Elusive Beauties

Peter Pierce

Alex Miller

Journey to the Stone Country
Allen & Unwin, $39.95hb, 368pp, 1 86508 619 3

In Alex Miller’s latest novel, *Journey to the Stone Country*, we are not in Carlton for long before being taken far to the north, to Townsville, and then inland to country that few Australians know. The short first scene is handled with dispassionateness and economy. Melbourne history lecturer Annabelle Beck comes home to find that her husband, Stephen Kuenz, has deserted her for an Israeli-born honours student. He has left a note so sickeningly self-exculpating and badly written that one is glad his future entrances are restricted to mobile phone calls. In despair, and on a whim, Annabelle phones her friend Susan Bassett, who works as an assessor of the cultural significance for Aboriginal people of sites marked for mining and other development. Annabelle flies to Townsville, where the house to which her parents moved after they sold their cattle station, Haddon Hill, still stands.

Soon the two women are on the road, travelling south and then inland to the Burrambah coalmine. There Annabelle meets a man who knew her when both were children and his Aboriginal grandmother owned the Verbena station that adjoined Haddon Hill, along Gunn Creek. This is Bo Rennie, once a ringer and now a representative of the Jangga people in their dealings with business and government. To summarise the rest of the gracefully simple plot: Bo and Annabelle become lovers and head back to their ancestral places, weighing the different sorts of value that each has for them, coming to the borders of the Jangga stone country (where Rennie’s grandmother was one of the last to be born), to the ‘playgrounds of the old people’. The ending of the novel is open rather than inconclusive. As before — for instance, in his previous book *Conditions of Faith* (2000) — it is Miller’s desire to let the ending resonate with the complicated possibilities so carefully set out in what has come before.

Watchfully, too, for that is one of the words that in part describes his narrative methods. Miller’s characters seem to be quickly released into an independent life, and are left to tell us through their conversations and monologues of the dreams and memories that they share, or wish to keep apart. Long stretches of the book are in reported speech, especially from Bo. One is not surprised to learn that he is a former booser and chaser of other men’s women. This has not so much diminished his present self as pared it down, so that he concentrates on repossessing his old family place. There, upon the past, a future might be built. It is a minor miracle that Miller keeps Bo just this side of portentousness, and intimates the considerateness that has been won from his grieving.

Miller also accepts the challenge to write of Aboriginal people. It is thirty years since Thomas Keneally did so in *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*. Since then Keneally has reflected that he must have been ‘a fucking madman’ to undertake such a venture. Taking his own risks, Miller first addresses the contested scene of Aboriginal politics. He does so without condescension or a sense of trespass. Aborigines such as Les Marra want a dam on the Ranna for the compensation income that this will provide. Bo Rennie wants his land back to work it for himself. Each case is forcefully advanced, if without agreement. Looking on is the giant, almost silent, figure of Arner, son of Bo’s mate Dougal. It is as if Arner is pondering whether there might be some part for him to play. In a novel where so many characters tell or repeat themselves into identity, the young man’s taciturnity passes judgment on them. Its essence may be obscure even to him. But it is Arner who is favoured by the angry old Aboriginal woman Panya, who scathingly tells Annabelle that her grandfather joined in the killing of Panya’s people while she hid for three days in the carcass of a bullock.

This is the long-delayed primal scene of *Journey to the Stone Country*. The consequence of the telling of this story will last, we are led to feel, well beyond the point where Miller finishes his. Bo argues that, ‘Them days is over. If we don’t live together now we gunna do it all again in years to come.’ Panya’s curse on this generation of whites is that
in a thousand years they will have vanished, and the Jangga people will still be on their land. If there is to be resolution of these differences, however, the means are nowhere evident.

One of the pleasures of Journey to the Stone Country is to watch Miller’s strenuous, yet unobtrusive, exercise of his craft. At one point during their dual quest, Bo and Annabelle fetch up at the abandoned house of his treacherous great-aunt May. There she finds a photograph in which her grandfather and grandmother look lovingly towards one another. This was taken in a place deeply known to Annabelle as well as Bo, although one she has never talked of with her husband. It is a scene that could have been cloying. Instead, it is both reassuring and disconcerting for the two of them. Before then, they have paused at Ranna Station, where John and Ruth Hearn hope to make a go of cattle. Their bitter marital unhappiness is a sharp, yet oblique, vignette. Ironically, the dam meant to bring prosperity to the original Aboriginal owners will rescue the Hearns. Now they will have a sealed road all the way to the coast, and the prospect of running a home-stay farm. It costs them a son.

The hardest fictional business for Miller to negotiate concerns the relationship between Bo and Annabelle. Warily, but immediately, they feel intimacy for each other. With Bo leading, they speak formally, using their full names as endearments. This is the softest element in the novel, but Miller allows neither a drift into sentimentality nor glimpses of realised hopes. In one sense, this longish novel harbours the form of a classic novella: the depiction of an intense, dependent relationship between two people. Usually, this is only concluded by the death of one of them, but that is not in the portion of their story that Miller chooses to tell.

Miller is a prizewinning novelist who has yet to be fully and fairly appraised, not only for the subtleties and depths of his achievement, but for its variety. Few of his contemporaries so resolutely mark out new territory with each novel (although one thinks of Tim Winton). Here, Miller offers a love story coloured and almost subsumed by family and ancestral memory, one located in a landscape that, insofar as it has appeared in Australian fiction, is the site of such wilful myth-making as Patrick White’s Voss. But Miller knows this country from his own youthful experiences, and is alert to its elusive beauties and hard-won profits. His own journey has been one of the most self-reliant in recent Australian fiction. Beginning with the intriguing English tale The Tivington Nott (1989), and now moving to ‘unvisited’ place instinct with Aboriginal and European tribal history and lore, this journey beckons us to think more toughly of such jaded abstractions as ‘the land’ and ‘the outback’; and dares us to imagine and reflect as vigorously as Miller has.