

**Andrew Taylor**

**“Bitter Heritage” or New Birth?**

**Two Novels by Randolph Stow**

**Abstract I:** Randolph Stow's two novels, *To the Islands* and *Tourmaline*, are set in the remote and arid north of Western Australia. Its hostile environment is depicted as a site of spiritual purgation and desolation. But today iron and gas deposits of enormous value have been discovered in this area and the adjacent ocean, and some of the world's largest industrial developments threaten both its fragile ecology and its storehouse of priceless indigenous rock art. Stow's novels are read as warnings of how easily success can disintegrate into hopelessness, and how tenuous our grip on spiritual fulfillment can be.

**Abstract II:** I due romanzi di Randolph Stow, *To the island* e *Tourmaline* hanno luogo nelle aride e remote terre del Western Australia. Questo ambiente ostile è rappresentato come un luogo di espiazione e desolazione. Oggi, però, depositi di gas naturale e carbone di immenso valore sono stati scoperti in queste zone e nelle profondità dell'oceano che è di fronte; pertanto lo sviluppo di impianti industriali tra i più grandi al mondo sta minacciando la fragile ecologia dei luoghi e depositi di arte indigena su roccia di inestimabile valore. I romanzi di Stow possono essere letti come avvertimenti di quanto facilmente il successo si può disintegrare in disperazione e come può essere tenue la nostra ottemperanza ad aspetti spirituali della vita.

Still islands, islands, islands. After leaving Cape Bougainville we passed at least 500, of every shape, size, and appearance... Infinitely varied as these islands are – wild and picturesque, grand sometimes almost to sublimity – there is about them all an air of dreariness and gloom. No sign of life appears on their surface; scarcely even a sea bird hovers on their

shores. They seem abandoned by Nature to complete and everlasting desolation (Stow 1982: v.).

The Australian novelist Randolph Stow used these words of Jefferson Stow, his great-grandfather's brother, to preface the revised edition of his third novel *To the Islands* (1958) when it was re-issued in 1982. The elder Stow's pamphlet was an account of a voyage he made south along the northern coast of Western Australia, along the regions which are now called the Kimberly (to the north) and the Pilbara (adjacent, to its south.) He would have been looking, like most early settlers of European origin, for land suitable for farming, most likely for grazing cattle. To someone who had been born in England the landscape of the north west of Australia would have looked barren indeed.

In Jefferson Stow's day, only geologists or gold fossickers looked much deeper into the soil than about one metre. Most people looked at the sky, to see whether there would be adequate rain to grow wheat or sustain the stock they hoped to graze. In fact, the Kimberley did become cattle country. The novelist Mary Durack gave an account of life there in the second half of the nineteenth century in her book *Kings in Grass Castles* (Durack 1959). And the 2008 movie, *Australia*, is set up there and concerns just such a pastoralist enterprise.

But on the 16<sup>th</sup> November 1952 another pastoralist, Lang Hancock, was flying along the Turner River when he discovered what turned out to be the largest deposit of iron ore in the world. In 1961 Hancock was able to stake his claim at a site that he named Hope Downs (compare that with Jefferson Stow's "Forlorn Hope") and he subsequently became one of Australia's richest men. What we now call 'the mineral boom' was born.

It used to be said that Australia 'rode on the sheep's back', meaning that the nation's prosperity was the product of the export of wool. Today Australia is said to have a 'commodity economy', which is the source of its affluence. The two states that are reaping most benefit from this are Western Australia and Queensland. The main commodities (or resources) exported are iron ore and gas from Western

Australia, and coal and (in the future) gas from Queensland, and the main markets are China and India. Until recently there have been three major companies involved in Western Australia: Rio Tinto, BHP Billiton and Woodside, while a relative newcomer, Fortescue Metals, is now coming into production. But the rate of expansion is so great that in the area of gas exploration alone these have recently been joined by companies such as Chevron, Shell, ExxonMobil, Apache, BP, Kansai Electric, Tokyo Gas and Inpex/Total. It is estimated that the projects currently in development will cost approximately \$168 billion, with an output of around 62 million tonnes per annum of liquefied natural gas (LNG), plus a substantial volume of related other products (Emery 2011: 4). This is in addition to outputs from the projects already in production. With the world's insatiable thirst for a fuel that is easily transported and, in comparison with coal, relatively non-polluting, the mineral mining boom, and particularly the gas sector, could well last, in the opinion of Colin Barnett, Premier of Western Australia, another one hundred years (Barnett 2011: 8).

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Almost one hundred years after Jefferson Stow wrote *Voyage of the Forlorn Hope*, his great-grand-nephew Randolph Stow wrote the brilliant novel *Tourmaline* (1963). Stow is one of Australia's finest and most original novelists, who died in two thousand and ten at the age of seventy four. In Australia he is probably best known for his novel, *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea* (1965), which is set in the coastal town of Geraldton, where he grew up. But two earlier novels are set in that arid, apparently intractable landscape of the north of Western Australia where much of today's mining and industrial activity is taking place. These are his third novel, *To the islands* (1958, revised 1982) and *Tourmaline* (1963). In these two novels the apparently arid and hostile landscape is both a dominant symbol of spiritual aridity and, at least in the first, a possible agent of regeneration.

*To the Islands* recounts the story of Heriot, an ageing head of a Christian mission in a remote area of Western Australia. Thinking he has killed a man, he leaves the mission and sets off across the land on a journey of both despair and expiation. He

is accompanied by the Aboriginal man, Justin, as he stumbles across the landscape towards “the islands of the dead” (19), “Where spirit goes. Spirit of dead man, you know, *bungama*” (25). When it came out, *To the Islands* was frequently compared with Patrick White’s recently published novel *Voss*, which is also a novel of spiritual quest through a desert landscape of strong symbolic overtones. But whereas *Voss* is a figure of hubristic pride, Heriot’s sense of his own unworthiness also reminds one of the whisky priest in Graham Greene’s *The Power and the Glory* (1940). On his death at the end of the novel Heriot has reached the ocean, but whether he has arrived at the islands is left unresolved. In a sense it is unimportant:

The old man kneeled among the bones and stared into the light. His carved lips were firm in the white beard, his hands were steady, his ancient blue eyes, neither hoping nor fearing, searched sun and sea for the least dark hint of a landfall.

“My soul,” he whispered, over the sea-surge, “my soul is a strange country” (126).

Through his ordeal in the harsh landscape Heriot has renounced his faith but achieved humility and even a sense of wonder.

Stow’s next novel, *Tourmaline*, has an introductory note, which reads: “The action of this novel is to be imagined as taking place in the future” (6). When the novel was published in 1963, none of the resources developments described above had as yet even begun. In the novel, *Tourmaline* was once a thriving goldmining town, somewhere in the remote desert of northern Western Australia. But the gold has run out and, more devastatingly, so has its supply of water. The town has dwindled to a pub, a store, a few houses, a war memorial, a collection of stone ruins and a handful of survivors. The narrator tells us, “It is not a ghost town. It simply lies in a coma” (8).

The novel is narrated by an old man, known only as the Law, formerly the town's policeman. This figure first appears in an unpublished poem that Stow once recorded and sent to his London publisher:

## TOURMALINE

When I was young and tight of belt  
To rule the world was droving sheep.  
In a shanty town of roaring drunks  
Where the pay was good and the liquor cheap  
I strolled with chink of gaol-house keys  
And scowled a township to its knee.  
When I was young the rocks were rich –  
Where dust is gold who cares how dry?  
The cells were full of millionaires;  
The millionaires were full of rye.  
Yet no-one laughed, and no-one swore  
Before my majesty the law.

But who has stolen my command,  
Who has taken then the gold?  
Some wildness has bereaved the town,  
And I am old, and I am old.  
My tower imprisons only me  
Who years ago mislaid the key.  
I lie and dream within my cell  
That Satan dreamed that he was king –  
Of Hell.

I have quoted the poem in full, firstly, because it does not appear in any collection of Stow's poetry. Secondly, it aptly encapsulates the desolation of the novel's setting and its sense of being imprisoned in meaninglessness.

This is how the novel opens:

I say we have a bitter heritage, but that is not to run it down. Tourmaline is the estate, and if I call it heritage I do not mean that we are free in it. More truly we are tenants; tenants of shanties rented from the wind, tenants of the sunstruck miles. Nevertheless I do not scorn Tourmaline. Even here there is something to be learned; even groping through the red wind, after the blinds of dust have clattered down, we discover the taste of perfunctory acts of brotherhood: warm, acidic, undemanding, fitting a derelict independence. Furthermore, I am not young (7).

The tone is forthright and blunt, yet also the vehicle of an irony that balances bitterness and compassion. This extraordinary balance is maintained throughout the whole novel. As a consequence, *Tourmaline* is a novel of great subtlety and power. As Anthony Hassall writes in his excellent study of Stow's work, *Strange Country*, in *Tourmaline* "Stow has explored the country of the soul with a visionary intensity more common in the Russian than in the Australian, or the English novel. But his spare, arid, harsh and yet living desert is unmistakably Australian, and offers a compelling insight into our spiritual malaise" (Hassall 1986: 74).

*Tourmaline*'s plot is fairly simple. The town is woken from its coma by the arrival of a severely dehydrated and sunburnt stranger who, on his recovery, says he's a diviner. By diviner he means someone who can detect the presence of underground water by walking across the ground equipped with a suitable implement – in his case, a piece of wire shaped into the form of a Y. The wire will dip and wrestle with the diviner's hands when it detects water.

Michael Random (the diviner's name) detects gold. But the inhabitants of Tourmaline want water. Water here is quite literally the water of life – something

obvious in Australia today where so much of the land is arid, or rendered infertile by salinity. If the diviner could find water, the former lemon trees, vegetable gardens, sheep and other sources of food, could be brought back and the town can wake from its coma. It could again become a living community, displaying the “perfunctory acts of brotherhood” the Law detects might lie beneath its barren surface.

Gradually, almost against his will, Michael becomes the prophet who will lead this lost band of hopefuls into prosperity. The novel powerfully dramatises how a sense of communal brotherhood can be perverted within a community hypnotised by a charismatic figure who serves its desperate need for salvation. But the diviner turns out to be a fraud. And also a victim of his own grand delusions. His designation as diviner, with its echoes of divinity, ironically indicate that he is a false prophet. A scar on his chest and back is reminiscent of the wound inflicted on Christ at His crucifixion, but is in reality the result, it is suggested, of a suicide attempt. So as Michael bursts out, when he fails to find water, “God’s betrayed me”, the Law concludes ‘He was nothing’ (163).

But if the diviner is a fraud, he finds willing accomplices in the town’s inhabitants. He summons them all to gatherings in the roofless church, holding them under his sway like the most hypnotic of demagogues, partly by his oratory, partly by a good deal of melodramatic stage management, partly by his maniacal desire to believe in himself, and partly by the townspeople’s own desperation and willingness to believe.

In a climactic scene in the ruined church, Michael holds the townspeople, and even, temporarily, the Law, with his pseudo-religious rhetoric:

“This is what we pray. Take charge of my life, father. Because it’s too hard – too hard. And I’m close to breaking”.

The diviner’s voice was trembling a little, and his eyes were unfocused.

“He is peace. He is joy, too. He’s every beauty you ever saw. Everything that ever made you go small and hard, in the heart or in the groin. Fire

and stars and flowers and birds. And great lakes and streams of blue water”.

And everyone caught on the word, sighing. Water.

“There’ll be water. There’ll be a sacrament. A sacrament with water” (156).

The narrator is, for a time, moved by the general mood, but what he experiences is something more profound than the hysteria experienced by the other townspeople. He writes:

the diviner, whom they praised, was only a symbol: a symbol for what I believed in, the force and the fire, the reaching unwavering spirit of man like a still flame. There were times, in the tumult of voices and instruments and tireless bell, under the white fire of the stars, when I felt, so surely, the presence of God, that my heart swelled (155).

But he adds, “I write this, now, as coldly as I can” (155). That hard-edged irony is maintained, even as a kind of private divinity is not denied. For the narrator, the presence of God is not something visited from beyond, as the diviner would have it. There is no sense in the novel that such a God is in any way transcendent, something outside the self to be invoked in the way that the diviner invokes Him. Rather, God – if indeed that is the right name for it - is something found in the heart: “the reaching unwavering spirit of man like a still flame”. As such, it offers a small and barely grasped alternative to the Taoism haltingly enunciated by the storekeeper Tom Spring, whose name has connotations of both water and renewal. Spring tries to articulate his belief in the Tao:

He unveiled his God to me, and his God had names like the nameless, the sum of all, the ground of being. He spoke of the unity of opposites, and of



the overwhelming power of inaction. He talked of becoming a stream, to carve out canyons without ceasing always to yield... (148).

But in the rigorous aridity of *Tourmaline's* spiritual landscape, he is forced to concede, "That was meaningless to you", and the Law admits, "Almost" (148). Tom dies soon after, whatever legacy he might have left dying with him.

At the end of the novel the diviner disappears into the desert, presumably to die. The fortnightly supply truck arrives bearing Kestrel, that hawk-like man who used to run the local pub but who temporarily left town, returning with three grotesque companions: "one of them... had no nose or mouth; only teeth" (164). Kestrel unloads a cargo of mining equipment: the mining boom in *Tourmaline* will start again, but without the sacrament of water.

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And, as I have shown above, in the real (as distinct from the fictional) Western Australia the mining boom is also unstoppable on its way.

But there is a down side.

ExxonMobil and partners will process LNG on Barrow Island, and the resultant carbon dioxide pumped deep underground for geosequestration. Because of its isolation, no exotic predators have been introduced to the Barrow Island, which is the home of numerous endangered native species. Such precious ecology is threatened by this industrial expansion and the port to be built. But, not surprisingly, the opposition to this project from environmentalists has been powerless against the financial, economic and political forces involved. The Australian Government's Environment Minister, a former outspoken environmental activist, gave the go-ahead in August 2009.

Meanwhile the Woodside North-West Shelf Natural Gas Project is building processing trains on the nearby Burrup Peninsula. Originally called Murujuga, this peninsula was included in 2003 by the World Monuments Fund in its list of the

world's top 100 most endangered sites. In July 2007 it was also included in Australia's National Heritage list. It is the repository of hundreds of thousands of specimens of indigenous rock art, some 10,000 years old or more, and has been described as the largest art gallery in the world. As the original indigenous inhabitants, the Jaburrara people, no longer exist, nobody knows exactly what such a collection of rock art represents. But one thing is indisputable: the area had great spiritual significance for those who made it.

Environmentalists and others are alarmed at the threat such large industrial development poses to the integrity, and even the existence, of these petroglyphs, due to industrial development and the increasing acidification of rain eating away the rock surfaces. What was a spiritual repository perhaps equivalent to the great cathedrals of Europe may be consumed and destroyed by industry and the pursuit of profit.

In a recent memoir, the novelist Gabrielle Carey wrote "I believe [Stow's novels] are more relevant and prescient than ever. Stow was, after all, a kind of seer, a visionary, perhaps even a prophet" (Carey 2010: 118). And Roger Averill, currently writing a biography of Stow, claims that "what is most interesting is not that certain aspects of [Stow's fiction] have dated, but how the spirit of it has become so contemporary" (Averill 2010: 132). Indeed, both novels can be read as parables for our times. In *To the Islands* the desert may – just – be a site of spiritual purgation leading to a coming to terms with oneself and hence peace, although the novel contains no hint of a Christian resolution. But *Tourmaline* is less consoling and more admonitory. The spiritual value that the book's narrator called God, and which was symbolized in the novel by water, may continue to be ignored or eroded, even as the nation's mineral wealth, and the prosperity it brings, continue to surge ahead. Randolph Stow's narrator's hard ironic balance may in fact be very relevant today. As he says, "we have a bitter heritage, but that is not to run it down".

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