
Perhaps for those born decades after the early Cold War the possibility of an all-out atomic war, which would bring irreversible mutual destruction to the then two geopolitical blocs, never felt too real, but for the people who were raised in the 1950s and 60s such an end was indeed plausible and too credible for comfort. Perhaps not many Australians are aware of the nuclear testing the British conducted on the remote Montebello archipelago in the early 1950s. Prime Minister Menzies gave the British military virtually carte blanche to do whatever they wanted, and in the course of a few years several nuclear explosions devastated the main islands of the Montebellos. Apart from annihilating wildlife, the radioactivity would eventually claim the lives of many shorts-and-sandals-clad Australian servicemen, who were exposed to the blasts – basically used as lab-rats by our British friends.

*Montebello* is kind of a sequel memoir to *The Shark Net* (2000). I found its narrative pace and its openness truly enjoyable, even though some of the episodes interspersed within the whole narrative seem oddly placed if not outright out of place. Drewe has a great sense of humour which, combined with his vivid descriptions of not only the Montebellos but also other parts of Western Australia he mentions, makes for a highly pleasant reading. He has the sharpness of an investigative journalist while adroitly meandering from childhood memories to teenage angst to adulthood, as well as briefly quibbling on too-hot-to-handle issues of contemporary Australia.

He can also allude to his more personal fixations. The introductory chapter to *Montebello* is indeed a quirky story of a perilous encounter with a brown snake on ‘a dark and stormy night’ (1). Armed with a barbecue spatula and extremely worried about the possibility that the reptile will enter his daughter’s bedroom, he vanquishes it.

The episode is narrated tongue-in-cheek, just as any close shave with danger can be regarded as humorous in hindsight. Yet Drewe sees it as a defining moment. Possibly one of the most important traits any writer must have is the ability to laugh at himself or herself, and Drewe is wryly good at it. The snake adventure gives way to his admission to his obsession with islands.

He explains his love for islands as partly the result of the literature he was exposed to as a child: ‘Islands had loomed as powerfully in my life as they had in my imagination. As a child I was drawn to castaway stories’ (39). He naturally mentions the classics that continue to capture every child’s imagination: *Robinson Crusoe, Treasure Island, The Coral Island* and *Swiss Family Robinson*, but also *The Island of Dr Moreau* and *Lord of the Flies*. Yet it was the small Rottnest Island off Perth that seemed to clinch Drewe’s heart for good and converted him to islophilia: ‘my islomania soared when as a teenager I discovered Rottnest Island … where West Australians lost their virginity … they (well, I) imbued this particular desert island twenty kilometres off the mainland with a sensual quality not immediately evident to foreigners or Eastern Staters’ (43).

When he finally gets the nod to join a crew of government ecologists on a species repopulation project on the Montebellos, Drewe makes the most of this perfect opportunity to write a memoir. His observations give added ironic value to the narrative account of heir expeditions and experiences on the island camp:

alcohol is never far from your mind here. Seeing there were few named features on the charts to aid their navigation during the bomb tests, the British took it on themselves to name the Montebellos’ bays. They named them all after booze: Hock, Claret, Whisky, Stout, Cider, Champagne, Chartreuse, Burgundy, Chianti, Drambuie, Moselle and Sach bays. They also
named Rum Cove and Sherry and Vermouth lagoons. Appropriately, there is a promontory named Hungover Head. (82)

This is what I had to keep in my mind: she could not be as good for Mary as I was. The clothes I could give her, the way of speaking, a chance to read and write, domestic knowledge, the reining in of her baser instincts. (77)

As Drewe queries the rationale for a nuclear testing programme in that part of the world, he recalls episodes of his younger years in Perth: shark attacks, teenage crushes, football injuries. The passage of boyhood to manhood to adulthood – and Drewe’s decision to become a writer – is set against the engrossing account of the environmentalist group’s work on the archipelago and their joyous realisation that the native species reintroduction programme has started to pay off so many years after nuclear destruction took place there.

For all the remembrance of tragic events past and present Drewe brings into the book, Montebello affords a mostly positive outlook on life – the idea being that from the chaotic and destructive can emerge new life and beauty. Yet Drewe also reminds us – sometimes humorously, other times in a more sombre tone – that we need to be wary of the many dangers that may inadvertently appear out of nowhere, even in the midst of the most friendly and comfortable surroundings.

There is also some room for reflection. Drewe writes: ‘The idealistic thirteen-year-old who wished to be a friend to all peoples, to play La Vie En Rose to girls on the trumpet and ban the bomb, would have preferred there to be a stern lesson for mankind […] he didn’t know whether to be pleased […] or confused as ever’ (283). Perhaps, I suggest, the permanent state of uncertainty we first feel as teenagers is the stern lesson we can derive from every life experience.

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