

Visitants: Randolph Stow's End Time Novel Nicholas Jose

Within the archive of literary writing from or about Papua New Guinea (PNG), Randolph Stow's novel *Visitants* (1979) has a special place.¹ Its highly specific location – in the Trobriand Islands off the east coast of PNG in 1959, when Australia was a decolonising administrative power – together with the author's first-hand experience of that world make *Visitants* a rare work on any terms, and more so in the context of Australian literature, where writers have not much looked in that direction for material or inspiration. One notable exception is T.A.G. Hungerford, author of *The Ridge and the River* (1952), to whom Stow movingly dedicates his novel in Pidgin that translates as 'I want to send this book to my friend'.

Australian writing from PNG comprises a broad range of non-fiction, extending to such oddities as Erroll Flynn's 1959 memoir, *My Wicked, Wicked Ways* (1959), poetry, drama, and a spectrum of fiction, including popular wartime or *kiap* (patrol officer) adventure. Among genre fiction, the crime novels of Charlotte Jay, penname of Geraldine Halls, who went there in 1948, are noteworthy. In recent literary fiction the work of Trevor Shearston offers the most serious engagement with PNG. Drusilla Modjeska's novella 'Ripe to Tell' (1995) is an intriguing sidebar. In *Networked Language* (2008), Philip Mead places poet James McAuley in relation to PNG, linking him to de Quiros on one hand and Michael Somare on the other, in a subtle discussion of Australia's near offshore as spiritual otherworld. Meanwhile, in the three decades since Stow's novel was published, Papua New Guinean writers have produced their own literature, telling their own stories.

Randolph Stow was born in Geraldton, Western Australia, in 1935 and died in Essex, England in 2010. He studied anthropology and linguistics at the University of Sydney (having studied English and French at the University of Western Australia) before going to work as assistant anthropologist and cadet patrol officer in the Trobriand Islands in 1959, where he learned enough of the local language, biga Kirawina, to converse. In his twenties at the time, Stow was already a writer, having won the Miles Franklin Award for *To the Islands*, his third novel, the year before. He was in PNG for only a few months before contracting malaria and being invalided out. Yet the experience stayed with him.

It would be another two decades before *Visitants* appeared. Stow sat on a near-complete draft for ten of those years. It was accompanied by *The Girl Green as Elderflower*, a novel of 'recuperation' (Stow's word) set in Suffolk. His previous novel, the enduringly popular *The Merry-go-round in the Sea* (written rather quickly while he was travelling in New Mexico), had been published in 1965. Thus *Visitants* marks the end of a hiatus in Stow's fiction writing career. It is a literary work of singular intensity, a profoundly unsettling limit case that critics, and perhaps readers, have regrettably left largely alone.

¹ An earlier version of this essay was presented in Fort Worth, Texas, in February 2011, acknowledging the expanded remit of the renamed American Association for Australasian Literary Studies (AAALS) to include New Zealand and the South Pacific.

Apart from some commentary around the time of the novel's appearance, little has been published on *Visitants*. The honourable exceptions are Anthony Hassall and Helen Tiffin. Like all readers of Stow, I am greatly indebted to the information and commentary provided by Hassall in his monograph on Stow and his selection of Stow's writing for the UQP Australian Authors series, which includes an interview with Stow in 1981-2, not long after the publication of *Visitants*. Tiffin first wrote on *Visitants* in 1981 and has revisited the novel since with changing insights, with Diana Brydon in 1993 and in a larger context in 1997, where she considers Stow's work in relation to its 'pre-texts', including Leslie Rees's popular *kiap* novel for young adults, *Danger Patrol* (1955).²

Like the music theatre texts Stow wrote with Peter Maxwell Davies in the same period, *Visitants* is an experimental work, its genre deceptive, its ontological status indeterminate. It looks like a novel, yet there is no omniscient author, no slippery Conradian Marlow to sheet the narrative home to, no external perspective except for a brief prologue and an end note signed 'R.S.' ('Randolph Stow' was a writing persona for Stow, who preferred to be called 'Mick' in person.) In the manner of William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, the lean prose narrative in four parts – 'Sinabada', 'Visitants', 'Cargo' and 'Troppo', each title acquiring multiple meanings as the book goes on – consists chiefly of witness accounts at an inquiry into the apparent suicide of a young Australian patrol officer. The witnesses voice what happened from their respective points of view in a sequence that allows the chain of events to be pieced together. The text resembles a court transcript as much as a play, a re-creation of collective recall, yet the words we read are 'inner monologues' (Stow's term) that respond in the interstices of speech, and with the texture, emotional nuance and reflective delicacy of fiction, to 'what other people are saying out loud'.³ The dead man, Cawdor, moreover, remains centrally absent, his voice heard only indirectly in reported speech and extracts from his journal.

The prologue notes the appearance of an unidentified flying object in Papua in 1959 in which 'visitants appeared to the Reverend William Booth Gill, himself a visitant of thirteen years standing, and to thirty-seven witnesses of another colour' (1).⁴ What is reported as fact is destabilised by the shift in perspective that comes through the association of extraterrestrial 'visitants' (men from Mars) with a 'visitant' missionary informant from white, Western civilisation, and the further information that the majority of witnesses were 'of another colour', whatever that may imply. The end note returns to the same matter in the same unsettling way: 'The incident described in the prologue is not fictitious, but was widely reported in the press in 1959' (191). That doesn't make it fact. 'R.S' aligns himself with 'William of Newburgh, recording a strange aerial apparition over Dunstable in 1189, "I design to be the simple narrator, not the prophetic interpreter; for what the Divinity wished to signify by this I do not know."' Yet *Visitants* has no 'simple narrator'.

² Anthony J. Hassall, *Strange Country: A Study of Randolph Stow* (Brisbane: UQP, revised edition, 1990); Anthony J. Hassall, *Randolph Stow* (Brisbane: UQP, 1990); Helen Tiffin, 'Melanesian Cargo Cults in *Tourmaline* and *Visitants*', *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 16.1 (1981): 107-25; Diana Brydon and Helen Tiffin, *Decolonising Fictions* (Aarhus: Dangaroo Press, 1993), 127-142; Helen Tiffin, 'Colonial Pretexts and Rites of Reply', *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 27 (1997): 219-33.

³ Hassall, *Randolph Stow*, 389.

⁴ References in parentheses are to Randolph Stow, *Visitants* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1979).

The quotation is teasing in its assumption of a significance in what has been recorded that is beyond the scribe's knowledge. It is up to us, who read the record, to consider whether this tale of Cawdor (one of Macbeth's titles) signifies nothing ('sound and fury' to allude to prismatic Faulkner again), or something. What is the relationship between the sighting reported in the prologue and end note, and the events leading to young Cawdor's death in the middle? In the words of another Shakespeare play, 'there's a divinity that shapes our ends, rough hew them how we will'. There is much that is rough-hewn in *Visitants*, including the house where the inquiry takes place and the site of standing stones that give rise to mythic, millennial beliefs, and there is much shaping (invisible, artistic) by way of inquiry into larger meanings. Is there a divine design?

As the inquiry takes place in camera, the island scene comes to resemble a Jacobean stage, laden with corpses seen and unseen: a sacrificial suicide followed loyally by another, the news of the death of a father, the reported death of a friend, the death by poisoning of a chief, a violent murder with no body to show, the grisly death of an innocent youth. It appears to be a case, in Horatio's words at the end of *Hamlet*, of 'carnal, bloody and unnatural acts, of accidental judgments, casual slaughters'. But 'the isle is full of noises', in a Shakespearean phrase of different modality, from *The Tempest*, and the novel's epigraph, that invites questions about what those mysterious sounds say, suggesting a level of explanation beyond the circumstantial and immediately human. That is the unknowing at the heart of the novel, a trick of doubleness on which the work hangs.

The UFO sighting reported by the missionary coincides with the appearance of what Benoni, the young future leader of the island of Kailuana, calls a 'star-machine' when he asks Cawdor about it (105). Benoni is properly sceptical, but also truth-seeking. He does not 'talk gammon'. He describes the 'star-machine' as 'like a tobacco-tin, that flies', emitting a very bright light as it seems to be visiting the Islanders. Benoni wonders if it is left over from Australia's war with Japan, and Cawdor offers a plausible Cold War explanation that it might be an American or Russian craft. Benoni sees through that: 'You talk gammon, taubada', he retorts, to which Cawdor replies with an acknowledgement of his human limitation: 'We live on the world like an island. Who can say he has seen every ship that sails on the sea?' (107)

Cawdor's Australian assistant Dalwood asks the same question: 'What *do* you think? ... About that flying saucer. ... you believe in it.' (131) Cawdor replies: 'In the star-machine? That it exists? Maybe.' What was a matter of fact becomes a question of belief. Dalwood has heard Cawdor talking to himself incomprehensibly: 'You were talking Martian because you are a Martian.' This boys' own banter between mates allows Dalwood a perception into Cawdor as himself a 'visitant', prompted by his estrangement from his own people to love the people on the 'star-machine' as his own. Cawdor has written himself into the cargo cult narrative with which the Islanders, adapting traditional beliefs, responded to arrivals from outside, like the colonising ships of the past. The star-ship is connected in the minds of the Islanders with a remnant church, a circle of stones, that becomes the base for the cult hysteria that leads to violent rampage. 'When asked why they should connect the stones with the space-ship,' Cawdor's journal records, 'all the men implicated said that they had heard of the connection from BENONI, who had heard it from me. I shall have to return to this ...' (154). His speculative narrativising enters the oral narrative of the

Islanders in a lethal case of Chinese (Trobriand Islands) whispers.

‘What is it in human experience that the repeated reports of such visitations answers?’ asked Stow in his conversation with Hassall, keeping an open mind.⁵ ‘What interests me [is] ... why so many people want to believe that they exist’. For a true believer in the power of the fiction-making imagination, the persistence of such stories might be taken to indicate that there is a dimension to existence, inner or outer, manifest in such speculation, that can only be represented in that form. Christ’s nativity too, the transformative intervention of divinity in history, of eternity in time, for Christian believers, was signed by an extraordinary star.

As readers we are prompted to ask about the status of what we are reading. In a novel acutely aware of questions of translation, and where each speaker’s language is carefully individuated, and the written tellingly differentiated from the oral, the language of the three non-native speakers has a mediated transparency. Perhaps it is understood to have been translated by Osana, the unreliable Government Interpreter, or accepted as delivered in comprehensible English by way of literary convention. But another fictional explanation of our understanding is that it is paranormal, extrasensory, mediumistic, as if we are mind-reading the inner monologues of the witnesses in the slow build-up to the relived climax. This makes our witnessing a form of ritual re-enactment, marked as mimicry or appropriation in the language of postcolonialism. Stow has been praised for his verisimilitude in this novel.⁶ Tiffin notes how ‘the rendition of conversation follows, often literally, the structures of biga Kirawina speech’, which has the effect of reversing ‘the convention of making the Western language the definitive or normative one’.⁷ Stow has called his realism ‘hyperrealism’ to distinguish it from the social realism of more conventional fiction, and apart from the kind of symbolic or allegorical reading that also renders the real unreal. Stow’s realism is *uncanny*, in the most troubling sense of that charged term. It allows unbearable knowledge to surface.

At the end of *Visitants* the interpreter Osana, who fears that Cawdor’s linguistic prowess will render his own skills redundant, and who amplifies the shaming news that Cawdor’s wife has left him for another, presumably more virile man, summarises his own inquiry into the chain of causation. Cawdor has encouraged the story that the advent of a ‘star-machine’ is imminent. This lends credence to the belief of some Islanders that the long-awaited time has come to overthrow the Dimdim, the Australian overlords, to seize their power and access to ‘cargo’, to reverse the order of subjection. Mayhem ensues.

OSANA

Who spoke to the people about the star-machine and the *Minauluwa* [a boat that has disappeared without trace]?

Mister Cawdor.

Who caused the destruction of Olumata and Obomatu?

Mister Cawdor.

Who caused the death of the boy Teava at Olumata?

⁵ Hassall, Randolph Stow 386.

⁶ Russell Soaba, ‘Of Kiaps and Cargo Cults’, *Overland*, 80 (1980), 65. Quoted in Hassall, *Strange Country* 194.

⁷ Tiffin, *Colonial Pretexts* 227-8.

Mister Cawdor.
Who caused somebody to murder Metusela?
Mister Cawdor.
Who caused Senubeta to poison Dipapa?
Naibusi, because of Mister Cawdor.
Who killed Kailusa?
Mister Cawdor?
What caused Mister Cawdor? (188)

Cawdor is caused, first of all, by Australia, by colonialism and history. He is caused by books, the ideological formation and world view that he carries with him, developed by constant reading. He is reading William H. Prescott's classic *Conquest of Mexico* (1843) as his illness worsens and he is struck by a passage explaining how 'special annunciations of Heaven' were interpreted ominously by the Aztecs in a way that seemed to make their doom inevitable (111). There's an analogy with the way political tension in the Trobriand Islands feeds on cargo cult memories and reports of inexplicable sightings and disappearances of men and craft. The passage is read to the inquiry. Cawdor is 'caused' by such knowledge and his capacity to connect the dots into narrative scenarios: to generate science fiction. He is also caused by his physical and psychological distress, a body susceptible to tropical disease and a mind invaded by absence of love: viral visitation and spirit possession. Finally, and most importantly for the local people, he is caused by his capacity to speak their language. His cause can have its effect in their world because he can penetrate their motives deeply enough to acquire a culturally crossing taboo role. 'That is what a king would look like,' thinks Dalwood when he sees Cawdor sitting in hieratic pose on the island: 'he looks like he must feel' (137). (As those other usurpers, Macbeth and Claudius, were never quite able to do.) As Hassall notices, Cawdor sits at the centre of the Daoist emblem 'of the square Earth surrounded by the circle of Heaven': at the intersection of time and eternity.⁸ (Stow was a student of Daoism.) For his communion with them, the Islanders love and fear Cawdor. After he opens his veins in the final blood bath, his body becomes 'unrecognisable as the body of a European'. 'Now he is a black man true,' says the native skipper (187). That is Cawdor's crossing, his transfiguration, a self-deliverance from which there is no return. He is the sacrificed god who releases the cycle of guilt and murderous revenge from this world. The cause of this Mister Cawdor is his capacity to enter the local community. He consummates that shared narrative, and the rest is silence.

Cawdor's last words to his younger colleague, Dalwood, as to a younger brother, are: 'I saw. Timi, I saw. Down the tunnel. My body. Atoms. Stars' (185).⁹ The sensation he reports is of being united with the cosmos through dissolution of self. He is being beamed up. The visitants are reclaiming him. 'He said: "I can never die." Then he died,' adds Dalwood, reminding us laconically that, if the planes of time and eternity seem to intersect in this moment, it's only a way of speaking (186).

Visitants allows a transcendent figure to appear in the circumstantial ground of the suicide of a patrol officer gone troppo. Yet the narrative ending is undecidable. In

⁸ Hassall, *Strange Country* 136.

⁹ Derek Wright discusses their brother-like relationship in 'The Mansren Myth in Randolph Stow's *Visitants*, *International Fiction Review*, 13.2 (1986), 82-86.

place of resolution comes the offer of faith. The words inscribed by Cawdor in local language in the copy of *Conquest of Mexico* that he leaves for Dalwood are translated as 'every kind of thing will be good' (188). We recognise the back translation of Dame Julian of Norwich's words, familiar from 'Little Gidding', the last of T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*: 'All manner of thing shall be well.'

Stow calls Cawdor's terminus an 'illumination', a vision of the elements of the body re-forming after death. He wants to show that 'even a situation like Cawdor's is not irredeemable'.¹⁰ The novel provides almost too many overlapping reasons for Cawdor's break-down, starting from 'Guadalcanal twenty-seven years ago' when he was born to a missionary mother (8). Yet being *redeemed* is different from being explained. It implies sin, even if only the state of sin to which man is born. 'Sin is behovely' (necessary, inevitable, useful) according to Julian of Norwich's (and T.S.Eliot's) full text. The phrase is elided in Cawdor's inscription. Stow is generous in interview but he also elides. There is a lacuna. What is Cawdor's *sin* that needs redeeming?

Hassall explains Cawdor's breakdown as a consequence of alienation and incapacity to love, an expression of existential despair, 'a spirit divided against itself'.¹¹ That is true as far as it goes. For Hassall the destruction on the island is a circumstantial correlative of inner turmoil, but 'does not cause it'. Tiffin is troubled by the question of causality too. She identifies Cawdor as 'both aggressor and potential victim'.¹² Later she writes that the novel 'collapses ... dialectically defined positions ... into a continuum', suggesting more fluidly oscillating perspectives. She is careful to say that while the burning of the island may be regarded as 'linked in a patterned way with Cawdor's death, the one is not the cause of the other'.¹³ She notes that Cawdor's suicide 'is given a clinical cause in ... cerebral malaria'. Yet the novel demands that we think about causation in a larger way. 'What caused Mister Cawdor?' is Osana's final insistent question, and the novel's Delphic riddle.

Without Cawdor's perspicacious interference, events would have played out differently. His capacity for cultural crossing makes him potent in a situation of unequal mutuality, enabling him to enter the Islanders' separate identity, even as he loses his own. For Cawdor this is an end devoutly wished, just as he wants to hear the imaginary music made by nature when all the instruments have disintegrated in tropical heat. His desire is to step outside his own locatedness, and he prides himself on his capacity to do so.¹⁴ It proves damaging all round.

Chief Dipapa shows Cawdor a treasured old sword. Cawdor identifies it as European, with the mark of the King of France, and guesses that the sword came from D'Entrecasteaux, the French navigator who visited the region in 1793. 'The people of Louis cut off his head,' Cawdor tells Dipapa, foreshadowing the novel's end when Dipapa himself will be poisoned by his people so power can take a different course (91). Dipapa's scheming agent, Metusela, will be executed by this very sword.

¹⁰ Hassall, Randolph Stow 392.

¹¹ Hassall, *Strange Country* 145.

¹² Tiffin, *Melanesian Cargo Cults* 123.

¹³ Tiffin, *Colonial Pretexts* 226, 230.

¹⁴ Veronica Brady understands the 'disintegration' of self as transcendent ascent in 'Randolph Stow's *Visitants* and the Limbo Dance', *The Writer's Sense of the Contemporary*, eds. Bruce Bennett, Ee Tiang Hong & Ron Shepherd (Perth: The Centre for Studies in Australian Literature, University of Western Australia, 1982) 26-29.

History incorporates such ruptures into its long patterns. There is no outside of history, if our understanding is large enough.

Yet literature is drawn to make sense of things differently, imaginatively, as experience reaches a limit point. The literary presences in *Visitants* usher the reader in that direction: the psycho-social chaos of Jacobean tragedy; the shadow-line of Conrad; the antagonistic polyphony of Faulkner; the straining for transcendence in Eliot, within a long, Christian, English tradition. That is the creative substrate from which *Visitants* moves to cross a threshold into non-Western time, fiction that is also myth, language beyond language. It is a scrupulous, intricate and moving attempt. Can it succeed?

Diana Brydon and Helen Tiffin note the many ways that the novel achieves 'the cultural dialogue that history itself never allowed': through translation, orality, an 'ethnography that poses its questions at the boundaries' (quoting James Clifford), a narrative plurality that problematises 'fact', and a rippling, engaged humour.¹⁵ Their argument insists worthily on 'the potential of cross-cultural interaction'. But is that what *Visitants* shows, where the potential enacted is catastrophic?

The novel's narrativising procedures share with Cawdor's extremity and the surrounding communal violence a determination to find meaning. Yet there is a kind of meaning that cannot be expressed through the conventions of narrative explanation, that cannot be brought back intact from cultural crossing, and stays inaccessibly silent. Cawdor jokes that when he learned the local language there was nothing to talk about except 'sex and yams' (109). This need not be taken as diminishing the language. (Written Chinese, for example, uses radicals that indicate elemental items, such as 'grain' and 'heart', from which countless complex meanings are generated.) The point might be that 'sex and yams' are in fact everything and that everything that needs to be said can be said in terms of 'sex and yams'.

Visitants is a visionary attempt to enfold history and myth as a way of transcending cultural difference. Its tragic awareness acknowledges the failure of the enterprise: a limit to a certain kind of literary imagination. Stow's recognition of what does not return from crossing makes *Visitants* an end point. In its imaginative attempt to escape its own locatedness, it comes up against that very same locatedness as a grief-laden apprehension. It is impossible to devise a position apart from, free of, the weight of colonising, colonised relationships.

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Visitants was Stow's last 'Australian' novel. It is Australian by virtue of its central character, and because its critique of colonialism turns back on Australians as colonised as well as colonising. The novel was published as part of a diptych with *The Girl Green as Elderflower*, a beautiful novel that opens doors into long vistas, as its companion closes them. Although conceived after *Visitants*, Stow allowed *The Girl Green as Elderflower* to be published first, making *Visitants* a kind of last word. *The Suburbs of Hell*, his last novel, followed in 1984, transposing memories of the Nedlands serial killer to small-town East Anglia. By the time *Visitants* was published in Australia, Australian fiction had moved on. Perhaps that explains the lack of impact

¹⁵ Diana Brydon and Helen Tiffin, *Decolonising Fictions* (Aarhus: Dangaroo Press, 1993) 127-142.

this taut, hypnotic masterpiece had in its day. Its powerful insight was an impasse, its prophetic diagnosis a fictional end point. It would be for another generation to recognise its meaning.

From here Australian fiction found another path, became more entangled, looser, muddier. The next generation of writers – Carey, Garner, Moorhouse, Bail and others – would go urban, domestic, sociable, concerned with the friction of like with like, the quotidian rather than end time.

Visitants was sufficiently occluded by 1999 for poet John Kinsella to recover its title, with an epigraph from Stow, for his own collection of poems. It includes ‘Visitant Eclogue’ in which lights appear to a West Australian grain farmer to answer an emptiness that is now ecological as well as existential.¹⁶

End time would make a return, however, from outside Australia’s colonised history, as Indigenous writers brought the celebration of their ‘time immemorial’ into literature. Alexis Wright’s *Carpentaria* (2006), published nearly thirty years after *Visitants*, is one tremendous expression of this.

Sinabada – ‘wife’ – the name of the first part of Stow’s book, is the name of a new short film by PNG-born New Zealander Veialu Aila-Unsworth. It’s a drama that ‘puts a spotlight on the 1928 White Women’s Protection Ordinance’ which made interracial relationships illegal in PNG.¹⁷ Things have changed there as in Australia, as work by artists and writers of PNG background, such as writer Russell Soaba, artist Michael Mel, and film-maker Aila-Unsworth, shows, work that often combines visual and performative elements with text.

I was fortunate to visit Mick Stow at his home in Essex, England, several times over the years. We made contact when I was working on my novel *The Rose Crossing* (1994), a story that also pushes the limits of cultural and historical crossing, in my case between East (China) and West (Europe). As Randolph Stow, he had been a visitant to me for much longer, of course, since I was introduced to his work as a schoolboy and identified with it to the point of emulation. Then it was *The Merry-go-round in the Sea* and the poems in *A Counterfeit Silence* (published in 1969). A local connection was revealed to Adelaide, where I grew up. The Stow side of his family were South Australian and their name is remembered in such public places as the Stow Memorial Church. That connected with the recognition of an intense but also deflected or distanced locatedness in his work, in the poem called ‘The Ghost at Anlaby’, for example, about the house where poet Geoffrey Dutton and his wife Nin lived, near Kapunda, in South Australia. In Stow’s work there is a complex relationship with Australia as a receding place – he didn’t return to Australia after 1974 – a continuing imaginative source, a site of intimate memory and human relationship. As recently as 2000, he recalled a drunken dream from half a century earlier in Geraldton, when, after a night talking poetry with a mate, a word came to him in a bush ballad stanza: ‘Tourmaline’, a name, a ghost town, a novel in embryo.¹⁸ Australia is also the primary location of Stow’s enduring literary presence. *Visitants* marks a limit point in that relationship. While not presuming to analyse the motives for his decisions, one might read his move to ancestral Stow territory in Essex as a

¹⁶ John Kinsella, *Visitants* (Tarset: Bloodaxe Books, 1999).

¹⁷ Tavurvur, ‘PNG Short Film – Sinabada’, Tubuans and Dukduks, August 17, 2009.

<http://garamut.wordpress.com/2009/08/17/png-short-film-sinabada/>

¹⁸ Randolph Stow, Foreword, Rachel Percy, *Dry River* (Darlington WA: Rachel Percy, 2000), vi-vii.

rigorous personal act of undoing colonisation: of returning things to how they might have been. It was a healing return. He was content to stay where he was after that, from where he communicated reticently and honourably.