Head Street, Old Harwich, where I interviewed him in 1981.⁷ His first regional English novel, *The Girl Green as Elderflower* had been published in 1980. A second 'English' novel, *The Suburbs of Hell* (1984) is set in a place that resembles Harwich but draws upon a series of murders in Perth, Western Australia, in the 1960s.⁸ I was intrigued by the notion of this native West Australian who was formative in the creation of a local literature in his home state transplanting his roots to the English countryside. Stow replied to my question about the relationship of literature and place: 'At the age of 19, when I wrote *A Haunted Land*, I had about 15 years of memories of Geraldton to draw on and I now have 21 years of memories of Suffolk'.⁹ That was in 1981. When he died in 2010, Stow had some half-century of memories of this region of England to supplement his still vivid memories of Western Australia.

Stow's heterodox religious outlook, which combined Christianity and Taoism became significant at different phases of his life and writing; and it is easy to imagine the intensity of his struggles for meaning and belief as he attempted to recuperate in England from the traumas of malaria, a breakdown and the sense that he was going mad. Unlike fellow expatriate Peter Porter, Stow did not discover a writing community in Britain that would nourish his talents and extend his audience. A solitary artist, he did not seek such communities. But Australians can be proud of this artist with words who evoked such memorable figures and landscapes of his homeland and of the ancestral region of England to which he returned.

*An earlier version of this obituary appeared in *The Canberra Times*, June 10, 2010.

Notes

- 1 Tony Hassall, 'Vanishing Wunderkind: The Great Oeuvre of the Enigmatic Stow', *Australian Book Review*, September 2009, pp 29–31.

- 2 Anthony J. Hassall, *Strange Country: A Study of Randolph Stow*.
St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1986.
- 3 *Patrick White Letters*, ed. David Marr. Sydney: Random House Australia,
1996, p. 535.
- 4 Marr, p. 643.
- 5 Randolph Stow, 'Raw Material', *Westerly*, no. 2, 1961, pp 3–5; p. 4.
- 6 Stow, p. 5.
- 7 See Bruce Bennett, 'Discussions with Randolph Stow', in *Westerly* 26: 4,
1981, pp 53–61.
- 8 These were the murders of Eric Edgar Cooke, the last person hanged
in Fremantle Gaol, on 24 October 1964. Stow was interested in the
atmosphere of fear, suspicion and dread that infected the community
during these years.
- 9 Bennett, p. 54.