Randolph Stow in Harwich

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I knew Randolph Stow as Mick—a family friend who sent us a Christmas card each year and wrote 'The Ghost at Anlaby' about the house where I grew up. My parents got to know Mick in Adelaide in the 1950s and, as I understand it, helped him out a few times over the years. I met Mick when I was a kid, loved his book *Midnite*, and visited him when I moved to London in the 1980s. I still remember the striking impression he made in person and in photos: a handsome man with a strong face and a black jacket. He never said more than he had to, despite his great turn of phrase and a wonderfully mellifluous speaking voice.

In 1994 Mick kindly agreed to do an interview with me to talk about his life and work. I caught the train to Harwich and spent most of the day with him in the pub and at his house. He did his best to help: gently reminding me to pace myself in the pub and warning that others had tried to interview him, from various angles, without much success. I didn't manage to winkle much out of Mick that day, but he was amiable and—occasionally—quite candid.

Here are the results of that 1994 interview.

By the age of 23, Randolph Stow had already published a book of poetry and three novels, including *To the Islands*, which prompted the critic Francis King to compare him with Patrick White and Thomas Keneally as one of a trio of Australian novelists who make most of their English counterparts seem trivial and anaemic. Critics talk about Patrick White's influence on Randolph Stow, but it's worth remembering that Stow's first novel *A Haunted Land* was published in 1956, a year before *Voss*.

At 58, Stow lives alone with his cat in a tiny two-up/two-down terrace house in Harwich, Essex, and he hasn't written a book for ten years.

Four times each day, Hook of Holland ferries pass by the end of this street, but there's not much else to be seen. Harwich is a port town, historic but hardly picturesque. Stow's house looks like a seaside B&B: knick-knacks, buttoned cushions, plastic flowers, velour armchairs, the brass of the front door perfectly polished. When I visited, his cat Billy kept trying to sit on my lap. 'Great icebreaker,' says Stow. When I ask if he's thought of moving to a bigger house, Stow explains he doesn't need to, his tastes are modest, and—like someone confiding that they have a private income—this is why he doesn't much need to write for money. 'There used to be a family of 11 next door, so it's enough for one old bachelor.'

Looking around Stow's house, you quickly notice the particularity of the few things he has on display: an old autoharp, Sidney Nolan prints, a strange looking bottle of Scottish bitters, and, above pictures of Billy the cat, an old photograph of 'HM King Zog of Albania' beside a thermometer labelled 'subtract 4°'. And then there are the books—history, music, anthropology, linguistics, philosophy, birds and insects—alongside innumerable dictionaries and novels, poetry and plays in several languages.

Harwich at first can look grey and desolate—and then you see the open sweep of the beach, with swans and other water birds nesting alongside the majestic harbour and remnants of the twelth-century walled town. This is a long way from tourist England—on a branch

line of a branch line, through marshes and across an estuary, on the edge of the North Sea—and Stow's self-confinement here is all the more extraordinary when you consider his origins. He grew up in and around Geraldton, about 400 miles up the Western Australian coast from Perth, in the narrow strip of arable land between the ocean and what a local once described to me as the Great Australian Fuck All.

In Geraldton, Stow reckons, 'the Depression lasted until about 1950; it was so *bleak*.' Talking about his childhood, it begins to make sense that he wound up in Essex. Both sets of grandparents came from farms nearby; they had known each other vaguely before Stow's parents met in Australia. In Western Australia, the Stows were 'very close, very clannish…but we had a lot of English visitors and, coloured by growing up in the war, a devotion to king and queen and *respect* for Mr Churchill. It was like being transplanted British, like Australia was a distant country. Everything about Britain was normal.'

Evidently Stow had a literate upbringing. 'My father didn't talk about anything whatever,' he says. 'There was a bit of a problem with his vocal chords, but that was later.' He did, however, have ambitions for his son's reading, expecting him to digest Chapman's Homer at the age of eight, and a collected Balzac when he was 11. Stow describes himself as 'a word man right from the start'. Taught to read at three or four, his love of fiction was dominated by the Andrew Lang fairy tale collections and later, Scottish and Border ballads. (There was also, he says, a book of French folk tales which, in reference to its peculiar cover illustration, the family referred to as The Lady with the Pants on Her Head.)

Having completed his schooling in Perth, Stow studied Law there ('a very rural experience') against the advice of this father, himself sick of working as a country lawyer. But within a month, Stow had given up Law, switched to English and French—and finished a novel. Very taken with Stevie Smith's *Novel on Yellow Paper* and also, says Stow, in an attempt to appease his father, he then wrote *A Haunted Land*, which was published in 1956. Another novel and a book of poetry were published the following year.

In 1958, not long after Stow's twenty-second birthday, *To the Islands* was published. In many ways it broke new ground for Australian fiction—an allegory of an old man's vain attempt at self-reconciliation, which simultaneously documents the deracination of Aboriginal culture. Stow wrote the book in Adelaide, after several months working as a storeman at an Anglican mission in the North Kimberley region of Western Australia. 'I was breaking my heart and neck to go back there,' he says, 'I could hardly believe I could live anywhere else.' But by then Stow had begun working at the University of Adelaide, giving tutorials which he describes as 'filled with elderly nuns. They terrified me, everyone terrified me then.' Stow continued to teach, at the university in Perth and later in Leeds, and evidently hated every minute of it. 'I like to be taught,' he says.

In 1959 he spent several months working for the Australian government as an anthropologist and cadet patrol officer on the Trobriand Islands—travelling from village to village with a pet cat and cockatoo—an experience which left him with material for his novel *The Visitants*—and a bad case of malaria. Recovering in London, Stow kept writing, between working 'as Cynthia Nolan's gardener—they thought it would be good for me', and taking advantage of Soho, 'where I'd let literary types buy me lunch.' In 1963, *Tourmaline* was published, which Stow describes as his 'most intensely imagined' novel. The story came from a dream of a poem he had, back in Geraldton, after an afternoon of drinking with school friends. Deposited unconscious on his parents' front lawn, Stow eventually woke up to discover that his father had mown neatly around him. 'It was about the only joke we ever shared.'

After *Tourmaline*, Stow spent eighteen months driving around America, and wrote his most popular book, *The Merry-go-Round in the Sea*, in a rented house with an apple and peach orchard beside the Animas River in New Mexico. *Midnite*—a very hip and funny book for children about a bushranger whose henchmen are a cat and a cockatoo—was written at his mother's house in 1968, and in the

following year Stow finished a libretto for Peter Maxwell Davies and published another book of poetry.

Then, as he describes it, something went wrong. Suffering from difficulty sleeping after a chronic bout of gastritis, Stow consulted a doctor who prescribed him, 'with a glint in his eye', the sedative Mandrax. Stow says he found himself dependent almost immediately. He became a registered addict, took the drug night and day and, when he travelled, had a friend collect his prescription and post the tablets to him sticky-taped to a card in an envelope. In 1974, having been 'asleep for four years', Stow found himself on his own at a friend's house in Provence, where he was unable to get his prescription. Four years of undreamed dreams flooded his mind and for more than a week he suffered a series of hellish visions. He subsequently returned to Suffolk, lived alone in a small cottage in East Bergholt, and published nothing until *The Visitants* in 1979, which won the prestigious Patrick White Award and enabled him to move to Harwich.

Stow shrugs his shoulders at the question of what he wants to write next, saying that 'since I was about 20 I've had a shopping list of things to do.' Increasingly interested in Gaelic poetry, he wants to go back to strict verse forms, and on his desk has a diagram of metres and rhyme schemes, but nothing else. 'I haven't found the words yet,' he says calmly. The difficulty of his job does not appear to bother him.

Stow's characteristic skill at combining symbolism and documentary gives the best of his work an easily visualised, film-like quality. Growing up in Geraldton, he says, 'Films were like the only culture, though I wasn't allowed to go to a film at night unless it was a "classic".' Ironically, though none of his novels has been filmed, a regular source of income has been payments for film options on his novels.

Contemporary readers weaned on the kind of fiction where the presence of the author leaps out at you from the first sentence may be puzzled by Stow's transparent narrative techniques, in which the relationship between narrators and characters is never explicit, and

the author hardly shows up at all. When I complimented him on this, he said it was merely 'the spirit of the times' and gave me appropriate advice from Flaubert:

> *A writer should not appear in a novel any more than God appears in Creation;*

And Stendhal:

> *A novel should be like a mirror moving along a road.*

But Stow is no linguistic snob—the only writing that seems to rile him is the middle-brow secondary industry that feeds off real writing. Apart from the daily paper and *The Times Literary Supplement*—which he says he gets mainly for the listings—Stow doesn't read 'literary' journalism at all. 'It's all so boring. I don't understand why anyone reads it.'

What Stow clearly enjoys, when he's not at home reading books, is the language of daily life. He likes his privacy and his habits, but he's never been a stay-at-home. Stow has a large, loyal and impressive circle of friends, and visiting him in Harwich, you can't help but notice how the whole town seems to know him by name. Everywhere people greet him—respectfully inflating his nickname Mick to Michael—and, as we enter the pub, his pint of IPA is already being pulled. ('I'm working,' he confides to the publican, by way of apology for not staying.)

Stow is a careful speaker, who appears to live in mortal danger of *faux pas* and sometimes doesn't speak at all. But at the same time he gives the impression of five decades of hard life and difficult reading, ready to burst out at any moment. Stow has a prodigious memory and recites verse and prose whenever necessary. He also has an endearing conversational habit of locating people and events culturally or historically, as if to stress that his own part in his life is unimportant: his London landlord appeared, libellously, in *Ulysses*; Constable

was fond of the village where he lived in Suffolk; Roy Orbison once bought a house there—and so on. (Reputedly, both Stow and the poet John Bray claimed Pocahontas as an ancestor.)

The people of Harwich clearly acknowledge Stow as an asset to the town. Youthful, tough-faced—friendly enough, but you wouldn't want to cross him—the kind of man who might have strolled into one of his fictional localities and saved it from obscurity. The expatriate label irritates him: Stow points out that his ancestors have been moving to and fro for centuries.

Would he ever move back to Australia? 'Not while my cat's alive!'