

Nicolas Rothwell, *Journeys to the Interior* (Black Inc, 2010)

Nicolas Rothwell takes his readers on many journeys to the interior in this, his fourth book in 'a sequence devoted to inland and northern Australia, and to the ideas these regions set in mind' (331). Written in the form of a series of portraits and essays, short pieces of non-fiction that arrest the imagination, Rothwell's 'word journeys' transport us to the furthest reaches of our own country. I have never travelled this far north in Australia, but I feel that I have experienced something of its uneasy mystery with Nicholas Rothwell as a guide.

'I would like to spread before you a world of rhythm and light' (3): these words constitute Rothwell's first invitation to the reader, and he proceeds to recreate the northern landscape in a series of vivid images and long, rhythmic sentences. So we travel far inland, over saltwater lagoons and 'dark, near-subterranean river systems', past red crags and deep water, near white gums and weeping mulga and stringybark canopies. Rothwell possesses a talent for descriptive writing, the ability to make a landscape come alive in 'look, feel and spirit', from the texture of the dry red earth to the cloud formations that cover the sky.

As in *The Red Highway* (2009), Rothwell's descriptions are accompanied by the deceptively simple black and white photographs of Peter Eve. These striking images – a dark tree flung across a pathway, a flock of magpie geese, a bank of clouds across the horizon – appear at the beginning of each section and enhance the word pictures of the text. Eve's work is acknowledged at the end of the book when Rothwell observes that the 'photographs here serve at once to answer and to amplify my own attempts to see' (331). The images are certainly welcome, as reading the author's descriptions requires constant attempts to *see* the land in the mind's eye:

Most outsiders who penetrate this kingdom see rather little of it, and what they do see appears to their eyes somewhat uninspiring: the eight- or nine-hour drive up the Central Arnhem Road is a trip through unchanging forest, and the first few times I took it, it seemed monotonous to me; until the look and grammar of the country, the play of the light and the endless subtle variations of the trees and plants around me, began to make their inroads on my mind. (11)

As a reader, I wanted to visualize this landscape as the writer sees it; not just as an 'outsider', seeing nothing, but through Rothwell's eyes, in all the varied detail, in 'the passing textured lines of foliage shadow and the bushfires' remnant traces on the woolly-butt and stringybark trunks as they draw nearer and then recede from the verges of the dust-mantled road' (11). Reading his words with the care and concentration that they deserve, I came close to doing this, an experience that is one of the great rewards of *Journeys to the Interior*.

As Rothwell writes, he draws on his experiences of travelling in the region to contemplate the history and the culture of the North, what is written invisibly on the landscape's surface as well as what can be seen. He writes about the pathways taken by nineteenth-century explorers and anthropologists, the possibilities for

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writers of history and Australian literature, the shadows cast by colonial conquest and ways of seeing. He covers topics as different and as varied as wildlife management, desert painting, traditional song cycles and the politics of the Stolen Generation era and the early twenty-first century. To all of these subjects, Rothwell brings his experience of the North, his passion for it and the skills of observation and interpretation honed in his years as a journalist.

Rothwell's is not the only voice we hear in *Journeys to the Interior*, however; he also provides us with the opportunity to listen to other voices and to hear other opinions of the North. The 'Sketches' and 'Portraits' range from anthropologists Peter Sutton and Ursula McConnel to Aboriginal leader Galarrwuy Yunupingu, from artists of the Bidjardanga school to Ngurratjuta watercolour painters. In 'Soundings' we hear from performers and musicologists; in 'Pathways' we can read the words of Ludwig Leichardt and Aeneas Gunn. These other voices, past and present, add richness and colour to Rothwell's portrait of central and northern Australia. The sheer range of stories and sketches is fascinating: I learnt more about the myriad aspects of art, music, politics, and anthropology than I expected in a book that is promoted in the broad category of travel writing.

One of the reasons for this variety is the origin of Rothwell's material: as he clarifies in the 'Acknowledgements', printed after 'Last words', *Journeys* is sourced from work as diverse as speeches given at festivals and conferences, extended essays and writing already published in the *Australian*. I appreciated this mix of essays, lectures and short pieces such as the semi-biographical sketches and portraits of individuals. The book is definitely one for dipping in and out of: a few pages here, a short evening's reading there. I wouldn't recommend it for sustained reading – the series of portraits of the artists alone, for example, a group of twelve pieces, would blur into an undifferentiated mass if tackled in a single reading. But the pleasures of a journey are surely those of stopping and starting, pausing and reflecting – and Rothwell's book admirably captures these. *Journeys to the Interior* is a book that provides a rewarding and enjoyable voyage of the mind.

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