
Islands of Ascent: The Australasian Novels of Randolph Stow

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It has taken some one hundred and thirty years for Western Australia to find its first true poet and chronicler. This vast area, first settled in 1830, inhabits the Australian condition in an exaggerated form. Nearly a million square miles in area, it has only just over one million inhabitants, three-quarters of whom live in Greater Perth. Over most of the state, excluding the favored south-western corner, the farming communities live in isolation from each other and from the few towns. The Gold Rush of the 1890s created a number of scattered mining settlements, which quickly degenerated into ghost towns. There were also a few missions dotted over the vast northern expanses once roamed by the aboriginal Australians, some of whom managed to retain their traditional life-style until a couple of decades ago. Only the big mineral discoveries and exploitations of the past twenty-five years have disturbed this pattern of slow and patchy development. But the Western Australia of which Randolph Stow (born 1935) writes in his first five novels, published between 1952 and 1965, knew nothing of these developments. The settings of those books range from the lonely farmsteads of *The Bystander* (1957) to the ghost town of *Tourmaline* (1963) and the tiny northern mission, dwarfed by the mountains, gorges, and deserts which surround it, of *To the Islands* (1958). When Stow's sixth novel, *Visitants*, appeared in 1979, the setting had moved northward again, to find isolation of another order in the sea islands lying off the coast of Papua-New Guinea.

Interestingly, it was in the same year, 1957, which saw the appearance of Stow's first two novels, that his senior compatriot Patrick White published *Voss*, which became the first native Australian novel to evoke the empty, unknown continent of the nineteenth-century explorers. What White's novel does for the eastern interior, lying beyond the Dividing Range which hemmed in the first settlements, Stow was simultaneously doing for the parched expanses lying some two thousand miles further west.

In their own way, both writers were responding to the expectations that local prophets might come from the wilderness, an expectation expressed by A.D. Hope in his poem "Australia" many years earlier:

Yet there are some like me turn gladly home
From the lush jungle of modern thought, to find
The Australian desert of the human mind,
Hoping, if still from deserts the prophets come,

Such savage and scarlet as no green hills dare
Springs in that waste, some spirit which escapes
The learned doubt, the chatter of cultured apes
Which is called civilization over there.¹

¹ A.D. Hope, "Australia", in *The Penguin Book of Australian Verse*, ed. Thompson, Slessor, and Howarth (London, Penguin, 1958), p. 120.

"Learned doubt" is precisely what Voss does seem to have escaped. Yet, far from being a home-grown product, he was (like his historical original Ludwig Leichhardt), a highly cultured European, drawn to the Australian wilderness by its very difference from the world he had known. Stow's characters are, by contrast, products of that wilderness itself, inured to hardship, seeing strangeness not in their savage environment but in the fabled world of the cities and of Europe. They are islanded in the waste, and the plots of each of his early novels are triggered off by someone intruding upon that island, bringing confusion, disruption, or perhaps even hope, in their wake.

Such an intruder is Diana Ravirs, tragic survivor of Europe's death camps, who finds herself at the center of a web of uneasily balanced tensions stretched between the isolated farms of Koolabye, Lingarin, and Strathmore in *The Bystander*. Similar catalysts are provided by the return of Rex to his native mission station in *To the Islands* and by the strange eruption of "Michael Random" into the dying ghost town of Tourmaline. And in *Visitants*, it is the arrival of the mysterious stranger Two-Bob or Metusela which triggers off the cataclysmic events of the novel. The physical and cultural dearth in which these isolated communities survive is still a form of existence—the narrator of *Tourmaline* even denies that the place is a ghost town and claims that "it simply lies in a coma."² But it is a form of existence which almost seems to cry out for the fateful intrusion which will either destroy or renew it. Prolonged coma differs little from the condition of death.

Many readers, accustomed to think of Australia as a thrusting nation asserting its place in the world, will be surprised by the prevalent images of desuetude and decay in Stow's early fiction. His landscapes are littered with abandoned mine shafts, roofless buildings, and rambling farmhouses (three-parts shut up, full of dusty furniture, and cracked portraits of forgotten ancestors). The answer must be found in the particular corner of the country in which the writer grew up. Geraldton, lying some three hundred miles north of Perth, was the last settlement in that direction which could then be graced with title of township at all. Even so, the place had been in decline for years and did not stir into activity until the war with Japan. As Stow writes in his autobiographical novel, *The Merry-go-Round in the Sea* (1965): "The boy was not aware of living in a young country. He knew that he lived in a very old town, full of empty shops with dirty windows and houses with falling fences. He knew that he lived in an old, haunted land, where big stone flour-mills and small stone farmhouses stood windowless and staring among twisted trees."³ Thus, to the geological and zoological antiquity of Australia, registered by many writers from D.H. Lawrence in *Kangaroo* (1923) onwards, Stow adds a sense of relative historical antiquity also. After all, a farmhouse which has been deserted for twenty years will make as powerful an impression of antiquity on the mind of a growing boy as an earthwork or a ruined castle. Ned Kelly, who flourished only a hundred years ago, is as legendary to the Australian imagination as the medieval Robin Hood to the English. Added to the air of antiquity conveyed by a flourmill built by convicts and sporting the date 1868 over its doorway, is the powerful sense of the ephemeral hanging over all the constructions of man upon the face of this immense waste. Seen from seaward, the town of Geraldton itself bears this ephemeral stamp: "The town was shabby, barren, built on shifting sandhills jutting out into the sea. To the north and south of the town, the white dunes were never still, but were forever moving in the southerly, finding new outlines, windrippled, dazzling. If ever people were to leave the town the sand would come back to bury it.

² Randolph Stow, *Tourmaline* (London, Macdonald, 1963), p. 9. All references are to this edition and will appear under the abbreviation *T*.

³ Randolph Stow, *The Merry-go-Round in the Sea* (London, Macdonald, 1965), p. 12. All references are to this edition and will appear in the text under the abbreviation *M.g.R.*

It would be at first like a town under snow. And then no town at all, only the wool-white hills of Costa Branca" (*M.g.R.*; p.15). Costa Branca was the name first given to this coast by the Portuguese navigators, four hundred years ago. Its use in this passage helps to sharpen the temporary look of the township stamped upon its ever-shifting face.

The boy Rob, hero of *The Merry-go-Round in the Sea*, is moved by his family to a series of inland farmhouses as a form of evacuation from the feared Japanese invasion of the coast. One of these is yet another reminder of the vanished splendor of Western Australia in its brief heyday around the turn of the century. Andarra is an Edwardian mansion with a big wild garden and great moldering reception rooms, which now serve only as dumps for the furniture of the evacuated families and as rinks for the tricycles of their children. For the boy it is both immensely old and haunted by the glories of its past. It complements his uncle's busy farmstead of Sandalwood, with its neat paddocks and its stone stables, still rifle-slitted to repel real or expected attack by marauding "blackfellows."

The Merry-go-Round in the Sea, though the fifth of Stow's novels to be published, casts light upon the genesis of all his early fiction. It derives fictional shape from the way in which it is punctuated by events in the life of the boy's beloved cousin, Rick Maplestead, which constitute cataclysms in his own development. The book begins with Rick's departure to fight in Malaya in 1941, only to be captured soon afterwards and to endure four years of suffering so intense that he never again recaptures the joy and energy of his youth. Rick's departure is the real beginning of the war for the six-year old Rob, the first fracture in the walls of his infancy. It ushers in years of disruption and excitement; the rumors of Japanese air raids and invasion plans; the arrival of American seaplanes in the harbor; the gnawing uncertainty about Rick's whereabouts or even survival, which leads the grown-ups to discourage all mention of him. The return of Rick in 1945, drained and exhausted by years on the notorious Death Railway, haunted by nightmares which constantly plunge him back into the past, ushers in a period of accelerated growth for Rob. His cousin's companionship brings him mingled joy and pain, the dawning realization that the Rick he remembers has gone forever, and that only his physical resemblance has returned from the war.

After four years of vainly trying to pick up the threads of his old life, culminating in a rupture with his fiancée and lover Jane and her attempted suicide, Rick decides to leave Australia for England. He dreams of becoming a painter, though the reader may suspect that he is already too old and too broken to succeed. Rob feels bitterly abandoned and betrayed, left, as he says, "to grow up alone." Distracted by problems of his own, he cannot or will not understand Rick's pain and sense of injured manhood.

If Rick's first departure marked the end of Rob's childhood innocence, his second announces a forced maturity, the abrupt abandonment of the illusions on which the boy has lived since Rick's return. Yet, bearing in mind that Stow himself has chosen exile from Australia since the age of thirty, we are left with a sense that Rick embodies an aspect of the author's consciousness just as much as Rob does. Rob's imagination is continually fired by the physical beauty and strangeness of the land, its antiquity and uniqueness, the presence of the whitened bones of the explorers and vanquished aborigines at its heart, its romantic history and fluctuating fortunes. Rick is repelled by the social and intellectual sameness, the reductive tendency of "mateism." Furthermore, if Rick dreams of becoming a painter, it is Rob who sees the land with a painter's relish for line and color. There is a precision and intensity of observation in his experience of landscape that bring the visual presence of Australia continually before our eyes: "From the high land Sandalwood stretched out like a relief map: pale brown under dead barley grass, silver under dead rye grass, yellow under stubble; the folds of the bare hills marked dark green

with wattles and gum . . . The huge, huge land rolled out like a blanket under the world-enlarging cry of the crows . . ." (*M.g.R.*; p. 282) If the main action of the novel is framed by Rick's movements into and out of the continent, its poetic symbolism is framed by the image of merry-go-rounds, which is picked up again in the cyclical couplet quoted from Donne's "Valediction" by Rick, on his return from prison camp: "Thy firmness makes my circle just, And makes me end where I begun." This reiterated image only serves to confirm the boy's sense of betrayal when he later discovers that Rick does not wish to "end where he begun," though Rob still believes that "there will be Maplesteads at Sandalwood for ever, and one apostate would be forgotten" (*M.g.R.*, p. 282). On the final page of the book, the sight of Rick's distant figure stabling his horse brings together the two organizing elements of its structure, the merry-go-round and the restless cousin who seems unable to accept love: "Over Rick's head a rusty windmill whirled and whirled. He thought of a windmill that had become a merry-go-round in a backyard, a merry-go-round that had been a substitute for another, now ruined merry-go-round, which had been itself a crude promise of another merry-go-round most perilously rooted in the sea" (*M.g.R.*, p. 283).

In one of Stow's earliest books, *The Bystander* (1957), published in his twenty-second year, the farmsteads around and between which the action revolves can be recognized as based on those the author knew during his wartime evacuation. Their sickly suburban names are belied by the loneliness and desperation of the lives within them. Koolabye, only a corner of which is inhabited by the lame, embittered bachelor Patrick Leighton, while the rest is given over to furniture and what-nots accumulated from two family homes, is discernibly related to Andarra, just as Diana Ravirs is drawn partly in the likeness of Lisa, the "Balt" servant whom Stow knew as a boy. But the most important figure in the book, the simpleton Keith who is the bystander of the title and the tragic victim of the plot, cannot be related to anything described in Stow's childhood memories, and he is created with rare imaginative power.

From the early pages of *The Bystander* we might derive the impression that we are about to witness the somewhat barbaric world of the "out-back" through the eyes of the European stranger Diana, who has been uprooted from her comfortable bourgeois background in the Baltic States and crushed by war and imprisonment. In the process, her whole family has perished and she, the survivor, finds herself obliged to seek menial work and to put up with the sort of rudeness and condescension which greet her as "the new Balt hired woman" at Lingarin. But we soon become aware that the young man Keith, ignored most of the time by most of the other characters, is the sensitive and observant eye through which we shall most clearly register the world around. This fact is remarked by the otherwise not notably observant Patrick Leighton, before the current of his existence is disturbed by the arrival of the fair, frail girl Diana in their midst. He says casually to Aunt Jessie, "He's quite observant in his way, because he stands outside everything and looks on,"⁴ to receive the tart reply that he has only himself to blame if he can find nobody to communicate with but a half-witted boy.

This comment is fair summary of the way in which "Keithy" is perceived by most of the others. His parents; the laconic, detached, basically unloving Frank Farnham and the nervous, defensive Kate; have brought Diana to the farm in the hope of leaving Keith in her charge while they take a prolonged holiday in England. Why they do not even consider taking their only son along with them is simply not discussed. Frank prefers to ignore Keith's existence as far as possible, because his own meanness over the necessary obstetric care has probably caused his disability,

⁴ Randolph Stow, *The Bystander* (London, Macdonald, 1957), p. 56. All references are to this edition and will appear in the text under the abbreviation *B*.

though the father's detachment does enable him to perceive that his son is now grown up. Kate makes a parade of affection by giving the boy the childish name Keithy, but fails in any real test of that affection—basically, she longs to get him off her hands for a year. Neither parent pauses to consider the wisdom of leaving a sexually mature young man in the sole company of a desirable girl, with whom he promptly and inevitably falls in love, much to her initial alarm. But Keith is not fated to experience the exquisite torment of a year's solitude beside his beloved. Patrick's far more self-interested proposal carries Diana off to Koolabye and obliges Keith to follow her, since his parents' departure is now imminent. Thus Keith loses at a stroke his intimately-loved home and his hopes in Diana.

Perhaps the lonely bachelor Patrick really believes himself to be in love at the time of his whirlwind courtship, but the word has no meaning in relation to someone who has so little understanding of women as autonomous human beings with needs and aspirations of their own. Patrick believes he has acquired a beautiful possession on whom he hopes to father a son. When he quickly discovers a certain frigidity in Diana, who has been emotionally shattered by her years in a concentration camp, his bitterness and self-pity prevent him from considering any other explanation than that she cares nothing for him and has accepted him for purely cynical motives.

The markedly more intelligent and self-aware Diana has, of course, considered the apparent advantages to herself in resuming the sort of status to which she was born, but the reader accepts that she has a genuine tenderness for Patrick and makes a genuine effort to conquer her sexual inhibitions. To succeed in this, however she would need the help of a gentle and concerned man, not the bitter egotism of Patrick, who continually repels and humiliates her with his mocking tongue. Finally she comes to both fear and hate him, and she finds herself virtually a prisoner at Koolabye. She longs only to escape, even if it is back to the condescension of the Farnhams.

Meanwhile the uprooted Keith finds that Patrick has replaced their former intimacy with jealous hostility and does everything he can to keep him apart from Diana. He is soon driven out altogether, and finds himself back at Lingarin in the care of Patrick's lazy and slovenly "companion" Fred. A final, desperate plan to rescue Diana from Koolabye collapses in the flames of a bushfire inadvertently started by Keith himself. Diana has put it into his mind that a real man will go through fire for the woman he loves, and in his direct simplicity, he wants to carry her through the blaze, to prove the reality of their declarations: "When she turned, Keithy was behind her, his face absorbed and strange in the strange light. She said, 'I thought you had gone, Keithy.' 'I wanted to see you . . . ' 'Me? Why?' 'To show you this—all my trees burning—and I don't care.' 'What do you mean?' 'I love you more than my farm—not like Patrick.' 'Oh, Keithy.' He came closer to her. 'Do you love me?' 'Of course, Keithy.' 'More than Patrick?' 'More, much more.' Then he looked at her, with the deepening strangeness in his face, and asked: 'Would you have an ordeal for that?'" (*B.*; p. 237). He snatches her up, but reading only terror in her gaze and her screams, he plunges into the flames alone.

Through no real fault of her own, Diana's arrival in the midst of these limited, unhappy people has disturbed the curious equilibrium in which they have hitherto existed. Yet we suspect that Keith's death will not be truly mourned by anyone but Diana herself. The outsider and the bystander have of late been drawn closer by their mutual plight, crushed between the blundering egos around them. But this vortex of passion and frustration is surrounded and in many ways dwarfed by the Australian bush, and it is uniquely through Keith's eyes that we experience its beauty, following every movement of its small intense life: "Spring came gently on the country, filling the air with pollen and the paddocks with a golden light. Scrub wattle burst into soft yellow bloom, stretches of fallow became a sea of capeweed flowers. Great drifts of pink everlastings sprang up and rustled like paper in the

cold spring wind, and a paler, more delicate pink showed in the hills when the heath flowered" (B.; p. 183). Such passages give the reader a lung through which to breathe when he feels altogether oppressed by characters who create their own suffering and are utterly incapable of alleviating that of others.

Character of more heroic dimensions is offered by Stow's third novel, *To the Islands*, which appeared in 1958 and immediately established his reputation as a writer of outstanding originality. There is an elemental quality about the interactions of man and landscape here which is new to his work. The setting of the novel is a remote mission station in aboriginal territory. Stow himself had worked on such a mission shortly before writing it, studying linguistics. The action centers upon the pilgrimage towards death of an elderly missionary, Stephen Heriot. Heriot has spent most of his adult life at the mission, has buried his wife there, and is on the point of retirement when he is enraged by the news that a young aboriginal called Rex has returned to the community without his knowledge or consent. Heriot has become something of an anachronism in the context of changing Australian policies and attitudes, having always ruled his flock with an iron hand, often equipped with a stock whip. He holds Rex responsible for the death of a girl who died when bearing his child, and accuses him, justly or otherwise, of beating her during her pregnancy. Although we never learn the truth about his accusations, Heriot never, while still functioning as Superintendent, admits that there can be any doubt about them, or about the rightness of his own rigid hostility towards Rex. Many others at the mission, however, feel that it is unfair for Rex to be banned from his own native community at the whim of one aging tyrant, as we see in the following exchange between Heriot and a visiting delegation: "Gregory moved tensely in his chair. 'It Rex, brother.' 'Oh,' said Heriot softly . . . 'Well, what about Rex?' 'We don't reckon you ought to send him away, brother.' 'And why,' asked Heriot woodenly, 'do you reckon that?' Richard said suddenly and with released anger: 'You not fair, brother. He not a bad man, Rex. You don't give him no chance. He just want to live here in his own country . . . What for you want to send him away now?' 'For exactly the reason you came here tonight. He makes trouble . . .' Michael murmured: 'He real sad, brother, leaving his country.' 'You a hard man, brother,' Richard said. Was hard, yes, when there was need for it; but not now, no, they're hard on me now."⁵ We see here that Heriot is not really interested in the advice of his "counsellors" or anyone else, being so accustomed to trusting his own judgment. When they threaten to leave the mission also, if he expels Rex, he treats them to a tirade about his own heroic self-sacrifice, to which Richard pertinently replies, "Brother, we didn't choose you."

Heriot is failing to carry either the aborigines or the whites with him in his inflexible decision. The crisis is causing anger and dismay in the mission, but its climax is one that nobody could have foreseen. Next night, Heriot goes to see the young priest at the mission, Father Way, whom he dislikes and despises. He comes, it seems, half to unburden himself and half to snarl. When Way asks him what is wrong, he replies: "I'm a wicked man who wants to be dead. And hates everyone.' 'Or enjoys pretending he does.' 'There's no pretence. I discovered that last night. For years I set myself up as a philanthropist and was really a misanthrope all the time. Ironic.' 'I suppose there's no reason why a constructive misanthropy shouldn't achieve as much as philanthropy. There's a bold modern view for you.' 'What would you say,' Heriot asked softly, the sour anger still in his eyes, 'if I said I thoroughly dislike you and your bold modern views?' 'I shouldn't,' Way confessed, 'faint with surprise . . .' 'Does it sometimes occur to you that I'm a lonely old man who needs someone to discuss his problems with him?' 'Yes, it does.' Heriot ground out his

⁵ Randolph Stow, *To the Islands* (London, Macdonald, 1958), pp. 66-67. All references are to this edition and will appear in the text under the abbreviation *T.I.I.*

cigarette. 'It's like your smug impudence,' he said viciously. 'I need no one'" (*T.I.I.*; pp. 72-73).

At the end of the interview, Heriot smashes a crucifix on the priest's desk and growls "I believe in nothing. I can bring down the world." We perceive that Heriot's monolithic personality is beginning to disintegrate and he is tormented by the process. He has become dangerous. Soon after this, he encounters Rex in a dust storm (there is a Lear archetype lurking somewhere behind this story) and the struggle between them comes to a head. He still flatly refuses to let Rex stay. In his anger and dismay, the young man throws a stone which strikes the retreating Heriot on the calf. He turns and picks up the missile: "But he would be no martyr, not submit to these flailings as if owning himself wrong, he would strike back, godlike; not he but the fierce crowd would die. He sobbed in his throat. The stone flew. With a strident gust the wind threw up a white curtain: Rex was gone, vanished in a shroud of dust . . . He went forward through the haze. Dust already lay thinly in the folds of the red shirt and on the thick flow of blood down the forehead . . ." (*T.I.I.*; pp. 78-79). Convinced that Rex is dead, Heriot leaves him there and goes straight to his own house, takes his horse and rifle, and rides off to the westward. Perhaps he thinks vaguely of shooting himself, but it is a grander and more gradual death he is doomed to die. His departure is soon discovered by Justin, one of the older and more stolid men of the mission, who hurries after him with food and blankets and, suspecting the suicidal impulse that has driven him out into the wilderness, refuses to leave him. They ride together, day after day, through a landscape that grows ever more bleak and absolute in its statements. They encounter a group of nomads, who steal most of their food, and a lone white man, the last survivor of a settlement, lingering on with his well and his pitiful patch of vegetables, who refuses Heriot's offer to bear him company. Crossing rivers and ranges, Heriot and Justin ride ever westward. Now that he has nothing, now that his murderous gesture has shattered his last links with a known existence, the kingdomless old man begins to progress, Lear-like, in self knowledge. He becomes more and more like his companion, gradually shedding the carapace of racial arrogance. Justin, after all, knows far better than he how to survive in the desert: "They rode in a silence relieved only by the rattle of stones from the horses' hoofs. Trees, grass and water were still as death, and beyond them was nothing but rock. They passed a stretch of rock wrinkled and pitted with lava. How old is this country? Heriot wondered. But it's not old, it's just born, the sea has never been over it, it was created yesterday, dead as the moon. Let the sea come swimming out of the rock-pigeons' holes. I will ride with my hair green and wild, through the canyons of the sea. In the silence there came a sudden eruption of sound, the crackle of fire. They stopped, listening, men and horses frozen like statues against the carved cliffs . . . 'There somebody'; Justin whispered. 'There, look. Canegrass fire'" (*T.I.I.*; p. 121).

Soon after this, Heriot attempts to throw away even the gun, which Justin has been using to shoot game for their food. "'I want nothing,' he cries. 'When we all have nothing, we can be equal'" (*T.I.I.*; p. 139). More and more, Justin takes charge of the expedition, though he has no idea where they are going nor why the old man, now naked and half-starved, persists in riding westward. Somewhere in the depths of Heriot's mind an aboriginal legend is stirring. It speaks of Bundalmeri, island abodes of the spirits of the dead, lying somewhere to seaward. Heriot has now become intent on glimpsing these islands before he dies. That is why, curiously, he longs for death and yet is not ready to die. He clings to his poor thread of life with the same obstinacy he has displayed in all his dealings. And as long as he so clings, Justin cannot leave him.

At last they come to some high rocks and a great cave filled with skulls and painted shrines. It is an ancient burial place, lying close to the sea. Heriot staggers into the cave and declares: "This is home." He is now ready to stop his wanderings

and prepare for death. Justin, realizing this, shoots the remaining horse and prepares the meat for him. Then he sets off on foot for the distant mission, his family and his friends: "Slowly Heriot stretched out his hands and laid them on Justin's chest. 'This is how to say goodbye,' he said, 'among your people.' 'I can't touch you, Stephen. My hands are all bloody,' 'All our hands are bloody,' said Heriot bitterly. 'Say good-bye.' A little wind stirred sadly in the leaves of the gle tree; and Heriot, at the mouth of the cave, turned and hid his face against the body of the painted god" (*T.I.I.*; pp. 199-200). Meanwhile, at the mission, Rex has survived his wound. Images of renewal begin to stir, starting with the words of the young nurse Helen, as she stoops to tend him: "You see, this is my first child." Step by step with Rex's recovery, a love affair begins to grow between Helen and Dixon, the engineer who originally brought Rex back from exile. The young whites at the mission have quickly come to the conclusion that Heriot fled in the belief that he had killed Rex with the stone, but they say nothing to the others. Discovering that Rex, through amnesia, has no recollection of his final clash with Heriot, Helen soon abandons her attempt to tell him the truth about the affair. Hence, the unhappy Rex finds himself generally blamed at the mission for having driven Heriot out by his hostility. He therefore determines to accompany the relief party which sets out to find the missing men. It is he who rides forward to greet the wandering Justin, and it is to him that Justin hands the old man's watch, pocketknife, and rifle, as Heriot willed. Their meeting thus becomes a symbolic reconciliation between the injured man and the dying one.

For Heriot still does not die with Justin's departure. He lingers on for three days in a kind of stupor. On the fourth, he impulsively climbs to the top of the rise and finds himself gazing at the ocean. He breaks into a tribal chant: "Where are you going, old ghost? Going to the islands, are you? Going to Bundalmeri? Here is your Lord. His country is outside, outside . . . *Worala gre beninangga. Walawa ada bram. Worai! Worai!*" He dies kneeling on the cliff edge, facing seaward, searching for the least glimpse of a landfall.

To the Islands marks a new level of achievement in Stow's art. It is a truly remarkable novel to come from the pen of a man of twenty-three. Stow maintains a careful balance between the humdrum affairs of the mission, whose decent, limited personnel lack the heroic grandeur of Heriot, and the stages of the old man's pilgrimage. The balanced imagery of death and renewal is handled with restraint, though there is a touch of sentimentality in the final scenes between Justin and Heriot. Above all, the novel takes us deep into the spiritual journey made by the old man who, it strikes us, has lacked both the time and the impulse for such self-examination before, locked as he was in an archaic paternalism towards both his black and his white subordinates. In the following passage from his later reflections, compassion illuminates both Rex and Heriot himself, preparing the way for their symbolic reconciliation at the end: "Then new thoughts stirred behind Heriot's eyes like yachts on an empty sea, and for the first time he remembered Rex alive, and what it must have been to be Rex, to take pleasure in clothes and women, to be sullen and rebellious and know the causes . . . Rex's life presented itself whole to him . . . and the bitter pride underlying it . . . all the ugly, aspiring, perverse passions of a living man." Heriot commands our sympathy only when he admits himself capable of hatred and injustice, like anyone else, breaking open his personality to expose the "poor, bare, fork'd animal" within.⁶

⁶ In the second part of the article, to be published in a later issue of the *IFR*, I will turn my attention to two other novels of Stow's earlier output, *Tourmaline* (1963) and *Visitants* (1979). They will be examined in relation to themes already explored here.