Review by Greg Manning

Journey to Horseshoe Bend

Journey to Horseshoe Bend is a memoir of boyhood in which no names have been changed to protect anyone; it is a work of non-fiction. At the same time, its core story bears all the hallmarks of epic, in the deepest sense. Had its story been presented as fiction, it would have demanded a place among the quests of archetype: of the father into death, of the explorer into oblivion, and of the son into his future, and in 1969 it might have seemed dated. At that time, elsewhere in the world, writers were treating archetypes as materials for play—in *The Dead Father* (1975), for instance, the New Yorker Donald Barthelme turns the bogeyman of the Freudian archetype into a figure of fun—but here Ted Strehlow, indifferent to the strictures of postmodernism, insists on the epic element in his own and his father's experience. In *Journey to Horseshoe Bend* his own father, the Lutheran Pastor Carl Strehlow, is the archetypal father caught in the nightmare of his dying. The tale has its flaws, but there is a sense in which the flaws serve it too: they belong, as flaws do, in settler stories. As a record the story is unique, and in many ways magnificent.

The future Professor T.G.H. Strehlow was born in 1908 at Hermannsburg, 80 miles west of Alice Springs, where his father had run the Lutheran mission since 1894. In 1911, the family travelled to Germany, where the four elder Strehlow children remained to complete their educations, but within three years that was out of the question, so Theo grew up effectively an only child, with the Western Arrernte children of the mission as his playmates, and his father as the authority in all things.

Then, in 1922, a year away from a planned final return to Europe, Pastor Strehlow fell ill. A big, strong man who had never known sickness, he underestimated the severity of his condition until it was much too late: pleurisy turned into what then was called "dropsy" and now is known as oedema, the swelling of soft tissues due to the accumulation of excess water. He was alone in the middle of the continent, and he could barely move. To get him the medical attention he desperately needed, he was strapped upright to a padded chair (he could not breathe lying down), tied to a buggy and carted, dying, in century-degree heat

across the central Australian desert. The aim was the railhead at Oodnadatta, 380 miles away in South Australia.

He made it not quite half way, as far as Horseshoe Bend. Firstly the horses struggled in the sand, and had to be replaced by donkeys; then the motor vehicles that tried to get to him were frustrated by breakdowns and blocked by flooded creeks. His journey was a hopeless, agonising, doomed ordeal, almost literally a caravan through hell. Young Theo went with his parents, as he had to—there was no going back—and watched as his father slowly drowned in the fluid welling up in his increasingly bloated, grotesque body, as the sun beat down. Near the end the Pastor's body was so swollen that he could not even wear clothes: he had to be kept under a sheet, as if dead already.

At the end, having endured the physical torments of Job and the spiritual agonies of the forsaken Christ, Pastor Strehlow is committed to the earth of Horseshoe Bend, absorbed at last by the country he intended only to offer to the one true God, and then leave. The image on the cover of the Giramondo edition, of Strehlow's lonely grave surrounded by the vermilion hills of the West Simpson, is perfect. Strehlow does not lie with his devoted Lutheran wife, as he was supposed to do, but next to the late owner of the Horseshoe Bend Hotel, an old pagan called Ted Sargeant. After the burial, young Theo leaves with his mother for Adelaide, to begin his formal education and to encounter a new reality of experience.

According to Philip Jones's afterword, Ted Strehlow had planned to write this tale almost from the day it ended—certainly from the 1930s—but he did not do so until his own brush with death, in the mid-1960s. The first draft came in a rush, in five weeks in May and June 1966, but that draft was subsequently overwritten with layers of other material over the next two years. The book was published in 1969. Its palimpsestic mode of composition shows through in the text, as the party makes its way through a landscape written over by indigenous and Christian mythology, by stories of rough inter-tribal justice, by exposures of the heartlessness of white invasion, and by tales of bush hospitality and mateship, of the depth of popular feeling for the doomed pastor.

Of course, most of that awareness is not with the 14-year-old Theo, who is given to us in the third person and is learning as he goes. It is with the narrator, the sexagenarian Professor TGH Strehlow of the University of Adelaide, who provides the warp in the weave of this complex and troubled text. His meticulously informed, multi-layered sensitivity to the landscape and the communities through which he and his family passed, almost fifty years

previously, is perhaps his greatest achievement—but a novelist he was not, and the demands of literary narration in English, his third language, do not always sit easily with him. When he writes at the start of "the great broad-fronted dome of Lalkintinerama," "rugged Rujtumba," "the lofty peak of Ltarkalibaka" and "the gap between the Ilaltilalta and Lalkitnama ridges, a short distance below the ever-running springs of Irbmangkara" (1–2), the indigenous names stick like fishbones in the throat of the cliché attempts at the picturesque.

But the awkwardness works, albeit in unintended ways. The writing allegorises divisions in Strehlow himself, the German boy born among the Western Arrernte, late to English, a second generation immigrant thrown into contradictory symbolic orders, conflicted cultural and spiritual resources, and kept there by war. His subsequent successes in the English-speaking academic world never completely overcame those divisions: perhaps inevitably, they subjected him all his life to their contradictions.

Those divisions are of a different order from the perennial, perhaps universal conflict within the son, between the intense and heartfelt need to commemorate his great father, and his equally ardent need to confirm his own ascension, his first steps in becoming the complicated man he went on to be. In this remarkable story, he finds a way to do both at once: to tell his own truth, and to do it in a voice for the ages.

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