
Reviewed by Gillian Dooley for Writer’s Radio, Radio Adelaide, Broadcast 17 May 2003

*Wings of the Kite-Hawk* did not look like a promising book for a suburban creature like me, who seeks city pleasures and rather dislikes the heat and dust of the outback. Subtitled *A Journey into the Heart of Australia*, it is journalist and novelist Nicolas Rothwell’s personal account of getting to know the interior of Australia: the tracks of the European explorers, the ancient sites and modern inhabitants, the landscapes; and the art, old and new, into which the landscape has been transformed by human hands.

So I turned to *Wings of the Kite-Hawk* with a certain wary scepticism. But it soon vanished. This is a unique, funny, profound and beautiful book. It is an odyssey, in a genuine sense. Rothwell is a modern-day Ulysses, braving perils and meeting mythical creatures as he follows the path the elements and other forces, seen and unseen, map out for him.

From the dedication, “To my mother – tu fui, ego eris,” which translates from that wonderful compressed Latin as “I was as you are, so you will be as I am,” it is obvious that Rothwell is no ordinary Australian journalist. The characters he finds in the outback are not the country bumpkins beloved of current affairs and lifestyle shows, but are, as often as not, highly educated refugees from Europe, deeply knowledgeable about the cultures of both their homeland and their adopted country. Early in his explorations, observing in the Mount Isa cityscape a resemblance to a castle in Transylvania that he feels confident no one would have noticed before, he immediately encounters “a middle-aged man with a distinct Central European accent … [who] had been born and brought up … in an obscure Transylvanian town.” Rothwell goes on, “Repelled and drawn at the same time by the force of coincidence in life, I could not refrain from asking him if he had ever been reminded of his homeland by Mount Isa. … ‘I have made the parallel often in my mind,’ he answered.” On his journeys, he meets a host of people both indigenous and European: scientists and art experts, artists and blues enthusiasts. There is plenty of eccentricity, but it is of the most genuine kind: people pursuing their obsessions, sometimes quixotic but never seeking attention merely for its own sake.
Rothwell’s interest is first aroused by the journals of the explorer Ludwig Leichhardt, and the book begins in Cape York, where he discovers traces of Leichhardt’s expedition. He is led from Leichhardt on to other inland explorers: Charles Sturt, Ted Strehlow and Ernest Giles. The book is loosely structured around his investigations of the trails of these men. But his interest is not in heroics or achievements. He sees them as writers and approaches them through their journals. Charles Sturt, for example, Rothwell says,

Conceived [his journey] more and more as time went by in private terms; he described it to himself as if it were a work of the imagination, a literary epic that he was composing even as he advanced.

What was he seeking at the continent’s veiled heart? A space as abstract as the grief that lurked inside him. What was he fleeing and leaving behind? Not only all he cared for, and held dear, but need, and pain, and love itself. Where was he bound? Like every noble or beautiful thing, to the kingdom of death – that kingdom he longed to see with his own eyes, to endure, and to return from, with golden words upon his lips. (142)

What wonderful, unexpected writing to find in a book about the Australian outback! Imaginative without being contrived, this book is full of memorable and wonderfully written vignettes, passages of great beauty and sadness, and descriptions of strange, surreal encounters. Finally, in the centre of the Gibson desert, he meets Mr Stansfield, an aboriginal community adviser on the Patjarr outstation. Mr Stansfield tells Rothwell, “I was interested in the explorers myself once. … These days, I’ve changed my mind. They just don’t seem to suit the country.” Rothwell himself is clearly coming to a similar conclusion.

This book has no maps, and no portraits. I’m sure this is the result of a deliberate decision rather than economic necessity. Tempted as one is to pin the Australian outback down, Rothwell’s book is more about “the desert, bleak and harsh, which stretches away inside all of us” than external realities of geography and landscape.

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