
What is it about Nicolas Rothwell? In my review of the first edition of *Wings of the Kite-Hawk*, back in 2003, I marvelled at the fact that he could arouse my dormant – or rather moribund – interest in the red heart of Australia merely with word-pictures: merely I say, as if the power of words were something slight.

The fact that Rothwell’s prose doesn’t enthral everyone is evident from the exchange in the pages of *Australian Literary Review* between Peter Cochrane, who reviewed Rothwell’s 2009 book *The Red Highway* in May, and Peter Craven, who wrote a long and spirited rejoinder to Cochrane’s less than complimentary critique in the August issue. In a response to Craven’s defence of Rothwell, Cochrane accuses Rothwell of indulging in ‘fake pathos’ in ‘overwrought and dubious passages.’

In his initial review, he protests about the fabrication of an episode where an archivist took Rothwell’s narrator to task for spilling tears onto the pages of a manuscript in Sydney University Archives. As my own day job involves the custodianship of manuscripts, I realised at once that this was highly improbable, but rather than finding it an outrageous imposition, I found it slightly comical in its unexpectedness, and quite profoundly touching. Literal truth is not the point: for me this passage typified Rothwell’s unique gift of finding the perfect image to convey deeply-felt emotion. But writing like Rothwell’s is so exquisite and audacious in its originality that it clearly cannot appeal to everyone: it is writing that takes immense risks.

Black Inc has now re-released *Wings of the Kite-Hawk* with a foreword by Pico Iyer and a new preface by Rothwell. Having become, since my initial encounter with the first edition, somewhat of a Rothwell devotee, I jumped at the chance to revisit this wonderful book. Iyer’s foreword is acute, personal, and full of wonder. He writes of Rothwell’s ‘chiaroscuro effect, as in a Rembrandt painting, but in reverse. … in this book, you find a kind of inner darkness trained on the sunlit spaces of the exterior’ (xvi), but he also confides that some passages ‘make me laugh out loud’ (xvii). Surely one of these must be the bizarre encounter with Pauline Hanson.

Sidetracked from a desert trip by an assignment to cover Hanson’s appearance in Broken Hill, bickering with his photographer, he finds himself at her side in a main-street shoe-shop, discussing her ‘best feature’ – her legs: ‘She stretched them out, first one, then the other, and stared down at them, rather in the way young horses, with an air of quiet amazement, sometimes inspect their front hooves’ (156-7). No amount of political analysis could capture so perfectly that peculiar mixture of artlessness and narcissism which characterises Hanson’s public persona. Did it really happen? Who knows, and really, does it matter?

Rothwell’s outback, he writes, is ‘a place of echoes and repetitions, where one lives over things experienced before’ (96). The kite-hawks encountered by Ludwig Leichhardt which appear again and again, as Rothwell pursues the trails of the inland explorers, provide one example. Another is the presence in remote places of Eastern Europeans in thrall to the Centre. And running through the narrative is a theme of the irrevocable damage inherent in the whole enterprise of exploration: damage to the

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world being explored but also to the explorer who, like Ted Strehlow, might find himself destroyed by what he found, things ‘that were still too strong and potent to be seen by outside eyes’ (213).

In the Preface, Rothwell says that ‘as I leaf through these pages today … I see the book I did not write, the branching paths I did not take, the stories lurking inside the paragraph, hinted at, untold’ (xxi). And indeed the book is full of such elisions. One of his friends half accuses him of being the devil:

Here you are, coasting through, watching, gazing into people’s worlds. Look at the way you latched onto me, the way you want to hear everything, know everything, get me to confess all my secrets to you – and what are yours? What do I know about you? You’re very careful to keep yourself to yourself. What’s that but a devil’s role? (286)

Once again, this seems like a conceit designed to reveal Rothwell’s uneasy consciousness about the ethics of authorship, rather than a literal report of a historic conversation. Often he will give tantalising, oblique glimpses of his own past – a transnational childhood spent in the United States and haunted by the Eastern European past of his ancestors. How he comes to be living in Australia isn’t explained. Even details of the travels he writes about in Wings of the Kite-Hawk are obscured: he meets someone in Glen Helen, Northern Territory, who asks him, ‘What brings you here?’ ‘I told them,’ he writes; but doesn’t let the reader in on the secret. But though he might not reveal many facts about his life, he sometimes reveals his deeper feelings: in Sydney after a period of desert travel, he found himself struck by the vivid presence within himself of the ‘landscapes of the Centre’: ‘I was building a world inside myself, just as I had been all my life’ (224).

Stillness and rich composure is the hallmark of Rothwell’s prose. Re-reading Wings of the Kite-Hawk, I found myself constantly making a note of felicitous phrases: ‘the painful poetry of Outback ruins’ (104); Ludwig Leichhardt, ‘this composed being’ (12). But though he is often solemn, a droll irony is never far away. He evokes, delightfully, an Adelaide institution: ‘Michael Treloar’s Antiquarian Bookshop, a business for which I had grown to feel an almost personal responsibility, so great were the fractions of my income I squandered on its rarities’ (248).

In the last sentence of his Preface, Rothwell dares, as scarcely any other Australian writer would, to apostrophise his ‘dear reader’ (xxii). I am happy to be Rothwell’s ‘dear reader.’ He is saved from sententiousness by his sincerity, and the self-awareness of his narratorial voice. It doesn’t surprise me in the least that both Craven and Iyer have likened him to V.S. Naipaul. Although in many ways they are worlds apart in personality and character, there is a similarity in the sensibility they bring to their writing which places them in a similar class. They both write about travelling in a deeply personal way that sees the grandeur, comedy and melancholy of humanity through the prism of landscape and chance encounters.

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2 Michael Treloar, far from showing offence at the gentle aspersions Rothwell casts on his business in this passage, responded to my enthusiasm for Wings of a Kite-Hawk by recommending I read Rothwell’s superb novel about the dissolution of the Iron Curtain, Heaven and Earth [1999].
3 See Iyer’s Foreword (xv), and Peter Craven, ‘Appointment with the Sublime’, Australian Literary Review, August 2009.

And no, I still haven’t been much further north than Quorn. The astonishing location that is Rothwell’s Central Australia exists only in his mind, and I know that slavishly following in his footsteps would not recreate the enchantment experienced by reading his books.

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