Elizabeth Perkins

REVIEW

THREE POST-COLONIAL NOVELS: FICTION AND A POLITICAL CONSCIENCE

Rodney Hall. *The Second Bridegroom.* Melbourne: McPhee Gribble, 1991.
Nicholas Hasluck. *The Country Without Music.* Ringwood: Penguin, 1991.
Ric Throssell. *In a Wilderness of Mirrors.* Sydney: Left Book Club Co-operative Ltd. 1992.

It might be asked if, twenty years ago, these three elegant and very different novels could have been placed in the same category and called "post-colonial." The question is irrelevant because twenty years ago none of the novels could have been written precisely as we have them now. Each novel in its own unique way demonstrates its awareness of the origins, products, distortions and legacies of colonialism and frames this awareness in fictional events and characters which may be discussed within the discourses of contemporary post-colonial theory. In each novel the discourse of guilt on one hand, and outrage at enforced suppression on the other, occupy a central place in the fiction. Each novel also resonates with a cry demanding restoration of a primal innocence for colonist and colonised, an innocence which both suspect did not ever exist. Each is concerned with multiple forms of power and helplessness: too often shown as power over others and inability to help oneself.

Rodney Hall's *The Second Bridegroom,* set in coastal New South Wales in the 1830s, is chronologically the first novel of a trilogy which began with *Captivity Captive,* set in the same location in 1898. An intermediate novel, titled *The Grisly Wife,* will cover the decades between. The trilogy is an ambitious project, and the two published novels make interesting use of a poetic Gothic mode.

As a highly self-conscious young citizen of the Isle of Man, whose father is hanged for smuggling, the narrator of *The Second Bridegroom* resents being colonised by the English. As a convict,

transported for theft or forgery, (historically a common crime among the New South Wales convicts), he feels like a coloniser among the natives.

The natives remain indistinct, almost spirit-like throughout the novel. Yet, although emerging intermittently from a background whose mistiness, like the hero's myopic eyesight, is partly metaphoric, the natives cannot claim the primal innocence which the narrator wants to bestow on them. At the edge of the misty bush, a girl is speared, apparently for a violation of a tribal law.

> The sight of her breast so tender and alive let loose a frenzy of grief. Both spears had found their mark: one pierced right through her neck, one dug deep in her belly. I sobbed dreadful convulsions. I had died and come back to find nothing changed. The old fears were waiting for me. I gave up with a howl of horror, such a long howl it left me fighting for breath. (p.90)

The Gothic element and the colonial hope of new life born out of an old hell are blended neatly in the scream that interrupts his grief, a scream that "grew and swelled beyond human power ... The horses were mating. Spring had come."

Poetically, if self-consciously, the narrative covers the ground of convict/colonial induction into the eastern Australian landscape, terrain, trees, fauna, birds, storm and fire. The burning of the settlement from which the narrator had escaped is described with sensuous gusto which identifies with the conflagration while apparently recognising some guilty part in its outbreak. A genuine colonial note is heard in the following passage, reminiscent of the style and sentiments of the poet Charles Harpur (1813-1868):

> As a scene, this had the fancifulest beauty. Throat dry, I watched a family's hopes being eaten away by cankers of night, gobbled into that black mass bloating and swooping above the hail of ash. I do not believe I had given much thought to ideals for some time and the notion struck me as

> full of tricks: such a frail ideal as a new life or a new society will remain forever beyond reach. And the ideal of a farm carved in virgin territory is not far different from the ideal of justice in a court of law. Each one being suited to the fool who falls for it. (p.125)

The trappings of the convict tale are credibly supplied in the story of Gabriel Dean, a bully to whom the puny narrator is manacled, but whom he smothers to the verge of death, thus effecting his escape. Like a grim, yet cunning, buffoon-like alter-ego, the maimed Dean hovers around the hero until the last pages, which settle only at the very end who shall conquer whom. But of course, neither man wins. Over the whole narrative hangs the shadow of the mythic Goddess of Kirk Braddon who gorged "the lust of each new husband while she got him ready to meet the death he was chosen for." (p.67) Taken from his Goddess on the Isle of Man, the narrator must create her again in the figure of Mrs Atholl, the Master's wife, the woman to whom the narrative is addressed.

The device of the convict forger derives directly from the historical fact that forgers comprised a high per cent of those transported to New South Wales, and creating such a character should be called realism rather than device. But the literate, physically weak, sensitive craftsman is an ideal narrator, enabling the author to underpin the narrative firmly. He permits several levels of intellectual and aesthetic engagement and idealism, also cunning to compensate for lack of brute strength, and a literary disposition to account for the writing of the narrative itself. His myopia carries the compensations of near-sightedness, "his near sight being exceeding sharp." As the narrator explains in his novel-length letter to Mrs Atholl, "This is the kind of man who writes to you, using words to take captivity captive." (p.185) The novel asserts the fact of near-sightedness, this particular artist's mode of seeing, as a contrary position to that of the far-sighted historian who might construct a narrative about the same period of colonial activity.

There is irony, however, as there must be in a romance constructed around the myth of a husband-consuming goddess. The hero may be self-deluding in his belief that he perceives fine points invisible to others, or that, his farther world being so hazy, he knows himself better, perhaps, than most. This is not a romantic hero, like Marcus Clarke's

Richard Devine, but rather an eighteenth-century, Crusoe-like hero, attempting to cope with the unknown in terms of what he knows, and perceiving wisdom in numbering the streaks in a tulip. On the other hand, the narrative constantly challenges eighteenth-century reason and rationalism with a imaginative apprehension of being that transcends any century.

The ending is open. Has the forger/convict/hero constructed another forgery in his letter to Mrs Atholl, written from his captivity in her shed? Delicately disowning the handwritten sheets, Mrs Atholl, who did little to save her husband's life, does not destroy this letter from her second suitor, but sends the pages off to the Governor for safe-keeping, so preserving the narrative for the reader.

It is a bleak suggestion. The records of the coloniser survive, the victims and the colonised seem to connive at their own elimination and suppression. The Goddess of Kirk Braddon has not been restored: although the new terrain is not inhospitable, it certainly has little of the female in it.

In *The Country Without Music* Nicholas Hasluck makes imaginative use of dramatic epochs of history, as he has done effectively in earlier novels, beginning in this novel with the French Revolution and the philosophical rationalism and idealism that preceded it. Like New South Wales in reality, the fictional French penal settlement on the two largest islands, Gournay and Dupuis, in the Baie de Baudin, presumably off the coast of Western Australia, was settled at the time of the French Revolution. The social philosophy that supplied the idealism of the convict system (insofar as idealism played a part) is satirised in the concept of the "Panoptique" expounded by Claude Dupuis, and perhaps Romantic Deist theories, or Pantheism, are evoked in the writings of the original explorer Lieutenant Bottineau. Through Bottineau, the narrative involves post-colonial attitudes towards Aboriginal peoples and the possible redemptive powers that their religious beliefs might exercise for the salvation of the colonisers. Bottineau brought back from the Islands a small bone flute which apparently bestowed upon him powers of foresight, and which is now worn and played by his young descendant, Jacqueline Villiers.

Most of the novel centres on Jacqueline, a student member of a radical freedom group, although the niece of the Governor or Gournay. She is the emblem of the colonial victim, and the act of colonisation is expressly related in the narrative to the act of rape: committed by a brash Australian resembling one of the early stage characters created by David Williamson. Don rapes the girl with a degree of love, perhaps, but the act is directly the result of greed, uncontrolled lust and self-delusion. It becomes likely that Jacqueline is not the niece but perhaps the daughter of Charles Villiers, a sardonic, suave figure resembling several French film actors, and also possibly her incestuous lover. As a member of the governing class, Jacqueline has an ambiguous relationship with her rebel Ilois friends. Her possession of the flute and its powers, her ambiguous position in the society of her peers, and her ambiguous relationship within her own home bestow on her both a burden and a grace possessed by many colonised people of this generation. Overall, she is an appealing figure in a novel whose characters are elegant caricatures, although they are well-equipped to spell out smoothly a narrative which both expounds and satirises post-colonial attitudes. Perhaps the strongest sense of emotion created is the sense of contempt that the colonised feel for their colonisers, and which persists even to that time when the colonisers themselves are beginning to resist a new form of colonisation.

The witty play with French names and language adds to the stimulus of reading the novel, and there are some colourful scenes, like the visit to the prison, the students' street concert, and the flashback to the Carnival on Dupuis that would come alive in a television series. If the novel succeeds in making the reader believe that a national music is essential for survival, the music is not the kind that gives rise to thoughts that lie too deep for tears.

As befits the first novel published by the Left Book Club Co-operative, Ric Throssell's *In a Wilderness of Mirrors* is a realistic, thoroughly credible and moving account of an ordinary English-born Australian who somehow found himself recruited by the Australian espionage system. Throssell's narrative does not attempt to suggest why Selwyn Joynton, member of the Student/Worker Solidarity Committee, was also an informant for the forces of law and order, but it does show the kind of emotional world such a man might inhabit. That Joynton is an English migrant may be read as some explanation for what his wife, Italian Marietta, dimly perceives, without knowing the facts of Joynton's career, as treachery. Yet obviously this is no real explanation.

Tracing the sad course of Joynton's failure to establish an apple orchard in Victoria like the one his family owned in Devon, the deterioration of his relationship with Marietta and his son Jack, and the comfort of his joyfully-accepting daughter Lucy, the novel allows us to feel that we learn all that there is to learn about Joynton. He does not really remain an enigma, although it is understandable that readers might see him as one. Rather, Throssell's narrative might persuade us that at the centre of such a man there *is* nothing more, and that it is precisely the existence of this nothingness that permits him to wander the third world assisting dangerous mischief, like a minor devil despatched from the hell of international power-play.

Totally unfree, Joynton is seen in post-colonial countries like Uganda, Grenada and the Seychelles Islands, obviously implicated in the destructive attempts, successful or otherwise, to frustrate what the novel sees as positive, politically independent situations or movements. He is despised by those who make use of him, and used kindly only by those whom he assists to destroy. The recreation of events in those three countries has the note of authenticity. Throssell, former Director of the Commonwealth Foundation in London, has visited and knows the histories of those newly-formed socialist states. If readers' sympathies are inclined towards the right, they may feel that the counter-revolutionaries or invaders are caricatured; but unfortunately, there exist too many readily available corroborative accounts to permit Throssell's account to be easily rejected. Yet the essence of *In a Wilderness of Mirrors* is not its opposition of left-wing and right-wing politics, but its portrait of a man who would allow himself to be used as an unthinking agent for either side. We never overhear Joynton talking to himself about his assignments as he does about his family. This does not appear in the narrative as an oversight: the absence indicates significantly that Joynton does not think about his assignments, that he merely performs them.

That idea points to the centre of the novel. Selwyn Joynton does not, it could almost be said, cannot, think. That he can feel is one of the novel's great achievements. As a father and a husband Selwyn is no more self-centred or unloving than an average man; in terms of marriage occasioned by pregnancy, his marriage is no worse than most of that kind. As Marietta soon understands, through an insight of her own, what is wrong is Joynton's treachery — to himself, to his marriage, to his family, and, if necessary, to his country. Although concern or compassion for a

figure like this will probably be tempered, the novel does succeed in making the reader feel for Joynton.

The moments when the narrative visits the other side, the left-wing idealists and progressives, are an escape into lives which more than compensate for Joynton's existence as a mindless death-bringer. Among other things, the novel pays tribute to the kinds of people in Uganda, Grenada and the Seychelles who, if not perfect, or if too idealistically perfect, nevertheless are as much on the side of the angels as Joynton and his bosses are on the other side.

In a Wilderness of Mirrors is a remarkable novel: unpretentious, elegant, intelligent, committed yet quietly understated in every way. It is good to have met someone like Selwyn Joynton, and if the introduction is only in the pages of a fiction, perhaps it will assist nevertheless in understanding such a man should he exist. Setting aside Ian Fleming, Len Deighton, John Le Carré et al, enough is learnt eventually, in the real world, about world events to make it certain that such men are out there somewhere, hollow inhabitants of an empty globe.

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REVIEW

SHARING SECRETS OF PAIN

The Secret is Out ed. Ros Butler and others, Toowoomba: Down Under Publications, 1991. rrp approx. $12.50. 108pp.

The Secret is Out is a collection of poems and stories written by women who have suffered some kind of sexual abuse, incest, assault and rape, and is dedicated to "all the people who have ever known this pain." Literature performing its most important function brings together expression, communication, art and knowledge in an act of liberation understood by the writer and the reader. The angry, wry, bitter, sad and frustrated pieces carry all this potential to liberate the writers from their isolation, and to induct into knowledge those more fortunate readers who have (so far) escaped this form of assault, and betrayal and persecution. For readers who have known this pain, *The Secret is Out* is a door into a space where one's own suffering and guilt are recognised, released, handled and written into perspective.

One of the benefits offered by this writing is its potential to remove the feeling of guilt, which is above all the greatest injury that the irresponsible, sexually-incompetent adult does to a child. This is poignantly expressed, for example, in Gina Mercer's "Independence Talk" in the image of the old man, a skilful gardener, who grafted his sickness onto a child who loved and trusted him when he forced his sexual needs on to her. "Cozza" writes in a graphic, heart-breakingly plain style, the story of a child's betrayal by her mother, her mother's second husband and his son. "At this stage," she wrote, after many years of abuse, "I didn't know you could say/ or had the right to say no to men."

We might ask, when so much of human life seems a betrayal of the civilisations our societies purport to represent, why individual cases of child abuse should be given special emphasis as an evil that must be eradicated as far as possible. As *The Secret is Out* demonstrates, this is an evil that lives in the heart of the family group which we seem to idealise as the basis of our claim to higher civilisation. To prey upon helpless

children, who have no other place to turn for trust or survival, proclaims a vicious weakness more despicable than cowardice in time of danger. What we call cowardice, is laced with a healthy instinct for survival; abuse of the young is a symptom of the desire to destroy one's kind. Most of the pieces in the collection, not only "Incest with the very young is murder," show clearly, without pretension or exaggeration, that sexual abuse is potentially more destructive than any of the virulent diseases on which we now spend research funds.

The Secret is Out is not exclusively a women's collection, and includes, for example, the work of a man who was abused in childhood by his uncle and his mother. Nevertheless the patriarchal myth which retains its hold on our society is responsible for many of the attitudes under which the perpetrators disguise their weakness, and which compel mothers to neglect the well-being of their children to retain the presence of a man.

The invigorating aspect of the book is its anger. Properly employed and deployed, anger is one of the most effective weapons against the servile habits of sexual oppressors. Regrettably, children do not have this anger at their disposal, to turn upon their aggressors, and on the rare occasions they can display their anger, they are left alone, and another victim is chosen. As these pieces show, children more often turn their anger and contempt upon themselves. To express anger, hatred and desire for revenge, and in doing so, to explain how they felt then and now, is an essential part of the victims' freeing of themselves from the status of victim. Until the victim is made whole, the perpetrators, however important it may be to understand *their* sickness, cannot be forgiven.

Some of the perpetrators recorded in *The Secret is Out* were themselves objects of sexual abuse. Perhaps one step towards breaking the cycle is to ensure that offenders have the opportunity to read this collection of writing. Inflicting comparable pain on others is the least effective way of overcoming one's own suffering: the writers in *The Secret is Out* have found what may prove the best way, and in the process they have enlarged the understanding of every compassionate reader.