

# Farm Novel or Station Romance? The Geraldton Novels of Randolph Stow

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There was a time, but I do not remember,  
when this warm-reeking woolshed was a fortress,  
the wall-slits slits for muskets, and my parents  
sentries alert against the shadowy clans.  
I remember only peace, the predicted harvests,  
the shadows dwindling beneath our ascending sun.  
Randolph Stow, 'Stations.' (127)

Randolph Stow set three of his novels in and around Geraldton on Western Australia's mid-north coast. These were his first two novels, *A Haunted Land* (1956) and *The Bystander* (1957), written during his late teens while a student at the University of Western Australia, and his fifth novel, *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea* (1965).<sup>1</sup> In this essay, I would like to introduce a more closely-grained treatment of the material dynamics of colonisation that sit beneath Stow's Geraldton novels. These dynamics—in particular, the mode of agrarian land usage—tend to be mystified by the metaphysics of alienation of a certain school of Australian criticism, and occluded in the more typological forms of postcolonial critique. In this task, I am following John McLaren in locating Stow's work firmly within a global extension of agricultural production into new zones of exploitation during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and in regarding the symbolic estrangement (i.e. 'alienation') of Stow's characters as a manifestation of the vicissitudes of these material colonial processes.

In his study of Stow's works, Anthony Hassall treats the first two novels as juvenilia, more or less: 'the work of an immensely gifted writer in the making' (7). This is a reasonable characterisation given that both were written before Stow turned 21 and because of a certain stagey-ness in *A Haunted Land* and *The Bystander* that disappears in the novels of the author's mature phase. Hassall also treats the novels largely as studies in character, retaining the metaphysics of alienation that the texts themselves posit: 'The novels portray the settlement of the harsh, alien, yet haunting land of the Geraldton district in Western Australia by psychically-displaced Europeans, who are tortured, restless and bitter' (7). On the other hand, an astute postcolonial critic like Paul Sharrad has little difficulty splitting *A Haunted Land* and *The Bystander* along their ideological seams. While Hassall simply mimics the novels' own causal scheme—the Maguires (the family at the centre of *A Haunted Land*) are victims of 'the black Celtic melancholy which isolates them from the mainstream of colonial life' (7)—the postcolonial view is that the Maguires are exactly expressive of this life. For the postcolonialist, the gothic contours of these novels are the signs of deep settler ambivalence, which the settler-protagonists seek to mitigate through a romantic immersion in a redemptive nature only to be reminded that farming is strictly at odds with nature. As Sharrad puts it: 'The strict maintenance of colonial cultural boundaries and taboos is undone by that culture's own romantic investment in nature and its countervailing economic power-base in farming' (12).

Against the metaphysical and postcolonial readings of Stow's early fiction, I would like to use them to isolate a particular dialectic that is in play within the modality of settler colonialism,

between the *pastoral* and *agricultural (farming)* modes of land exploitation. In the pastoral mode, land is left in its original state and the natural herbage used as pasture for livestock; in the farming mode, land is cleared and sown for crops or for feed. Pastoral occupation is characterised by large-scale, quasi-nomadic land-usage—either via lease or, indeed, without any formal title—with a central station (homestead) and satellite operations staffed by stockmen (usually men), who herd and tend the livestock (cattle or sheep). Farming in settler colonies is characterised by much smaller land allotments for mixed farming (cropping and livestock), purchased outright often through land-issuing legislation and leads to close settlement with hamlets and towns as nodes for services, transport and market. Originally settled as a pastoral district, Geraldton and its hinterland became, in the twentieth century, mainly a farming district. The mid-north became a major wheat-producing region and Geraldton served (and continues to serve) as the export port for the northern wheatbelt, linking districts like Mullewa, Morawa, Mingenew and Three Springs to the sea. The conversion of Geraldton from the pastoral to the farming mode was part of the general and dramatic expansion of the Western Australian wheatbelt at the beginning of the twentieth century. The discovery of gold at Kalgoorlie, Coolgardie and Southern Cross transformed the colony (after 1901, a State) of Western Australia. The non-Aboriginal population of Western Australia, largely as a result of the stimulus provided by these gold rushes, went from a mere 50,000 in 1890 to roughly 300,000 by 1920. The influx in population, along with significant technological and agricultural advances, finally allowed the founding dream of the Swan River Colony—agricultural close settlement—to take place in the southwest corner of the Australian continent. A vast patchwork of 1000-acre ‘homestead’ farms began to fan out along newly built rail networks between 1900 and 1930, often into ‘virgin’ bush, but also into other pre-existing settlement modes. In the latter case, this led to a process of *secondary colonisation*, particularly of pastoral (mainly sheep) stations in the southwest and mid-north, and in the case of the New Norcia monastery and mission, communal farm settlement jointly worked by Noongar people and Benedictine monks.

In Australian historiography, the conflict between pastoralist and farmer has traditionally been reified as a contest between the *squatter*—the privileged few who got in early and picked the eyes out of the country, and the *selector*, the ordinary ‘man on the land’ (or, indeed, the drover’s wife) who came after and faced a life of grinding rural poverty despite notionally owning the land they worked. Our democratic ‘bias’ might lead us to feel a sympathy for the small selector, but in terms of colonial dispossession it was in fact the small selector that posed by far the greater existential threat to Indigenous people. One need neither romanticise the interculturality of Australian pastoral stations, nor fully subscribe to Patrick Wolfe’s ‘elimination thesis,’ to accept that close-settlement represented a major new danger to the traditional connection to the land of Indigenous people. Certainly, in the Western Australian wheatbelt, the emergence of wheatbelt farms and towns in the twentieth century was disastrous for the Noongar and the Yamatji, who had been able, in many instances, to maintain a precarious existence in the pastoral stations that colonised the southwest in the nineteenth century. What Stow’s Geraldton novels help us to see is that the process of settler colonialism is not monolithic but characterised by significant internal conflict. Being able to recognise that these two modes (the pastoral and the agricultural) led to antithetical mentalities is important in the deconstruction of the dynamics of settler colonialism.

Stow’s Geraldton novels belong to the situation prior to the advent of the twentieth-century Western Australian wheatbelt—its prehistory, in fact. Stow’s ancestry in Geraldton comes through his mother, Mary Sewell. The very fact that Stow has—and firmly identifies with—a local ‘ancestry’ indicates that his family memory is connected to a different order of being from

that which existed in the new mass-settlement farms of the emerging wheatbelt. Suzanne Falkiner's recent biography of Randolph Stow usefully lays out the trajectory of settlement followed by Stow's antecedents. The Stows and the Sewells had in fact arrived in the Australian colonies within three years of each other. Thomas Quinton Stow arrived in Adelaide in October 1837, appointed by the London Colonial Missionary Society to serve the new colony (Falkiner 20). Meanwhile, the brothers John (1813–1901) and George Sewell (1816–1891) had landed in Fremantle in November 1834 (Falkiner 25). From there, the Sewell brothers took up a pastoral lease in the Chittering Valley, some fifty kilometres northeast of Perth—with George Sewell marrying and beginning a family which grew steadily over the next decade and a half.

The labour shortage, as it was conceived, had been identified as one of the main inhibiting factors in the growth of the Swan River colony after its founding in 1829 (Bolton 22). Certainly, the colony's growth was a fraction of that seen in South Australia, founded at roughly the same time. From 1849, the colony of Western Australia took the extreme measure of petitioning to accept convicts from Britain. In doing so, it forfeited its status as a 'free' settlement and incurred the odium attached to penal colonies at a time when the eastern colonies of Australia were desperately trying to remove this very 'stain.' But the lure of free or very cheap labour was enough to encourage the dominant political caste in the colony—large land-owning pastoralists—to take this step. The history of Geraldton, known initially as Champion Bay, is closely tied to this stage (i.e. the convict era, which lasted until 1868) in Western Australia's history. With the effective saturation of pastoral settlement in the southwest, the near north was now—particularly with the aid of convict labour—a realistic and attractive proposition to land-hungry pastoralists anxious to settle their progeny. In 1848, a 'Settlers Expedition' was organised by pastoralists in the Avon Valley (Bolton 20). It was led by the surveyor and explorer A.C. Gregory and aimed to map the Gascoyne River. Whilst it did not manage this, the party identified significant pasturage between the Irwin and Murchison Rivers further south in the traditional country of the Yamatji people.

On the strength of the 1848 expedition, and with little concern for the traditional owners, these Avon Valley pastoralists set off to take up leases on the banks of these rivers. It is worth detailing these events because they provide the material basis for what transpires in the gothic strains of Stow's Geraldton novels. The spooky hauntings and grim melodrama of these early works need to be placed very directly against this vector in the settler-colonisation of Western Australia. The rules governing pastoral leases were changed in 1850 by Governor Fitzgerald (Geraldton was named in his honour) to allow the granting of land north of Perth. Fears about the cost to the colony had previously meant that the north had been proscribed from settlement.<sup>2</sup> In October 1850, a party set out overland from York with around 2000 sheep and 200 cattle for Champion Bay. The animals were to stock two leases which had been granted to members of this party—brothers William (1808–76) and Lockier Burges (1814–86) took up 132,000 acres on the Bowes River in what is now the district of Northampton; and Thomas Brown (1803–63), accompanied by his son Kenneth (1837–76), was granted 40,000 acres on the Greenough River.

In the original overland party, along with the Burges brothers and the Browns, were three younger men who were to help with the droving, and sought land of their own in the newly claimed district. After working for a year on Thomas Brown's lease, which he named 'Glengarry,' John Sydney Davis (1817–93), James Perry Walcott (1820–91) and Major Logue (1826–1901) were granted leases on the Greenough to the east of Brown's Glengarry. It is this series of leases with their accompanying homesteads along the Greenough River southeast of the future town of Geraldton that form the *mise-en-scène* for Stow's farm novels. The homesteads of Glengarry, Tibbradden (John Sydney Davis) and Ellendale (Major Logue), built

by convicts in the middle of the nineteenth century, provided the models for Strathmore, Koolabye and Malin in *A Haunted Land* and *The Bystander*. In *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea*, Ellendale is called Innisfail and we also see Northampton stations like Narra Tarra, which is called Andarra.

The particular link to Randolph Stow was Major Logue. Logue's daughter Elizabeth had married George Sewell, and Stow's mother was a Sewell. Through his brother-in-law, George Sewell received 20,000 acres of sandplain country further east of the Greenough River. There was sufficient fresh water in the sporadic springs to allow the country to be stocked with sheep. Convict (and ticket-of-leave or conditional pardon) labour meant that stock could be shepherded, and in particular brought into enclosures at night to protect them from the Yamatji people, whose land they had seized, and the dingoes who were also adjusting to the presence of new occupants. The Sandsprings property would feature in *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea* as Sandalwood station. By the time Randolph Stow was evacuated as a six-year-old boy to Sandsprings in the darkest days of World War Two, some four generations of Sewells had lived in the handsome sandstone homestead at Sandsprings built by convicts in the 1850s and completed in 1860. Inter-marriage amongst the founding families placed a large part of the countryside into an interlocking network of stations that defined the shape of the country before the government began alienating pastoral leases for wheatbelt farms in the early twentieth century. As Falkiner notes: 'the sons and daughters of these early pioneering families set up a complex web of interconnections by land, inheritance and marriage, which in varying levels of disguise would help to animate Randolph Stow's first three novels' (Falkiner 26).

### The Farm Novel

In his study of American midwestern farm novels from the early twentieth century, Roy W. Meyer set out some basic criteria for the genre. Meyer stipulated that a farm novel must have a farm setting, and be populated mainly by farming people who are living a farming life. He distinguished farm novels from those which took place in villages within farming districts and whose primary subject was village life, although it was not always clear cut. Willa Cather's *My Ántonia* (1918), for instance, begins as a Nebraskan farm novel but shifts abruptly to the village of Black Hawk half way through the narrative. In the farm novels that Meyer studied there was particular attention paid to the processes of farming including, in the newly settled areas, the preparation of 'virgin' country for cropping and pasture. Meyer's study is useful because he is describing a literature that parallels a settlement pattern very similar to that found in the Western Australian wheatbelt in the twentieth century. In both cases, earlier pastoral holdings (called ranches in North and South America, stations in Australia) were being repurposed for small-scale mixed-farming made available to settlers through specific homesteading legislation. Indeed, the Western Australian *Homestead Act* (1893) was explicitly modeled on the famous United States *Homestead Act* (1862) (Bolton 60–61).

The first ambiguity to deal with in Stow's Geraldton novels is determining whether we are, in fact, in farming country or pastoral country. As it happens, the author addresses this very issue in his preface to *A Haunted Land*: 'I have called Malin, Koolabye and Strathmore "stations," as it is a local custom to give that name to the older and larger properties in this district. They are, of course, not sheep stations, but only very large farms' (vii). This rather specific apology is the sign that, for the original pastoral families of the Geraldton hinterland, their land (as they thought of it) had suffered a *demotion* from station country to farming country. In material terms, one can observe this process in the size of properties that run alongside the trajectory of colonisation which took people like the Burges brothers (or the Sewells) from the Swan River

to the Avon Valley and then to Champion Bay. After arriving in 1830 (one year after the Swan River colony was founded), William and Lockier Burges initially farmed 300 acres at Ellenbrook in the upper Swan. In 1837, they founded Tipperary, a 5,600-acre sheep station at York in the Avon Valley. After overlanding from York to Champion Bay in 1850, they took up a lease of 132,000 acres on the Bowes River.<sup>3</sup> William Burges was one of the major proponents behind the petition for convicts, and he was also (unsurprisingly) one of the major beneficiaries as convict (and ex-convict) labour provided the basis for this massive expansion in scale. But having been winners in one paradigm shift in colonial land administration, these same station owners fell victim to the next one. In the early 1900s, the State government refused to renew the extensive leases on pastoral stations in what was now prime wheat-growing country. Much of the Bowes Estate (the property acquired and developed by the Burges brothers) was resumed and subdivided into 1000-acre homestead farms for new settlers. Even in 1911 the Bowes Estate was still large of course, but had been reduced from its original 132,000 acres to just over 16,000 acres. A similar story is seen with the Tibradden, which began as a 25,000-acre pastoral lease and by 1928 was 4,500 acres.<sup>4</sup> This is what Stow means when he writes that the properties in *A Haunted Land* are not stations but ‘only very large farms.’ The embarrassment is the indication that something once held to be the essential and defining source of pride and superiority had been slowly whittled away to the point that it no longer served as a clear mark of distinction—in other words, an effective boundary of class.

By the time that Stow sets his novels (roughly 1900–1950), the owners of these ‘stations’ have not only lost the epic extent of their properties, they have also changed their mode of work. The land itself, which had been rangeland for open pastoral enterprises—i.e. stock (sheep and cattle) feeding on native pasture and perennial vegetation—was cleared and seeded either to crop or pasture in a much more intensive mode of agriculture. No longer supervising shepherds and mustering stock by horseback, they were now sowing and harvesting paddocks—in other words they had ceased being ranchers (in the Iberian model that proliferated in America’s arid and semi-arid zones) and were now farmers. *A Haunted Land* and *The Bystander* are in effect one long lamentation about the decline of the pastoral age in the Geraldton hinterland, while *Merry-Go-Round in the Sea* also takes place in the melancholy shade of this dissolution. In *The Bystander*, the symbolic effect of this change in agricultural mode is encapsulated rather dramatically by a thunderstorm in which the lone Norfolk Island Pine that had served as Koolabye station’s phallic totem is struck by lightning and destroyed. As Patrick Leighton tells his wife in *The Bystander*:

‘God, I hate time. You can’t keep anything safe from it. Not the tree, not Malin, not Koolabye. It took so much to build them, yet—someday I’ll die; twenty or thirty years’ time, maybe, but that doesn’t seem so far away—and there they’ll be, sold to a pastoral company or split up into little farms. They won’t be Koolabye and Malin anymore. Those places are us, the Maguires and the Leightons, and we’ll all be resting in our old cemetery at Malin, with other people’s ploughs running round overhead, probably. —God, a hundred years and four generations isn’t long for a dynasty to last.’ (176)

The horror contained in the image of ‘other people’s ploughs’ running obliviously over the top of the mortal remains of these fallen pastoral dynasties makes explicit the antithesis between the pastoral and farming modes. For this reason, while we might provisionally term the works set on these properties *farm novels* in the minimal sense that they were taking place on what were now farms, they are not really farm novels in their basic symbolic dimensions. They are more properly termed *station romances*.

One reaches the same conclusion if one considers the depiction of farming processes that defines the farm novel for Meyer. Robert Stead's novel *Grain* (1925), to take a prominent Canadian example, contains many long passages which lovingly describe the work of wheat farming in Manitoba. Yet the work of farming is not something that features very prominently in Stow's Geraldton novels. One might say that this is because Stow himself grew up mainly in the town of Geraldton, where his father was a solicitor, rather than on any of the properties belonging to his mother's relatives. But the authors of farm novels in America, Canada and Australia were not necessarily farmers themselves. One might point for instance to the Western Australian writer John K. Ewers, whose *Men Against the Earth* (1946) and *For Heroes to Live in* (1948) are farm novels very much in the mould of those that Meyer studies in North America. Ewers's two novels depict the founding of a farm in the Western Australian wheatbelt at the turn of the century. Ewers had come to know the wheatbelt in 1926 while working in a one-teacher school in the recently settled district of South Tammin, about 250 kilometres east of Perth. Farm novels by teachers in newly settled districts are also a feature of Canadian literature. Frederick Philip Grove taught at a dozen different schools in rural Manitoba and it was this that put him into the world of the farms that provided the basis for novels like *Settlers of the Marsh* (1925) and *Fruits of the Earth* (1933). Martha Ostenso's *Wild Geese* (1925) is another novel based on a teacher's experience of farm life in Manitoba.

Stow spent more than enough time on his relatives' farms to observe farm life in all its phases. It is more accurate to say that his novels are muted rather than silent on the more workaday aspects of farm production. Work in the fields is depicted sporadically in *A Haunted Land* and a little more extensively in *The Bystander*, yet one cannot help but feel that there is a degree of embarrassment associated with farm work. This has two main dimensions. The first is a strong aversion to the concept of *service* and the particular status of *the servant*. The second is an aversion to cultivated land, which is experienced as dull and domesticated, and which might be seen to be an epiphenomenon of the first aversion. The young Rob Coram in *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea*, we are told, 'was bored by the farmed, fenced plain of Greenough' (25) and longed for the true station country further east and north, 'where the small farms ended, where the winter rainfall ended, where the people ended . . . the open North: unpeopled, innocent' (69). In farm novels, the protagonists draw their symbolic mandate from the idea that they were 'serving the land.' This often takes on distinct erotic overtones through the constellation of metaphors that underpin the language of farm-work—ploughing the fields, sowing the grain, reaping the fruits of the earth, drilling or scattering seeds, and so on. Cropping is, in other words, utterly beset by the signification of the sexual act. A good example that could serve as a paradigm for this in literary terms is James Pollard's short story 'The Servant of the Fields' (1947–48). In this story, a wheatbelt farmer faithfully *serves* the fields, and the crop that he produces each year is the reward not of his hard work or agronomic acumen, but of his simple and unshakable faith in the land and its fertility. In Grove's novel *Settlers of the Marsh*, when the hero loses his faith in the goodness of the land, he nevertheless continues to serve the farm and its needs. The phrase—'the farm was a law of its own'—works as a refrain for the latter part of that novel. But working the land is not the main axis of signification or action in Stow's novels—the main axis is the dynamics of *inheritance*.

Notably absent from Stow's farm novels is any celebration of the harvest. Typically farm novels follow the cycle of the seasons, and harvest time represents a social climax, the point at which the basic ontology of the world reaches its manifest fruition. The growing pattern that governs farm production also usually provides a central temporal scheme and metanarrative for these works. Human activities in the foreground of these novels—romances, conflicts, illnesses,

marriages—are usually keyed to the changes in season, with the fields acting as the visible sign for seasonal flux. For example, in Peter Cowan’s novella ‘The Unploughed Land’ (1958), the key romantic relationship between the farm-hand and the farmer’s daughter follows directly the ripening of the wheat-fields in which they both work. In Ostenso’s *Wild Geese*, the passage of the geese first north and then, as winter returns, south again, acts as an additional signifier for shifts in the relations among the humans on the farms below. Certainly, this does occur in Stow. In *A Haunted Land*, *The Bystander* and *Merry-Go-Round in the Sea* one is constantly aware of the season—either the scorched brown landscape of summer beneath a blue porcelain bowl of sky, or the softer contours offered by the green fields and scudding clouds of winter. But unlike the typical farm novel, in Stow’s novels there is no deep metaphysical investment in the agricultural goods that these fields will yield. In *A Haunted Land*, the foregrounded social world seems to take place in almost wilful ignorance of the farm world: ‘[T]here will be dances and tennis parties and picnics, and we will have parties too,’ thinks Adelaide, as if she were inside a Jane Austen novel. There is even a ballroom at Strathmore, at which guests arrive by buggy and sulky, and debate the merits of the Boer War. Fifty years later as the isolated figures of Patrick Leighton and Nakala Cameron—each the last in their lines—cower in the corners of these cluttered and dilapidated houses, the ballroom has become ‘a monstrous affectation’ (178) and Strathmore itself ‘more than a little absurd’ (179). Patrick reflects ruefully how the ‘colonial lairds and squires had not long survived the unfriendly climate of the twentieth century’ (179).

### The Station Romance

For these reasons, despite the fact that *A Haunted Land*, *The Bystander* and *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea* are by-and-large set on farms, they are not *farm novels* because the inhabitants are still not accepting their new status. Instead they fit more closely the genre of *station romance* that is a mainstay of Australian fiction and nonfiction from Henry Kingsley’s *The Recollections of Geoffry Hamlyn* (1859) to Mary Durack’s *Kings in Grass Castles* (1959). The central feature of this narrative mode is the recourse to a panoply of aristocratic pretensions (i.e. those of the ‘bunyip’ aristocracy) in which the realities of the class structure of settler colonies are systematically disavowed. Features of the station romance include a dynastic disposition in which succession and marriage are carefully curated, an upstairs-downstairs social (class) division between leisured land-owning gentry and working servants, and concerted attempts to recreate manor-house luxuries (libraries, drawing rooms, ballrooms) and affectations, such as ‘riding’ (for women) and hunting (for men) as leisure activities. The Australian context complicates this ideal in various ways, particularly through the presence of convicts and Indigenous people. The destabilisation created by convicts and Aborigines is often subsumed within a broader eugenic economy of ‘blood’ and ‘name.’ In any event, it is the aristocratic ideal that is the definitive element of this genre.<sup>5</sup>

Stow’s Geraldton novels are notable for being station romances that are set on farms. Indeed, the fictional universe is set up in concerted resistance to the concept of ‘the farm’ that is the basic unit of social utility in the farm novel. Even when Stow’s characters occasionally refer to themselves as ‘farmers’ they do so ironically so as to retain the vestiges of a social privilege that has been rendered obsolete by material reality. In an early review of *A Haunted Land* for the *Sydney Morning Herald*, Kylie Tennant described it as a ‘genealogical novel’ in the mode popularised by Martin Boyd in his Langton quartet (quoted in Falkiner 169). The comparison is insightful because Stow’s novels (and here he shares a sensibility reminiscent of Judith Wright and Dorothy Hewett) are marked by a very particular form of genealogical compulsion. The compulsion is driven by a single question: *When did the rot begin?* What is significant is

that the narratives eschew the banal material processes (alterations to the labour market, changes in agricultural technology) by which pastoral stations were turned into farms, and provide instead a drama of metaphysical decline. Early reviewers naturally compared *A Haunted Land*, with its gloomy fatality and doomed ancestry, to *Wuthering Heights*—David Martin for instance remarked that the novel was perhaps a little ‘too haunted’ (88). A gothic dimension is not entirely foreign to the farm novel. The oppression of families by overbearing patriarchs in works by Ostenso and Grove creates that mixture of incarceration and perversion that are the hallmarks of the gothic novel since Radcliffe. But what is particularly distinctive in Stow’s works is how the dead hand of the past is used to mystify historical material determinations as a primal curse.

This leads to the characteristic temporal pattern in Stow’s Geraldton novels, in which a tortured eschatology of *the fall* cuts against what would be the ‘natural’ seasonal cycle in a typical farm novel in the genre that accompanied the mass-settlement farms. The following passage from *A Haunted Land* is, at first blush, not unlike passages that one might encounter in the farm novels of Ewers or Grove or Ostenso:

January passed into February, a month as fruitless as the last. From the faded sky the murdering sun seared the land, engendering new death.

Life at Malin continued as before, but there was a change. And the change was in Anne, who was the soul of that life. (73)

For the Canadian novelists, our scorched summer corresponds to their frozen winter, but that is not the significant difference here. What stands out in passages like these in Stow’s novels is that the failures of human life, which the farm novel will seek to make cyclical and seasonal, are given an ontological primacy—a dire and cataclysmic extension of the pathetic fallacy. The ‘change’ in Anne is not going to be a redeemable one for her. Nor will it be given any sacrificial efficacy for her family. It is the end.

What has happened? It is in fact the central event of *A Haunted Land*, and because *The Bystander* is an explicit sequel, with all the same families involved, it is the hidden cause of disaster in that novel too. 18-year-old Anne has just lost her virginity to the ‘native boy’ Charlie at Malin Pool (Ellendale Pool) in circumstances that are ambiguous at first but gradually shown to be consensual. When she tells her brother Patrick, he says that she is not to blame because ‘he forced you.’ Anne does not dispute this characterisation: ‘She accepted that [i.e. her brother’s assumption that ‘he forced you’] in silence. She had not intended to spare herself, but she saw his suggestion as an offering’ (78). It is typical of Stow’s version of the settler romance that a sexual encounter between a young Aboriginal man and a pastoralist’s daughter is made responsible for the generalised banishment of the pastoral dynasty from its paradise. In the relative significances offered in the novel, it seems little more than a footnote that Patrick shoots Charlie in the back with his rifle. The main import is not the death of Charlie for what seems to have been a consensual sex act, but the hystericisation of Patrick who finds himself unable to apply the brutal mandates of settler ‘law’ (in this case, retribution for the violated white female body) with the coldhearted conviction of his father. Extra-judicial killing sits uneasily on Patrick’s shoulders: “‘I can’t help it,’ he said hysterically, ‘I can’t help it, I can’t be a man like Father. I couldn’t kill anyone else, whatever he did to us. I’m not tough enough, I’m soft as a girl’” (80). The racism and racial violence in the novel make *A Haunted Land* almost unreadable today. The Yamatji violently resisted the usurpation of their lands and the new occupants responded with brutal force. Following the publication of *A Haunted Land*, a family friend from

the district, Helen Wilson, wrote to Stow to ratify his portrait, asserting that in spite of the image provided in the ‘unlibellous archives,’ her family lore left her in no doubt that the Geraldton district ‘was a bloody country in the second generation’ (Falkiner 167).

The intrusion of settler violence into the present action of the seemingly well-settled stations of *A Haunted Land* in 1902 and 1903, draws attention to the way that Stow’s Geraldton novels divide time into three distinct moments.<sup>6</sup> Although these three moments seem to provide a diachronic succession of epochs—to suggest a telos that might convert the novels into generational sagas—in reality these seemingly distinct moments are constantly collapsing in the novel, so that the characters catastrophically occupy both the *here-and-now* of their world and the *there-and-then* of an obscene foundational moment. The first point of time is roughly 1850–70. This functions as a kind of *settler colonial dreamtime* when the world was created. It was a time of convicts and pioneers and violent conflict with the Yamatji whose land they have taken. The description of Innisfail Station (modelled on Ellendale) in *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea*, given through the eyes of the child Rob Coram, shows this foundational space, now occupied by his aged aunts May and Rosa:

Their house was so old that his own great-grandfather Maplestead, with the spear-scar on his hand, had helped their father to build it. Their station had been founded on the first day of his world’s creation. And their Pool was older still, and full of bunyips. (28)

This period does not form any part of the explicit narrative of Stow’s novels, but exists in the memories of *the descendants*. It is constantly alluded to, but often in comic or ironic ways, as if it could not quite be faced with full sincerity, either because there were lingering doubts as to the basic legitimacy of land stolen from the Yamatji, or more likely, because the original empire founded two generations earlier was in the process of crumbling.

The next moment to note in Stow’s Geraldton novels is the turn of the twentieth century, roughly from 1890–1905. This is the time-period for the main action of *A Haunted Land*, whose denizens are now stranded with a mentality that no longer fits the reality of their world. They are no longer able to credibly locate the aristocratic pretensions that were formed during the age of conquest and expansion when an effective serfdom was created by a combination of bound labour (convict, ticket-of-leave) and an Indigenous workforce made mendicant by the theft of their land.<sup>7</sup> But by 1900, both labour and land had been stripped from these properties. The most visible sign of this—and such a palpable feature of Stow’s Geraldton novels—is that the grand houses *fall* into disrepair. Even with all available labour now engaged in the more intensive farming of the remaining land, these properties were no longer able to generate the surplus capital required to maintain their large dwellings against the depredations of time and the elements.

When we reach the final point in the temporality of Stow’s Geraldton novels—the ‘now’ of the mid-twentieth century in which Stow was writing—we find these former stations collapsing in a kind of grim endgame. In *The Bystander*, Patrick Leighton calls Malin the ‘House of Usher’ and it is true that the incestuous refusal of otherness is something that unites the entropic worlds of Poe and Stow. What we see in the mid-twentieth century of Stow’s Geraldton novels is in fact the final dissolution of this settler complex—the pastoral stations created during the mid-nineteenth century between the Irwin and Murchison rivers in the coastal fringe of Western Australia’s mid-north. It is this drama which is acted out by the sad and blighted characters in *The Bystander*: lame and illegitimate Patrick Leighton, barren and embittered Nakala Cameron,

frigid and broken Diana Ravirs; and the central family unit consisting of the half-wit Keithy Farnham, his frail mother Kate and absent-minded father Frank. What *A Haunted Land* and *The Bystander* are announcing in short is that the ‘generations of men’—to cite the title of a contemporaneous book by Judith Wright dealing with the same issue—have come to an end.

### Secondary Colonisation

While critics have tended to ascribe the alienation visible in Stow’s novels to a primal discord between European colonists and the ‘alien’ landscape they have sought to conquer, or alternatively to a modernist impulse to challenge ‘hegemonic symbolisation’ (Andersson 199), what is not remarked upon is the fact that these so-called stations have become subject to a *secondary colonisation* of pastoral property by farming property. The blindness to this process is a little surprising since, as this essay has shown, it is very much in the minds of the characters of the novels. Nor, in fact, was this process invisible to those living through this process of secondary colonisation of pastoral lands by grain farming, which was not only happening in the Geraldton hinterland but in large tracts of western New South Wales and Queensland and northern Victoria. No lesser personage than ‘Banjo’ Paterson wrote, in ‘The Song of the Wheat,’ about the transition from the pastoral epoch to the age of ‘wheat’:

We have sung the song of the droving days,  
           Of the march of the travelling sheep—  
 How by silent stages and lonely ways  
           Thin, white battalions creep.  
 But the man who now by the soil would thrive  
           Must his spurs to a ploughshare beat;  
 And the bush bard, changing his tune, may strive  
           To sing the song of the Wheat!

In North America, the dialectic between pastoral and farming modes is very well understood, to the point where the conflicting aims of ranchers and farmers is something of a cliché in the historiography of the Great Plains. As Matthew J.C. Cella explains, the ‘historical collision between the ploughman and cowman entered the realm of myth, embodying a series of opposing cultural, economic, and ecological paradigms that reflect the complex story of land use in [the Great Plains] region’ (56). But in Australia, what the Americans call the ‘range-farm frontier’ has tended either to be subsumed within a broader ‘bush’ mythology, or made visible by proxy through the opposition between the ‘squatter’ and the ‘selector,’ which renders this interface (station / farm) in terms of the dynamics of class. Stow’s novels are interesting in that they do not dramatise this opposition as a conflict between two groups (pastoralists and farmers), but as the slow and fatal *collapse* of one into the other.

Of course, the intrusion of secondary colonisation does not supersede the legacy of the initial colonisation prosecuted by the pastoral pioneers at the expense of the Yamatji. In fact, the evidence of Stow’s novels is that the erosion of the pastoral mode forces a realisation in the descendants that the seemingly manifest destiny of their stations is, in reality, a material artefact—the specific product of a set of material forces that is quite blind to the dynastic imaginary propagated by the initial colonists. And with this realisation, the original repressions of the foundational violence are undone in Stow’s early fiction, only to be, in various ways, re-enacted. Intriguingly, the original settler frontier and its attendant violence return both as tragedy (the murder of Charlie, the death of Patrick at the hands of his father, the self-immolation of Keithy Farnham) and as farce (the cartoon frontier that is the subject of a certain

camp irony in the banter of the descendants). One of the curious effects in writers like Stow, Wright, Hewett and White is the fact that in their adolescence they felt ineffably ancient. As Anne tells Patrick after he confesses his murder of Charlie, ‘we’re eighteen and already as old as the hills’ (81). Later her sister Adelaide chastises her: ‘Stop trying to talk as if you were a hundred’ (191). This premature nostalgia is a response driven into these writers (and their fictive creations) by the consciousness of a double dispossession—that they are heirs to vanquished conquerors. They seem to realise that simply losing what your parents stole does not make you innocent. At best, it makes you careless. If the ideological priority of a settler colony is to produce a legitimate generation then the novels of Stow fail utterly in this task. Indeed, his world is the negative image of this. The youth in his novels are all guilty and illegitimate, and as a ‘generation’ they singularly lack the capacity to generate. The ‘bastard’ Patrick Leighton in *The Bystander* resembles the role played by illegitimate children in the Great Plains fiction studied by Cella, who ‘emerge as ambivalent figures’ that ‘haunt their respective narratives as specters of the frontier’s negative associations’ (66).

In Stow’s extended poem ‘Stations’ (1965), which resembles a libretto insofar as it is cast as a ‘suite for three voices and three generations,’ ‘the man’ who speaks for the third generation plaintively declares:

I am the third begetting of my blood  
 To work these acres no one worked before us:  
 A man not young, with growing sons, whose portion  
 May well be mortgaged waste and a good name.  
 This was not in the dream my generation  
 Dinned in my ears. This was not in the legend.  
 (*The Land’s Meaning*, 131)

Leaving to one side the disavowal of thousands of years of Indigenous land management, what this lamentation attempts to crystallise is the process that is dramatised within Stow’s Geraldton novels, which is the denuding effect that secondary colonisation institutes in the descendants of pastoral families. This is registered at the level of the poem’s diction, wherein violent appropriation is initially clothed in the Old Testament archaism of words like ‘begetting,’ ‘blood,’ ‘sons’ and ‘generation.’ It is the reduction of a title imagined as being founded in *blood* to one that is *mortgaged* to a bank that has emptied the concept of ‘name’ of any material purchase for the descendant—turning it from an asset into a liability. This is what gives to the word *generations* the heavily freighted historical irony that it holds in the work, not only of Stow, but Wright, Hewett and White as well. The word ‘generation’ becomes for these writers a euphemistic metonym for everything that went wrong in the microcosm of their family history, but most particularly it is reminder that it is the generation of surplus wealth and not dynastic descendants that determines the existence of property in capitalist settler-societies.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Stow’s third and fourth novels—*To the Islands* (1958) and *Tourmaline* (1965)—were also set in Western Australia but further afield.

<sup>2</sup> A detailed account of the settlement of Champion Bay by the York pastoralists is given in Peter Cowan’s book, *Maitland Brown: A View of Nineteenth Century Western Australia*. See especially, chapter 2, pp. 27–55.

<sup>3</sup> See the entry for ‘The Bowes’ in The Heritage Council of Western Australia’s Places Database: <http://inherit.stateheritage.wa.gov.au/Public/Inventory/PrintSingleRecord/99ba73d8-583e-4737-80f5-2397f9a574c4>

<sup>4</sup> A brief history of the Tibbradden property is found in the Shire of Greenough's *Municipal Inventory of Historic Places*: <https://www.cgg.wa.gov.au/Profiles/cgg/Assets/ClientData/Documents/Council-Meetings/103/8.-SC029-Attachment-Shire-of-Greenough-Municipal-Inventory-of-Heritage-Places.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> A particularly insightful discussion of the relationship between land and the colonial narrative is found in Ken Gelder and Rachel Weaver's recent book *Colonial Australian Fiction: Character Types, Social Formations and the Colonial Economy* (2017).

<sup>6</sup> This tripartite division is captured in Stow's poem 'Stations,' written in 1965, which is a 'suite for three voices and three generations'—in fact, nine voices in total, but split through these three generation. *The Land's Meaning*, pp. 125–33.

<sup>7</sup> The Aboriginal labour on Australian pastoral stations did not amount to what Donald Denoon calls a 'coercible peasantry' in his study of settler capitalism, but they did provide an essential workforce which allowed pastoralism to flourish on such a vast scale.

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