

A Mt WILSON MODEL for XANADU in *RIDERS in the CHARIOT*

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When Patrick White's parents first sent him to Mt Wilson in the Blue Mountains as a boy of nine, he spent most of his time with Matt and Flo Davies, servants at the Wynne family house (Marr 49-51). Over the next few years, White spent his holidays watching as Owen Wynne built the current house 'Wynstay' in creamy stone with a grand vista north over mountain ridges (Marr 55). It seems to have lent some features to Xanadu, Norbert Hare's grand house on the edge of Sydney in White's *Riders in the Chariot* (1961). In that novel, the Hares (like the Wynnes) are Sydney merchants rather than graziers like their cousins the Urquhart Smiths (and the Whites); Mr Hare builds his Xanadu in stone complete with park gates, according to the layout of Wynstay: 'golden, golden, in a frill or two of iron lace, beneath the dove-grey thatching of imported slates, its stables and bachelor quarters trailing out behind' (*Riders in the Chariot* 15).



Wynstay house

He acquired ‘an exquisite setting for his humours: the park of exotic, deciduous trees, the rose garden which his senses craved, pasture for the pedigree Jersey cows which would fill his silver jugs with cream, and stables for the horses which he drove himself with virtuosity—always greys, always four-in-hand’ (*Riders* 19). Wynstay has the exotic, deciduous trees, elaborate stables and a series of enclosed gardens (now neglected) at the back of the house. It is also distinguished by a Turkish bath, built in the 1880s by Owen Wynne’s grandfather, Richard, and now a museum housing exhibitions by the local historical society. White contents himself with a mosaic bath built by Italian artisans for *Xanadu* (*Riders* 14).

The most surprising correlation between Wynstay and *Xanadu* is the ‘domed watertank’ at the back of the Wynstay stables. It is in such a cistern that Mr Hare drowns at *Xanadu* (56-58).



Cistern at Wynstay

Of course, White situates *Xanadu* at Sarsaparilla ‘outside Sydney’, where suburban houses begin to encroach on its grandeur. It is as if Sarsaparilla is abutting Mt Wilson imaginatively, though geographically it is 100 kilometres away in the Blue Mountains. Time and place come together as White’s upper class childhood confronts the expanding vulgarity of Sydney in the 1950s.

Mt Wilson may have influenced the setting for *The Tree of Man* as well. In that novel, Stan Parker is pioneering new ground ‘in the hills’ (14) within reach of Sydney, a seeming anachronism in the early twentieth century—but Mt Wilson was still being cleared at the turn of the century. White’s friendship with Syd Kirk, who ran the Mt Wilson sawmill and

married his beloved nanny Lizzie Clark, must have suggested elements of Stan Parker, a First World War veteran like Syd. While we are likely to read *The Tree of Man* as a generalised, mythologised story of Australian settlers, elements of Mt Wilson appear in Durilgai's configuration of great house, a post office, and farmer-workers like Stan Parker. White's memories of 'the paradise of my childhood and youth' (*Flaws* 29) may have increased his distaste for the raw suburbs of post-war Sydney that surrounded him in Castle Hill. In these novels, he seems to draw the two experiences close together so their contrasts are in sharp relief.

Works Cited

Marr, David. *Patrick White: A Life*. Milsons Point: Random House, 1991.

White, Patrick. *Flaws in the Glass: a Self-Portrait*. Jonathan Cape, London, 1981.

———. *Riders in the Chariot*. Ringwood: Penguin, 1964. [f.p. 1961]

———. *The Tree of Man*. Ringwood: Penguin, 1961. [f.p. 1956]

'Wynstay' Mt Wilson and Mt Irvine Historical Society.

<ahref="<http://www.mtwilson.com.au/mt-wilsonmt-irvine-historical-society/miscellaneous-articles/201-wynstay.html>">Wynstay