

***A Country Too Far: Writings on Asylum Seekers* edited by Rosie Scott and Tom Keneally (Penguin Viking, 2013)**

In January 2014 a news story broke in Australia. An employee at the Manus Island detention centre had posted the following on Facebook: ‘Merry Christmas all. One of these jokers just swallowed a pair of nail clippers. RALMFAO.’¹ G4S, the corporation which manages the centre, responded by promising to review its training procedures, and a spokeswoman for the Minister for Immigration inevitably announced how ‘inappropriate’ it is to mock self-harming behaviour among the detainees.

This story is sickening, but the fuss made about the boorish behaviour of one employee at one detention centre downplays wider and more fundamental questions about successive Australian governments’ treatment of asylum seekers. Subsequent events, including the death of asylum seeker Reza Berati in the Manus Island detention centre, have compounded the horror of the situation.

So this book, *A Country Too Far*, is heartening in a way. It confirms that there are Australians who believe that there must be a better way. But the book is in equal measure distressing and depressing. With these intelligent, articulate people arguing the case, how is it that neither side of politics shows the smallest interest in changing their inhumane policies?

Tom Keneally sets the argument out most clearly in his carefully-argued essay ‘A Folly of History’. He explains the inconsistencies in government policy – at the time of writing it was a Labor government – and the familiar statistics about the small number of boat arrivals compared to plane arrivals, and the large proportion of asylum seekers who are eventually judged to be genuine refugees. He is careful to counter the arguments about ‘sending messages’ to people smugglers and stopping leaky boats before they set out. He tellingly compares the way the current governments deal with Displaced Persons with historical examples. As Keneally says, the DPs of the Second World War were ‘people without documents, a condition which is now, in Australia, depicted as something between a crime and an arch stratagem’ (228). Australia accepted 170,000 DPs from Europe between 1947 and 1952.

Joining him in this volume are some of Australia’s most celebrated writers: poets Les Murray, Dorothy Hewett, John Tranter, Judith Rodriguez, Ouyang Yu – and Judith Wright, recruited posthumously. A short introduction by Wright’s daughter explains the extract from her memoir and links it to the current project: ‘She would have heartily approved of the present anthology and its aims’ (149). There are many vivid short stories, by Rodney Hall, Debra Adelaide, Denise Leith, Gail Jones, Kathryn Heyman, and Eva Hornung; all devastating in their empathy and deployment of telling details. Stephanie Johnson has imagined a future in which the tables are turned: Australia is becoming uninhabitable due to climate change and her mordant story, ‘Camp Ahitereria’, is set in a refugee camp for Australians in New Zealand. Anna Funder and Alex Miller, in fiction and non-fiction respectively, draw the parallel between the current situation and the refusal of various countries to accept Jewish refugees during World War Two. Both Sue Woolfe and Geraldine Brooks confess to being the daughters of illegal immigrants who lived successful lives under

¹<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-01-08/manus-island-guards-ridicule-asylum-seeker-after-self-harm-atte/5190024>. RALMFAO = ‘roll around laughing my f***ing arse off’.

the radar in Australia. Elliot Perlman and Christos Tsiolkas give personal accounts (in Tsiolkas' case, extremely personal) of encounters with men they think likely to be refugees. Kim Scott presents the Aboriginal point of view, linking it with a historical encounter, when it was a nineteenth-century runaway sailor who was the 'boat person' and the Aboriginal people who had to deal with his arrival. As he says, 'the identity of the hosts and refugees – who are the Australians and who the non-Australians? shifts and turns about' (143). Arnold Zable and Fiona McGregor provide powerful journalistic accounts of the lives of individual refugees. Raimond Gaita's essay 'Obligation to Need' looks in depth at notions such as 'dignity' and 'universality' and the limits of their application to issues of human rights. An extract from Robin de Crespigny's book *The People Smuggler* gives a new and unexpected view of that maligned trade.

This book is worth reading for the sheer quality of the writing. I think I might have arranged the contents differently – it can be a shock moving from immersion in the intensely personal world of a detainee to a coolly argued dissection of public policy, but I can see that the editors' decision to resist neat categorisation by form results in a different kind of reading experience, and might even encourage a more thorough reading. In some cases it took me some time to sort out the fiction from the non-fiction, and that in itself could be a worthwhile exercise. And how better to end than with Eva Hornung's beautiful short story about Iraqi children imagining themselves flying away from their devastated homeland to a new start on the other side of the world?

As Rosie Scott says in her introduction, 'It was inspiring to find such a communality of feeling and generosity among Australian writers' (3). I only wish I could share her belief that 'it's not too much to hope that we can meet this crisis with compassion and optimism instead of cruelty and despair, constructiveness instead of damage, honesty instead of lies' (3-4).

Gillian Dooley