

Alan Gould, *The Lake Woman* (Arcadia, 2010)

Consent is hard come by for a tale which in its opening scenes so tests credulity. Giving sympathetic attention to the first sixty pages can be disconcertingly like trying to step back and forth between *Idylls of the King* and *Johnny in the Clouds*. A man falls from the sky over war-torn France. His parachute fails to open. He survives. A woman – real? Not real? Something of both? – rises from a mist-enshrouded lake to greet him and mentor his ethical instruction. Europe's conflagration is become a finishing school, there in part, the feeling is, to burnish our hero's upper-middle class *modus vivendi*. The devil appears periodically in the shape of panzer divisions breathing dragonfire. Other ranks, staunch fellows mostly, take up their traditional station, Dad's Army enlargements shifted towards the legendary, yeoman-staunch and shoulder-to-shoulder with their betters.

Social difference is the undiscussed subject of *The Lake Woman*, otherness drawn to the centre that in easier times excludes it in the Quest for the universal, for which read: decency. Chaps who address one and quite right too, as *sir*, and the scions of privilege with their eye on the same prize, this being, not far below the mystic marriage and tutelary business, Anglo-Saxon attitudes, really.

The principal character, Alec Dearborn (there may be more to a name than subtlety; there had better be), is squattocracy Australian transplanted to public school England to show the right stuff on behalf of us all, as the balloon goes up in Europe. After the initial mystic business of the first few chapters, the sociologic underpinning endures. The stoic upper lip of old stock and new world pragmatic courage meld matey in defence of values on the verge of being lost forever.

The reason *The Lake Woman* runs well, especially in its extended middle development section, despite the leaden formalities in its saddlebags, is that its background John Buchan hum keeps throwing up genuine grace notes. Switching metaphors for a moment, as the novel does registers: the narrative is a hem-stitching of memorable narrative *aperçus* – especially those between Alec and the Woman, later named and lowercased, whose initial otherworldliness subsequently snaps into a convincing, if faintly shocking, fleshiness – are angels really sexual? do they birth? – and unanticipated pieces of what deserve to be acknowledged as a sort of wisdom that does seem drawn up from ancient wells. Dash it all, Richard Hannay might have expostulated, the blessed thing works, though it has no right to. One keeps admiring this and that, though one does not perhaps always like oneself very much for doing it.

Perhaps a brief example of Gould's dialogic decorousness to illustrate the sort of risk of losing his reader he's prepared to take:

'You play the football, and then you go secretly to the piano. I believe you do not think you are such a simple Alec'. This conclusion of hers made him shrug, so she probed. 'In this war, I have seen some soldiers who watch themselves very carefully despite the bang-bang.'

'The Other Bloke?'

'The Boche who are here, yes.'

'I'm a common enough article, I reckon,' he parried. 'Like most soldier boys, probably.'

Book reviews: *The Lake Woman* by Alan Gould. Robert Lumsden.

*Transnational Literature* Vol. 3 no. 2, May 2011.

<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

For modesty was his first instinct when folk tried to draw him on his introspective side. Years ago in the school changing rooms after a match, one of the fellows had stopped in the midst of the raillery to look at where Alec was sitting apart in his muddy togs. The look of that otherwise bland scrum player had been oddly piercing on the occasion. Then the bloke decided to advise both the team and the way side of his piece of insight.

‘You know, I reckon Handles is actually a darker horse than he lets on.’  
(89)

The writer of this passage walks a tightrope in establishing something about his character and about Dearborn’s relationship with Vivianne Orbuc, the lake woman of previous appearance, and so must we, his readers. On the one side is peril of a the plunge into a take on life that smacks of *The Boys’ Own Paper*; on the other, a stretching too far for a significance beyond the ordinary, with the consequent possibility of toppling into pretentiousness. The passage works, just, despite the fustian language of Alec’s school days (*one of the fellows had stopped*) which though true to its time is too much reinforced by other inducements to twee-ness (*in the midst of raillery; folk; the bloke* (twice); *soldier boys*), which reprise similar passages throughout the novel. The pressing undertone of English gentility is redeemed in this case by a single sentence, which I take to be the impulse behind the exchange, and part of its moral lesson (this is a thoroughly moral book): *For modesty was his first instinct when folk tried to draw him on his introspective side*. It is an insight into Dearborn worth having, and concisely put. The reader is on tenterhooks for it to arrive, all the same, aware of the danger of slipping to right or to left from that rope.

Much of *The Lake Woman* operates in this risky fashion by assuming assent to a sort of tea shop propriety not everyone might be comfortable with, as though a battlefield were regarded from an embrasure hung with a Liberty’s of London print. Reading it sympathetically can require an edgy tonal adjustment of contemporary expectation against the sepia tints provided by the writing.

Sometimes overbalancing does happen, most importantly in the final scenes of Dearborn’s briefly renewed acquaintance with Vivianne Clausthal, as she becomes, and especially in the last chapter, whose title ‘The Lessons of the Lake’ signals a resolution that will crescendo and remain in memory, an echoing literary *moment*.

But too much of this is conclusion summarily done, or involves an assumption, case not made, that the significance of this central relationship reaches beyond just another account of two people torn apart by war. This had to have been been made good by that point, or left alone entirely. It hasn’t, and wasn’t. The characters of Dearborn’s children, and Vivianne’s, and the circumstances of their meeting with him – they travel to Australia – are, especially, too lightly drawn; the pay-off of Dearborn’s encounter with them when it comes is neither stoic nor mysterious, but *précis*-like.

But then, just a few pages on, Gould in describing Alec’s decline and death and his character’s manner of dealing with it, is convincing and moving. All at once, he begins to sound, not warlike, but like Waugh, and the comparison isn’t invidious. Something of the code of stoic vivacity he had been romancing previously, suddenly lives.

It can be no accident that these final pages of the book are characterised by the

kind of concise evocativeness of Alan Gould's best poetry. There is often a sustained and restrained exuberance in his verse which comes readily because it is unconfined by a chivalric, or any other, matrix, most splendidly in his libretto for Graham Hair's choral symphony *The Great Circle*, which stands apart from the music as a great poem of Australia. It is so good, I think, that it deserves to be studied in schools, or would be, were schools still reading epic poetry. And we do have something of that, at last, near the end of the book. The *Lake Woman* is worth spending time with, despite its flaws. But one foot carefully in front of the other on that tightrope as you proceed would be the go, and don't look down.

**Robert Lumsden**