

Mixed Results in the South Seas

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John Toohey

Quiros

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THE ENDURING POPULARITY of historical fiction — it dates back almost to the inception of the novel itself, with the eighteenth-century Gothic movement — has, more recently, acquired a particular focus. Novels about the history of exploration have sold impressively. Some, such as Dava Sobel's *Longitude*, have even achieved that incontrovertible sign of novelistic success: adaptation into a television miniseries.

Our tendency to narrativise the past may stem from a number of desires: a yearning for heroism or other 'lost' virtues; nostalgia for supposedly better or simpler times; even the wish to revise or explain a particular historical moment. Sometimes the distance of an historical setting may provide a useful perspective on a novel's more abstract concerns; in any case, it intensifies the escapism inherent to fiction. But, while a prefabricated setting can be a blessing for an author, there are a number of dangers inherent in the genre. The provision of authenticating detail can conflict with the momentum of the novel's thematic concerns. Rendering speech in an old-fashioned manner may result in stilted dialogue. Authors who focus on actual events must also deal with the fact that historical events don't always fall into patterns that make good plots.

John Toohey's *Quiros* is set during the seventeenth-century search for the Great South Land. Pedro Fernando de Quiros is a Spanish explorer driven by the desire to construct a glorious new Christian civilisation in the southern hemisphere. He arrives in Peru in 1605, the legendary survivor of an infamous earlier expedition by Alvaro de Mendana, whose crew became horribly degenerate. Despite this legend, the young men of Callao flock to crew Quiros's new expedition. With the mixed legacy of the South American conquistadors in their memory, these adventurers seek gold and, if not primarily god, then glory and women.

After witnessing Quiros's emotional outbursts and maniacal religious fervour, the crew becomes increasingly doubtful of his sanity, but is unsure whether anyone else can lead them to safety. Further uncertainties about the nature, and very existence, of their destination combine with the desolation of the vast Pacific to create a volatile atmosphere in which

mutiny becomes a constant threat. The balance of power sways alarmingly between Quiros and his disgruntled crew.

The expedition encounters various islands that offer tempting respite from the monotony of ocean, but also hidden danger. The explorers draw much-needed water from one volcanic summit, failing to connect the dead bodies in their water source with the consequent sickness of most of the crew; they assume supernatural intervention. Another island is populated by beautiful people, 'la Gente Hermosa', who are truly the stuff of male fantasy: the women go naked, and obligingly have sex with the crew, to the point where desertion becomes a serious possibility. But the most extreme events occur on the island that is the endpoint of their voyage. Here the tensions of the voyage boil over; the threat emerges from within.

Toohey negotiates the pitfalls of his genre with mixed success. The situation he explores is intriguing: men grouped in a confined place on a dangerous voyage to an uncertain destination. He sets up the various psychological dramas in a promising fashion, and gives his story the immediacy of a first-person narrator. However, various interesting possibilities are not fully explored. Perhaps the problem is a sense of uncertainty about the novel's precise generic location, whether it is primarily a psychological drama or an adventure tale. While the enigmatic character of Quiros is supposed to be one of the prime concerns of the novel, it isn't developed significantly beyond the proleptic opening scene, which details his ultimate mental state. He continues to be passionate and erratic, alternately violent and compassionate, but we have no further insight into what motivates his missionary zeal. He remains colourful but frustratingly opaque.

On the other hand, the defining elements of this exploratory voyage — boredom, equivocation, slow loss of faith — don't make for a good adventure story. They form a background for a study of group dynamics, and this does become a theme, with the threat of mutiny, and the culminating escalation of disturbing behaviour. Yet, again, there could be greater substance and complexity to the psychological insights. Even these disturbing events fail to have the shock value they could command, partly because of an element of flatness to the narrative voice, but more simply because they are overshadowed by the horrors of the Mendana voyage. Overall, there is a lack of momentum to the story, which diminishes both the adventure plot and the psychological drama.

The most serious ambiguity, however, lies in the nature of the novel's relationship to reality. I thought a map of the journey this novel describes would have been not merely interesting but an opportunity to create dramatic irony from the difference between the crew's knowledge of their location and fate, and ours. With no explanation of how this narrative relates to the history of South Seas exploration, the analytical potential of the historical fiction genre is also lost. This is a diverting tale, but it could have had more significance.