Kate Leah Rendell, ed. *Randolph Stow: Critical Essays*.
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Kate Leah Rendell has capitalised on the revitalised enthusiasm for Randolph Stow with *Randolph Stow: Critical Essays*, an edited collection of thirteen pieces exploring the writer of fiction and the man. It was Suzanne Falkiner's hefty tome, *Mick: A Life of Randolph Stow* (2015), that sparked renewed interest in a once-major writer who had descended into oblivion by the time of his death in 2010. Stow had ranked among Australia's major writers for most of the late twentieth century. At age 22, he won the Miles Franklin Prize for his third novel, *To the Islands* (1958). His subsequent novels, *Tourmaline* (1962) and *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea* (1965) achieved classic status almost immediately. Stow's history followed a pattern common enough among creative Australians in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. He left the country in his twenties, in the early 1960s, leading a life as wanderer and then as a permanent exile. After an extended visit to Australia in 1974, Stow left for England—Suffolk—never to return. His writing silences moved from prolonged to permanent; after the 1984 publication of *The Suburbs of Hell*, Stow did not publish another work.

In the introductory essay, "Randolph Stow and His Literary Critics," Rendell articulates the larger purpose of the collection: "The thirteen essays … do not insist on restoring Stow's due but seek to reveal the complexity and intertextuality of his work" (8–9). The most compelling aspects of the essays connect his creative output to his life and values. Randolph Stow descended from pioneering families on both sides, his forebears distinguishing themselves as explorers or judges or pastors. Growing up in a stable, affluent world, Stow understood that his family owed their prosperity to the dispossession of the Indigenous residents; that awareness was a source of enduring guilt. As he began writing, Stow expressed interest in an overlapping concern for the colonisers: "the spiritual absence within settler identity" (71). Sam Carmody, one of the contributors, cites a telling insight from Stow's biographer: "[T]he major discovery I made in tracing Stow's life was that nearly all of his works become much more accessible when contextualised by events of his life" (174).

Roger Averill, Kate Leah Rendell, and Klaus Neumann contribute essays on Stow's first great success, *To the Islands*. Inspired to write a novel centered on a King Lear-like figure and seeking geographical and cultural specificity for the work, Stow contacted several missions, asking to take up residence there while completing "anthropological fieldwork" (58). The Forrest River Mission accepted his offer to join them as a working volunteer. For three months he performed a daily round of mundane tasks, studied language with local elders, and engaged with the Aboriginal young men of the area in hunting and other outdoor activities. *To the Islands* was the results of this sojourn, a novel focused on mission superintendent Heriot, whose crisis of faith in his life's work results in his leaving the mission and journeying toward the "islands of the dead," an image from an Indigenous vision of the end of life.

Hovering about the essays in the collection are questions prompted by Rendell's introductory piece: Why did Randolph Stow slide so definitively into oblivion by the close of the twentieth

century? And—what makes Stow worth reading in the twenty-first? *To the Islands* is a prime vehicle for addressing both questions, as the three writers remark on the challenges posed by the novel as well as reasons for continuing to read it today. Averill, for instance, notes Stow's appreciation for the work of missions. In his 1982 preface to a revised edition of the novel, Stow states that one of his goals was "propaganda on behalf of the mission-stations for Aborigines" (43). With the 1997 publication of the *Bringing Them Home Report*, revealing the trauma experienced by removing Aboriginal children from their families, Averill finds such a goal untenable. Neumann counters claims that "historians had exaggerated the level of violence against Aboriginal people" (79) or that events conveyed through oral testimony, incidents of "settler violence and Indigenous resistance" (80), lacked credibility as actual history. Neumann also criticises attitudes of such redoubtable contemporaries as Prime Ministers Malcolm Fraser and John Howard, who separate their fellow Australians from those of earlier eras who perpetrated injustices against the Indigenous population, absolving the former of blame for misdeeds of long ago. In this context Neumann commends *To the Islands* as "an attempt to own up to a past reverberating in the present" (86).

Rendell's essay is the most stimulating in addressing the novel's limitations for a contemporary audience. As an outsider, she asserts, Stow could and should only "partly read" the Indigenous world, and that partial reading accounts for error and transgression. The titular "islands" were a subject not spoken of by Forrest River Indigenous people, but Stow puts them into print through character dialogue. Heriot arrives with a guide at a burial cave, the floor of which is "littered with human bones" (66); he lies down on those bones, uttering the words, "I have come home now" (66). A cultural violation enacted as a gesture of reconciliation? Rendell appreciates the sincerity of Stow's intent to connect settler Australia to the Aboriginal continent, asserts value in continuing to read the novel, but insists that we can only do so "within its cultural and historical context, acknowledging the limitations in its representation" (72).

Depression and exile played significant roles in Stow's life. He served as a cadet patrol officer in the Trobriand Islands for a few months before contracting malaria, suffering a breakdown, and attempting suicide. Philip Mead and Martin Leer contribute essays on *Tourmaline*, the novel begun on Christmas Day 1959, the year of his suicide attempt, and finished in Leeds, an early stop in his wandering life. For his jumping off point, Mead uses the poem "Anabase," by Saint-John Perse, noteworthy for its grand imperialist vision. Says Mead: "Stow's narration is a sardonic dethroning of such a heroic version of the workforce of empires" (101), for "every aspect of *Tourmaline*'s history is a failure" (101–2). Stow visited the original of the town with his mother and a friend in 1961; it was one of many abandoned mining towns dotting the Western Australian landscape. "Anabase" depicts life as cyclical; the town of Tourmaline has little more than twenty residents, with no lasting prospects to stave off extinction. Leer highlights Stow's use of "the self-doubting narrator" (132), the Law, whose supposed clear view of the world vanishes as he joins his fellows in ecstatic support of Michael Random, the diviner—and charlatan—whose anticipated discovery of water will restore the flush times that exist only through a few faded photographs. To Lee, *Tourmaline* is a study of human isolation in which the key moment of Random's uniting the town in religious fervor demonstrates that "[t]he mirage of the collective is … based in loneliness" (138).

Stow expressed the following in writing about *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea*: "[T]he writer could allow himself the indulgence … of turning his childhood into a novel, and in so doing I made very little alteration to the reality …."(146). Roger Averill sees *Merry-Go-Round* as conveying

family definition—what you can be, what you must not be—as young Rob, the protagonist, tests those limits, just as his creator did. The novel becomes a story of exile, as Rob's beloved cousin Rick announces his plans to leave and his rejection of Australia. Averill cautions against a too-easy identification of the Rick with the author. Yes, Rick Maplestead and Randolph Stow both reject a life among the clan that surrounds them, but in choosing Suffolk as his lasting home, Stow was, in fact, circling back to embrace the home of his ancestors.

Sam Carmody contributes an unusual take on Stow's *Bildungsroman*. Critics, he argues, have focused on Stow's persistent effort to find meaning in the "empty desolation and silence of the interior" (169). Though the novel takes Rob to Sandalwood, the family station in the interior, as a refuge from possible Japanese attack, to Carmody, Stow "establishes a literary vision of the coast," a "pastoral poetic of water" (169). He contends that the ocean embodies the complexities of the world for young Rob, being at once calming and soothing but also alluring and dangerous. The sharks provoke horror and fascination equally, casting an "existential shadow" (174) that troubles the growing Rob. It is the contradictions in the settler-Australian response to land and sea that give *Merry-Go-Round* its "complexity" (179).

Stow's career took an altered trajectory after the 1965 publication of *Merry-Go-Round* and his evidenced intent by then to live abroad permanently. He spent much of 1969–1970 writing his next novel, *Visitants*, completing at least two-thirds of it before halting. It was nearly a decade before Stow returned to complete it, propelled by his success in writing another novel, *The Girl Green as Elderflower.* Catherine Noske links the two works as "narratives of significant illness and depression" (183). She sees both novels as instances of writing as therapy and catharsis for an author with a lifelong history of depression, whose addiction to painkillers brought on the writer's block that forced his silence through the 1970s. Both revolve around a suicide—in *Visitants*, Alastair Cawdor, the late post commander, took his own life, and the novel explores the effect of that event on survivors; in *Girl*, Crispin Clare attempts suicide, and the narrative then follows his path to recovery. Noske invites her readers to see *Girl* as a sequel of sorts to *Visitants*, with Crispin Clare's journey toward healing a resolution of the trauma that pervades *Visitants*.

Nicholas Jose's essay on *Visitants*, "Randolph Stow's End Time Novel," illuminates both the novel and the trajectory of Stow's career and reputation. The novel title stems from an actual event, a 1959 report from Papua New Guinea regarding the sighting of a UFO. In an interview with Anthony Hassall, Stow shared his puzzlement about such sightings: "What is it in human experience that the repeated reports of such visitations answers?" (208). Noting *Visitants* as Stow's final Australian novel, Jose sees Stow continuing to examine tensions between the colonising and the colonised with the colonising especially seeking, often in vain, a transcendent moment that connects them to the colonised world. But Jose sees *Visitants* also as exemplary of the writer's "visionary artistry" (205).

Most interesting in Jose's discussion, however, are his comments on the publication realities of the novel. For all of its complexity, *Visitants* excited little critical interest in Australia. By 1979, in Jose's view, Australian fiction "had moved on" (214). A new generation of novelists had emerged by the 1980s that were drawn to "the quotidian rather than end time" (214). Narratives of characters seeking spiritual awakening in a resistant continent or alien space no longer resonated with readers or writers. Though *Visitants* moves the setting to the Trobriand Islands far from the

empty desert, the social dynamic between settler and colonised and the quest for transcendence among members of the former persist. And with such commentary, Jose provides the likeliest answer to that overarching question—why did Randolph Stow slide so definitively into oblivion in the late twentieth century?

Randolph Stow: Critical Essays includes other pieces. Michael Farrell discusses Stow the poet, and Rachael Weaver contributes a welcome analysis of "his best loved and least critically scrutinised work," *Midnite: The Story of a Wild Colonial Boy* (17). Biographer Suzanne Falkiner and Graeme Kinross-Smith deliver pieces portraying Stow the wanderer in search of a home. The final essay, by Margaret Rogerson, investigates Stow's final novel, *The Suburbs of Hell*. While superficially a murder mystery, to Rogerson it is a medieval tale whose moral concerns are a response to Chaucer's "Pardoner's Tale." Readers of the major novels will find the critical analysis stimulating, though I contend that the best essays are those connecting writer and life. Rendell's sequencing enhances the collection. Threaded throughout the critical discussions is a story of an Australian writer struggling with social concerns and personal demons, a man who claims a home and a measure of peace at last in the home of his ancestors. Rendell's collection might be approached as a warm-up to reading Falkiner's biography or as a follow-up to *Mick* for readers not ready to let go of Randolph Stow.

The collection underscores another of Rendell's points about Stow: he was "[n]otoriously difficult to approach and … seemed particularly inaccessible after his self-imposed exile" (2–3). The book cover features a photograph of Randolph Stow, one that also appears in the Falkiner tome. Taken during his final visit to Australia, the picture shows Stow perched on a walking bridge. Stationed above a world devoid of other human beings, he is leaning into one of the rails with his face directed away from the camera to his left. After immersing myself in Rendell's collection, in discussions so frequently highlighting the creator and his creations, I would still describe him as aloof and—yes—"inaccessible." I imagine that Randolph Stow would value such an assessment.

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