

Randolph Stow's *Tourmaline* and *To the Islands*

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An islanded world like that of Heriot's mission, with its claustrophobia in the midst of vast emptiness, is reproduced in Stow's novel *Tourmaline*, 1963.¹ The ghost town of the title, for we cannot take seriously the narrator's rejection of that designation, snatches at the prospect of redemption from within, whereas Heriot's redemption in *To the Islands* had to be sought in the wilderness surrounding his tiny community. When the monthly truck which connects Tourmaline tenuously with the outside world brings to it a young man at the point of death from heat exhaustion, the townsmen not only nurse him back to life but take possession of him. Knowing nothing of his past or real identity; unable to discover anything of these from the man's own fragmentary and evasive answers, Tourmaline seizes upon his mumbled description of himself as a water diviner to identify him as its redeemer. For it is from dessication, trapped between its vanished lake and its dwindling wells, that the town is slowly dying.

The narrator of the tale, known throughout as "the Law," is a survivor from Tourmaline's booming days and its former policeman-cum-gaoler. From the first, he half suspects the truth about "Michael Random", as the wanderer names himself. After all, what was he doing in the desert, without even a water-bottle or a bicycle, when the driver discovered him? The wounds of an attempted suicide have been seen on his body during his convalescence, and the circumstances in which he was found pretty clearly indicate another attempt. At the end of the novel, when the whole town has abandoned its vain efforts to find water at the point confidently indicated by the diviner, the narrator observes: "... something about that bitter resignation, that half-scornful defeat, struck my policeman's eye as familiar; and the conviction came into my policeman's head, and never left it, that he had been, somewhere, a criminal of quite extraordinary distinction."²

That is as near as we ever get to the "truth" about Michael Random, if the concept of a truth lying outside the novel and outside Tourmaline has any meaning. For the diviner exists for the reader, as for Tourmaline, only from the moment when he is found, parched and bloated by the sun, lying stretched across the highway like an aborted sacrifice. When snatched back to life he is, for a while, as eager for redemption as his hosts. And he ceases to exist with equal abruptness when he abandons that hope and runs off into the desert from which he sprang.

In the interim, however, he has succeeded in dominating the life and imagination of the tiny community. The only one standing instantly and completely aloof from his mysterious attraction, his brilliant blondness and piercing green eyes, is his physical and spiritual opposite, the dark satanic Kestrel, keeper of the local bar.

¹ Stow published a revised version of this novel in 1983. All references in this essay are to the first, 1963, edition.

² Stow, *Tourmaline* (London: Macdonald, 1963), p. 206. All references are to this edition and will appear in the text under the abbreviation T.

And Kestrel soon withdraws from Tourmaline, leaving the field clear for someone he instantly recognizes as his rival for dominance. Perhaps he half guesses at Random's final failure and makes provision for his own return by buying drilling equipment for a more "scientific" search. Finding himself conceived of as the town's creation and possession, the diviner soon decides to turn the tables and make the town his. He is aided not only by his prophetic looks but by his reputation as a diviner, for by a piece of good luck or fitful inspiration he has detected an untouched reef of gold on Byrne's concession near the town. He quickly persuades the inhabitants to form a sort of co-operative to mine the gold and hold it in common; it is smelted and stowed away in the safe which survives among the ruins of the narrator's former authority. Thus the gold, which by any normal commercial reckoning is Byrne's anyway, is made to serve as a symbol of Tourmaline's new-found hope and unity, which are then further strengthened by some phoney and frightening showmanship at the services which he devises in the long-neglected church standing above the town. Ironically, it is the narrator himself, a late and somewhat tepid convert to the diviner's messianic pretensions, who first puts the idea of these services into his mind. For he takes the newly risen Michael on a tour of Tourmaline which includes the church, where they startle its one dogged aboriginal worshipper, who has kept the oleander beside the porch alive by faithfully pissing on it every day. Her obscene gesture takes on a new significance when the church again becomes the center of the town's life.

News of the gold find stirs the narrator to one of his flights of elegaic reminiscence, which serves to put Tourmaline's brief moment of revived hope into a deeper perspective of time and space, in which it loses much of its brightness: "The news of this find, so great for Tourmaline, in which the diviner promised that all who cared to work it might have a share—this news left me less elated than melancholy. For I remember how it would once have been received, with what rejoicings, in the bar and over the countryside (not quite treeless at that time) to the site of the discovery . . . That was in the days of hope, the days of tree-lined streets, the days when the veranda of the hotel and other buildings were shaded with vines . . . The town was moved, certainly, even excited. But the gold means little now . . . It was of water, not gold that all thought after this miracle . . ." (*T*, pp. 92-93).

The narrator is alone, apart from a few wizened ancients in the aboriginal village, in remembering the half-mythical splendors of Tourmaline's past. Hence the younger inhabitants inevitably feel less *déjà vu* melancholy about the gold at "Byrne's Reef" than he. But it is true that all thoughts now turn towards the water, and that the diviner now most opportunely distracts them with his messianic performances. The ambiguity of his stance, posed somewhere between provider of liquid and of spiritual nourishment, had already become evident when he stood with the narrator gazing across Tourmaline for the first time: "'I could save this place,' he said—so quietly that the queerness of the claim did not strike me for a moment. When it did, I began to fear him. 'From what?' I said. 'Save it from what?' But he turned away with a sigh, swinging the rod in one hand and picked off a flower from the bush and held it to his nostrils. 'It doesn't matter,' he said, after a while. 'Just thinking aloud.' . . . 'You can save it with water. Is that what you meant?' 'Yes,' he said. 'That's it.' And turning from surveying the church he suggested that I might care to go home" (*T*, p. 73). There are clues planted in this passage, such as the words "surveying the church" and the fact that the diviner is sniffing a flower from the oleander bush, which reinforces its ambiguity in retrospect. But the aged narrator is willing to bury his fears for the time being.

Eventually, however, the more material expectations of his followers for liquid nourishment cannot be ignored by the diviner any longer, and he makes his abortive move to strike water. Perhaps, too, he is troubled by the stubborn scepticism of the

storekeeper Tom Spring and the aggressive scepticism of the lone prospector Dave Speed. For the latter, even Tourmaline is too bustling and metropolitan an abode, a place to be visited only from necessity, to replenish his supplies. Hence he is astonished to find the whole town under the sway of someone who is, to him, an obvious phoney. As for Tom King, who had been the diviner's original host on his arrival, his attitude is summed up in the following exchange with the feebly defensive narrator: "But he's inspired. Can you deny it?" "Inspired, sure, But not by God. By you, by Tourmaline . . ." "If we created him, what was he before he came here? Nothing?" "He was having a fight with God," Tom said. "Now he's dragged the whole of Tourmaline into it," "Is that bad?" He looked at me with contempt. And it changed him utterly. "Haven't we had enough of these lunatics in the past?" (T, pp. 184-85).

While the Law vacillates, Spring emerges more and more clearly as a counter to the diviner, unable to articulate clearly his own vision of the way towards truth, but firm enough in his rejection of all messianic claims to some special grace or revelation. He can be seen as a sort of Taoist of the outback, who lives his search for the way without any of the effort it costs him to express it.

Once again, as in *To the Islands*, Stow's novel benefits greatly from the concentration of effect, both in plot and characterization. The little group of townsmen are caught in the timelag and spacelag of Tourmaline as if in a bubble. The diviner does bring brief animation and conviction to people like the ruined, drunken poet Byrne, whose haunting song: "Tourmaline, Red wind, red sun, I thought I'd never come to Tourmaline," is like an elegy for the whole tale. Also to the strong, simple-minded Rock, to Horse Carson and even to the more demanding Deborah, former mistress of Kestrel. Deborah at first turns upon Michael all her frustrated physical passion and, when coldly rejected by the puritanical prophet, wallows in self-hating adoration of him. The only escape from Tourmaline, apart from the road out, is through uplift; but the diviner himself is too troubled and tormented a character to maintain that uplift for long. What happens to these characters when it collapses? The end of the novel finds Byrne again singing his elegy drunkenly on the steps of the war memorial.

Here, also, Stow balances images of death and despair against those suggesting renewal and rebirth (especially gold and fire). In the related sequence of poems, "From the Testament of Tourmaline," he puts it thus: "Silence is water. All things are stirring, all things are flowering, rooted in silence."³ But this time Stow has trouble in finding a convincing ending to frame his story. The reader accepts that the darkly Celtic hotel keeper Kestrel, accustomed to dominate both Tourmaline and Deborah by strong fist and bitter tongue, should return to Tourmaline when rumor reaches him that the diviner's rule is over. But it seems overcontrived that he should return with drilling equipment and with some infernal minions, announcing his intention of taking over where the diviner left off. Is Stow here making a little too overt the echoes of *Paradise Lost* which inevitably reverberate through the novel, and giving the devil a little more than his due? Be that as it may, it might have been better to end the novel with Michael Random's flight into the desert at the end of Chapter Sixteen, just as he began it with his arrival; leaving Tourmaline to revert to the coma which now seems its inescapable condition.

The subject matter of *Tourmaline* still seems to owe much to Stow's childhood experiences. He writes in *The Merry-go-Round in the Sea* of a schoolfellow whose town "died overnight" because of the closure of the local mine. This reappears in *Tourmaline* as Lacey's Find, which has already been swallowed back into the desert.

³ "From the Testament of Tourmaline," *A Counterfeit Silence* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1969).

In any case, the whole ghost town tradition was an important part of the West Australian culture in which Stow grew up. After the appearance of *The Merry-go-Round in the Sea* in 1965, however, there followed a fourteen-year gap in Stow's fictional production, apart from the delightfully fanciful children's story *Midnite*, published in 1967. This gap might have been taken to mean that the material stored by his formative years, already distanced by exile as well as by time, was exhausted. Yet when Stow broke this long silence with the appearance of *Visitants* in 1979, he brought back with painful intensity and freshness experiences of twenty years before, when he was briefly a Cadet Patrol Officer in Papua-New Guinea. So intense, indeed, is the impression made by this major novel as to make one suspect he was simply unable to handle those experiences until a fair interval of his life and artistic practice had separated him from them. This conclusion is confirmed by the fact that the book was largely written by 1970, but Stow was unable to write the ending until he had handled the same kind of spiritual crisis more redemptively in *The Girl Green as Elderflower* (1980).

Stow's knowledge of the Kiriwana language, which he learned while serving in the Trobriands, enables him to root his local characters here, as in *To the Islands*, by a judicious use of words and phrases in their own language. But here, owing to the use of a technique of multiple narration, he seems also to give us some insight into the vastly different thought processes and world views of his characters. In *Tourmaline* Stow had already experimented with the use of an intervening narrator who is also an actor in the town's dramatic encounter with the diviner. The great age of that narrator made him a living link with the town's legendary past, giving a certain depth of perspective to his account of events which loomed much larger for his younger contemporaries. In *Visitants*, Stow goes much farther in this direction by eliminating altogether the idea of a single narrative voice, whether authorial or interventional. He gives us instead a text consisting entirely of alternating passages of narration by five of the main characters in the action; Macdonnell, an old copra planter, known to his fellow-whites as "the King of Kailuana"; his nubile servant Saliba; the nineteen year-old Cadet Patrol Officer Dalwood; the Government Interpreter Osana; and Benoni, heir to the old chief Dipapa. Other important figures in the tale give their own testimony only occasionally, and appear mainly through reported speech or the testimony of others. These include Alistair Cawdor, the Patrol Officer, whose suicide forms a tragic climax to the action, and Dipapa. The Assistant District Officer, J.G. Browne, who carries out the subsequent inquiry into the events which form the plot of the novel, makes only a couple of direct interventions. This inquiry framework is not intrusive, however. There is no close questioning of the witnesses, and for the most part their interlocked narratives form a continuous story of developments over a period of a few critical weeks, beginning with the arrival of Cawdor and Dalwood on a routine patrol of Kailuana Island.

In many ways, it is the ordinary inhabitants of Kailuana and the adjacent islands who play the dominant role in the story. For them, strange visitations from the outer world have occurred at intervals for almost two hundred years. First to come were the French seamen of D'Entrecasteaux's expedition of 1793, who left behind a still-treasured sabre and a dagger to commemorate their stay. The German and Australian colonizers of a century later; the intermittent activities of the Christian missions; the Japanese interlude of 1942-45 which saw the temporary collapse of Australian administration; the crashed Spitfire pilot left suspended in his harness like a hanged god; the supposed return of the millenarian prophet Taudoga after a disappearance lasting fifteen years; all these are no less strange, alien, and inexplicable to the islanders' daily experience than the recently rumored visits of a flying saucer. There is a sense in which all these visitants come from outer space, especially when they take to dropping disconcertingly from the skies. As old Dipapa remarks: "They come, they go," (sucking his gums and looking towards the sky, like a man

half asleep) 'Black men, white men, canoes, steamers. They bring their somethings. But we—we stay and watch, that is all. Every day the same.'"⁴

Like many other communities in Papua-New Guinea and the Sea Islands around it, the inhabitants of Kailuana in 1959 are ripe for the development of a Cargo Cult. Rude joltings from the outside world have forced them to confront technological backwardness and to seek explanations for it. Their various alien visitants are easily presented as evidence that all the good things of the Creator have been diverted elsewhere, notably to Dimdim (Australia), and that only by destroying the poor things that they have been left with can they prove worthy of winning the cargo from the gods which is properly theirs. The crashed pilot of the wartime Spitfire can be seen as yet another proof of this version of events, and he has for many years replaced the images of Christianity in the local church, as Dalwood accidentally discovers. No missionary has visited the island since 1918, but the villagers have since put the building to uses of their own: "The earth floor was bare, but at the end, where the altar might have been in the God-times, a huge black plane . . . hung upright from a rope. As I came near a puff of wind hit the wings and twisted it round and I was looking into eyes. Cowrie-shell eyes, the underside of the shell, like puckered white lids with no eyeballs behind them. They stared back at me, out of an ebony face. It was the pilot, there could be no doubt about his being a pilot: he was wearing all his gear, I made out the straps of his parachute and goggles, pushed up on his helmet. He hung there by the neck, with his arms stretched out, 'crucified' on his plane'" (V, p. 93).

When the book begins, the two white officers are staying briefly at Macdonnell's seaside house before setting off for Wayouyo in the interior. On the same boat comes Osana, resentful as ever of Cawdor's extensive knowledge of the language, which reduces his own power as intermediary. Cawdor's obvious sickness and mental distress seem to offer golden opportunities to get rid of him. Also on the boat is the mysterious stranger, Two-Bob or Metusela, whom we soon come to associate with the long-vanished Taudoga, who made himself lord of the nearby island of Kaga for several years during the war. Metusela is aware (perhaps through Osana?) of the tension between the ancient chief Dipapa and his young heir Benoni, who has had an affair with the youngest of the chief's many wives. It is quite possible that Metusela is not of the chiefly family at all, that he is in fact Taudoga or some other adventurer, but it suits both Dipapa and himself to give out that he is a possible heir, and to encourage rumors of mysterious inter-stellar visitors who hover by night above the prehistoric stone circle near Wayouyo. Metusela sets about organizing the older men into a secret society, which meets by night at the stones. A thoroughgoing Cargo Cult will lead to the destruction of everything in the villages, which suits Dipapa's nihilistic mood, and to the ascendancy of Metusela in the resumed identity of Taudoga. The same scenario appeals to many of the older villagers, headed by the Government agent Boitoku. It will ensure their continued control over the villages and the more desirable girls, enabling them to terrorize the younger generation by manipulating the legend of the spatial visitants whom they claim to have seen and communicated with.

Whilst this plot is maturing at Wayouyo, the terrestrial visitants are innocently drinking rum at Macdonnell's house—the symbolism of houses is prominent in the novel—and young Dalwood is casting lascivious glances at Saliba. Browne's despatch gives us a poetic description of the setting: "The palms above the house submerge the rooms in their surf of sound. Creakings and susurrations drop from the air. The palms wander in the bare wooden passages, in the gaunt living room wide

⁴ Stow, *Visitants* (London: Secker & Warburg: 1979), pp. 91-92. All references are to this edition and will appear in the text under the abbreviation V.

open to the sea . . . The grass mats shine a little in the greenish light from the shutters. They show the path of someone who walks day after day between the windows, who leans day after day on the splintery sills to watch the sea. A house is a castle; it defends. A house is a conch. Under the palms, the house lies turbulent and still" (V, pp. 9-10).

But this old house, known to the locals as "Rotten Wood," is already marked for destruction by the plotters, who use conches to call their secret meetings. Dipapa has given over his own house to Metusela and has banished Benoni to an outlying village. Cawdor's "house" (his body) is quietly bleeding to death from deep psychic injury, as we learn later. Already he has shown himself a deeply disturbed man, unable to make proper use of his talents. An attack of cerebral malaria has probably damaged his brain, his wife has recently run off with the station doctor, and he is soon to lose both his father and his oldest friend, who disappears while swimming. Already he is inclined to mystical speculation about the stones, as he indicates to Macdonnell: "'There's a lot of study we could do here,' he said . . . 'On the megaliths, for instance. Why are they there, who put them? . . . What do you make of them, Mak?' 'Not a thing, old man,' I said, 'I think it was probably a different people altogether . . . 'I think people who were fey.' 'Fey,' I said. 'Haven't heard that name for years' . . . 'Doomed to die,' he said . . . 'When people were fey, their character was supposed to change . . . I've always imagined some very ordinary blokes being marooned here and realizing that they'd never get away, and changing . . . I can see them putting up those stones as an act of worship . . . And to show that they'd been here, to leave something behind. Maybe they even thought of the stones as a signal for help.' 'Never struck me that way, I must say,' I said. 'Very ordinary lumps of coral, I've always thought.' 'Oh, yes, but,' he said, 'They didn't get there by themselves . . .'" (V, p. 38).

A curious current of sympathy runs between Cawdor and the islands, rendering him gullible and feverishly excited when he first hears reports of the flying saucers and of the disappearance of some men from another island, supposedly snatched into the sky. His reading at this time consists of Aztec legends about the return of Quetzcoatl. Altogether, he seems increasingly prone to believe that there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in Macdonnell's banal philosophy. It is also strongly hinted that Cawdor is half Solomon islander. His father was a missionary there and his mother's identity remains mysterious. He himself remarks that he hardly spoke English before the age of seven, which leaves us with the supposition that he spoke another language with his mother. His dark skin is frequently mentioned, and when he finally lies dead, his poor emaciated body caked with the dried blood from his veins, the boat skipper Sayam observes: "Now he is a black man true" (V, p. 187).

Dalwood is almost his exact opposite: a callow, touchy, bad-tempered, and insensitive youth, incapable of grasping why Saliba scratches his face when, presuming on a night's intimacy, he humiliates her by publicly pawing her about. But he is also observant, quick to learn, and capable of decision. Witnessing the disastrous end of Cawdor's strange involvement with the islands, and how his unrest was exacerbated by his unfortunate ability to understand whispered remarks, Dalwood resolves: "I will be different now. See nothing by accident, hear nothing by accident. Say nothing by accident. Move through the villages like royalty, like a wooden figurehead" (V, p. 186).

The patrol on which the white officers have embarked at the beginning of the novel is interrupted soon after their arrival at Wayouyo by a sudden radio recall to headquarters. This gives Dipapa and Metusela their chance to move. A minor inter-village clash, perhaps instigated by a member of the cult, is exploited until it leads to the frenzied destruction of two of the villages and everything in them. A

wounded boy is also burnt to death in the conflagration. Wayouyo itself is marked down for destruction on the following night. But in the meantime Benoni and his supporters have guessed what is in the wind and have organized their counter moves. While they ambush the party coming to attack Macdonnell's house, Saliba makes a secret assignation with Metusela at the stones, but prefers to run him through with the old French sword rather than submit to his embraces. With Metusela out of the way, the whole plot soon collapses and, by the time the patrol officers return, Benoni has the situation in hand. During the interim, however, Cawdor's disintegration has gone much further. Losing control, he accuses Dipapa of Metusela's murder and then attacks Osana with a knife because of an overheard insult. He is already virtually under arrest by Dalwood when he decides to end his agony. The words he speaks to Macdonnell's old mistress Naibusu just before his suicide pick up again the imagery of the house with which the book began, and of the visitants who have haunted it. The words prefigure his own suicide, in which his blood pours through the floorboards onto his servant sleeping beneath: "I want to die. I do not want to be mad. I am mad now, Naibusu, and I will not be better. It is like somebody inside me, a visitor. It is like my body is a house, and some visitor has come and attacked the person who lived there.' He said: 'O Naibus'. O my mother. My house is echoing with the footsteps of the visitor, and the person who lived there before is dying . . . My house is bleeding to death' " (V, p. 189).

In *Visitants*, Stow's writing reaches a new intensity and beauty in its ability to handle extreme states of consciousness. Like Heriot before him, Cawdor seems to reach a point of unbearable illumination before plunging into an abyss of nothingness. Total isolation from others is the price of this illumination. Yet it is through the eyes of others that we watch this process.

I have confined my attention in these two articles⁵ to the novels which Stow published in the years from 1956 to 1979. His work since 1980, when he published *The Girl Green as Elderflower*, has turned in a new direction. It is true that Crispin Clare in that book begins as another version of Cawdor, for he is an ex-Patrol Officer who has attempted suicide after a terrible attack of malaria. But the context of Clare's recovery is entirely found in the landscape and legends of the Suffolk countryside, from which Stow's own ancestors sprang. The first six novels not only show coherence in their concern with islanded states of being, but they all draw with great freshness and fullness upon the impressions and experiences of Australia and the islands. As he presents them here, these are haunted lands where a unique version of history is always ready to stir into life, a history in which a lone white man stumbling through the desert or a crashed pilot can take on the dimensions of a major myth, which will reverberate through the consciousness of generations. His most compelling characters, like Keith, Heriot, Cawdor, or the diviner, not only share the physical isolation of the corners of the Australasian wilderness which they inhabit, but join to it a social and spiritual isolation of their own. They are doubly islanded, and from the points which they have reached, the only possible movement is one of ascent. In that sense Cawdor was indeed snatched into the clouds by a flying saucer, just as Keith was snatched by the flames, the diviner by the desert which had once released him, or Heriot by the visionary islands of the blest.

⁵ This article is a continuation of "Islands of Ascent: The Australasian Novels of Randolph Stow," which appeared in the *IFR*, 13, 2 (1986), 61-68.