The War against Others

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Tom Keneally
THE TYRANT’S NOVEL
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THE TYRANT’S NOVEL is Tom Keneally’s twenty-fifth novel (if you don’t count the revision of The Fear as By the Line, or the two that he wrote as William Coyle of World War II). It is also one of his most unusual — satirical in purpose, sombre in tone. What is not different is the author’s willingness to take risks and freshly to venture.

The book opens with ‘The Visitor’s Preface’. The person in question is a writer who is given permission to enter a detention centre on the outskirts of Sydney where he meets an asylum seeker called Alan Sheriff. But first, the visitor provides some context: ‘a particular government might find it suitable to have an enemy-in-the-midst, more imagined than real.’ One has, although at this point one can also imagine some readers refusing Keneally’s premise. The centre is surrounded by ‘razor wire to a height which Afghanistan’s, Iraq’s, Iran’s, Bangladesh’s champion pole vaulters could not possibly clear’. While its name is not given, Sheriff comes from one of those countries.

The visitor observes that Sheriff is ‘the name of a man you’d meet on the street’. Then the point is made more explicit: ‘if we all had good Anglo-Saxon names … If we had Mac instead of Bin.’ Another polemical premise is now offered, with the simple and radical intention to ask us humanely and without prejudice to reconceive how we think of the detained outcasts, whatever they are labelled. At that point, Sheriff, under his Anglicised name, is ready to speak. This is his introduction: ‘my story is the saddest and silliest you would ever hear.’

It takes place in a Middle Eastern dictatorship that clearly is, and is not, Iraq. That is the next premise: Keneally transports us inside the world of a privileged but imperilled élite, and even into the presence of the dictator Ian Stark, known to his people as Great Uncle. Stark is a writer. His friends are poets, actors, radio and television producers. Keneally’s point is not that this could be Sydney, but that the place and the society that he depicts is not so alien from some of our own experiences.

Features of this place indicate where it might truly be. Among the twenty palaces within the capital city is Wolfmount, the Palace of Disappearances, from whose walls the bodies of alleged and executed traitors are hung. The tyrant’s domain is policed by the Overguard. As a conjecture, Stark is a veteran of ‘the war against the Others’, this at a time when the US supported his country. One of Great Uncle’s sons, called Sunny and ‘quite crazy from childhood’, is homicidal. There is a vignette of his murder of the coach and the manager of the national soccer team after it had been defeated by that of the Others. This is the kind of tale that attaches to Uday Hussein.

Yet The Tyrant’s Novel is not a roman-à-clef. The veritable horrors of the Iraqi régime are too well known for that to be viable, or interesting. Keneally’s task is to draw us into the lives of those who suffer under the tyrant, not just the professional set whom Sheriff knows, but those who are destitute. While the tyrant’s cronies luxuriate ‘at sunset on glittering cruise vessels’, there are ‘rowboats on the river, manned by fathers and sons trying to catch a little protein for their shanty kitchens’. As Sheriff points out to his listeners, these are circumstances that the sanctions have created.

Meanwhile, Great Uncle moves from palace to palace, watching Godfather movies, but reproving Andrew Kennedy, the head of television, when he shows the Russian film Burnt by the Sun. The tyrant, an admirer of Stalin, tells him not to do it again, ‘because it sentimentalised the whole issue of treachery in subordinates’. This is a flash of tart wit to which Keneally does not often give reign. He does, as usual, run a number of plot lines at once, but in this taut novel they too are slimmed down, and the action is not exuberant. One concerns Sheriff’s short marriage to Sarah Manners, actress and star of the soap Daily Lives. Another involves Mrs Carter, whom Sheriff regularly and reluctantly visits to tell her stories of her son, who served with him in the Summer Island campaign against the Others. She believes what she has been told — that he is missing in action. Sheriff knows better, or worse.

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War has been the sovereign theme of Keneally’s fiction, and he writes of it here with the authority that he also achieved in his novel of the war in Eritrea, *Towards Asmara* (1989). The tyrant’s forces use gas and chemical warfare against the Others. During a lull after an attack, young Hugo Carter takes off his gas mask. The wind changes and ‘his flesh melted before my eyes’ as the poisoned air is blown back on him. It is to find such weapons, one character remarks, that ‘one day soon the West will invade us’, as well as to deal with ‘the sins of certain of our people’.

One person in particular: Great Uncle, to whom Alan Sheriff is summoned and from whom he hears this blandly menacing instruction: ‘I ask you to loan the state the great benefit of your talent.’ Great Uncle is ‘a darkling fellow from the north … profound eyes, a moustache, full lips, the lotion-repaired look of someone who had just shaven’. What he proposes is that Sheriff should write a novel of ‘the home front, the impact of the sanctions. And brave, ordinary folk.’ It will be published in the US to coincide with, and to embarrass, the members of the G-7 summit meeting in Montreal. Its putative author will be the tyrant. A novelist in his own right (‘my own past novels have been dismissed in the West as pure melodrama’), from Sheriff he expects social realism.

It is from this point that Keneally breaks free of memories of the place we have been thinking of all along. Now he propels us into territory of his own making. We are reminded how much his novels have been interested in writers of all kinds, from the rancorous military journal keepers and the poet Corporal Halloran in *Bring Larks and Heroes* (1967) to the conscripted Sheriff in *The Tyrant’s Novel*. The project is repellent to Sheriff, yet tantalising. He has buried the discs of a work in progress with the body of his wife. As he contrives a new plot on his computer, we are enticed to think that we might be (as we are) seeing how Tom Keneally practises his craft. It is a good joke, not least for the restraint. There is none of that when, novel stalled, Sheriff has his wife disinterred so as to rescue the discs, on the pretext of research into Sudden Adult Death Syndrome.

The game expands beyond Sheriff’s control. Once finished, the novel goes to its ‘author’, who likes it so much that he promises ‘you will be Shostakovich to my Stalin, Molière to my Sun King’. A critic in the US later judges ‘how real it is compared to most American writing’. For his part, Sheriff knows that he has to escape, even if it means becoming (as the novel returns us to its present setting) ‘the most piteous creature on earth … one contemplating flight, and without documents’.

This sage and sane book ends with the teller of his sad and silly story commenting to his listeners that, by comparison with him, some of the internees ‘have been involved in genuine tragedy’. Keneally has written compelling anatomies of modern Australia before — *A Family Madness* (1985) and *Woman of the Inner Sea* (1993). *The Tyrant’s Novel* is a more oblique dissection of the way we are now, but it is no less compelling, or grieving, for that.