

Nomadology in Kylie Tennant's *The Battlers*

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In an obituary of Kylie Tennant the anonymous author describes the road as a 'guiding principle, not only in her best known novel of nomads, *The Battlers*, but in other, apparently more static tales' (*Age* 22). This is true of *Foveaux*, where the construction of a new road is the central metaphor, and also of *The Honey Flow*, a study of itinerant bee-keepers; people who follow the blossom. It's also apparent in the title of another of Tennant's novels, *Ride On Stranger*. Tennant is clearly fascinated by nomadic communities and correspondingly scathing of the sedentary. In *The Honey Flow* Mallee Herrick denounces those who own land:

Let them eat dirt. They possess the dirt, it is their miserable heritage, and until it all blows into the sea it belongs to them. It is under their nails and in their minds and mortgages. Their cities choke in it, their arts and knowledge choke in dirt, their children breathe it in. The wild people of the forest are gone, people like shadows hunting shadows under the trees, because they could not live in the evil glare of the dirt-eaters. (21–2)

This contempt for the sedentary is also evident in *The Battlers* where towns are described as 'running red sores' (200) and the people in them are called '[w]hite ants, crawling shapeless jellies' (206). *The Battlers* describes the lives of the families who, during the Depression, move from town to town in a variety of vehicles—horse-drawn vans and carts, decrepit trucks, even sulkies. Tennant calls them alternately travellers, dole-chasers or battlers.

While researching *The Battlers* Tennant spent three months on the road in a horse-drawn van travelling with such families. M.N. Pearson speaks briefly of the purposeful traveller in his/her essay 'Pilgrims, Travellers, Tourists: The Meanings of Journeys'. The purposeful traveller is one who, seeking wisdom 'from a foreign culture will immerse themselves in that culture, and will shun contact with their fellow-citizens' (127). This is an apt description of Tennant's research methods. While on the road she noted that the travellers have 'a language of their own, a code of their own that forbade their refusing food or shelter to any like themselves' (206). She recalled listening to two men plotting to steal an ancient horse harness they had seen in a barn. When she asked why they didn't just take *her* harness, which was new and much closer, they were indignant at the thought of stealing from one of their own. (3) Tennant was also included in the general division of loot although she had no facility for theft. She commented:

At stealing sheep I was a hopeless failure, making far too much noise; but I continued to enjoy my share of the fresh mutton. Whatever was looted in our passage, my share, although I had done nothing, was placed aside because I was 'one of the mob'. (3)

Tennant merged into the travellers' culture sufficiently to be accepted as a mate, a fellow of the road, even though this entailed complicity in theft and endangered her health: by the end of her time on the road she was suffering from malnutrition. She wasn't simply Kylie Tennant in a different milieu and yet, despite her acceptance by

the travellers, she wasn't a battler either. Tennant was able at any moment to resume her normal life and intended to do so.

Pearson suggests that the purposeful traveller is engaged in a quest and, while so engaged, is in a liminal state (127). While this does describe Tennant, who is neither of the battlers nor separate from them, the time she spends with the travellers could also be considered a becoming. Becoming, as Deleuze and Guattari define it in *A Thousand Plateaus*, does not entail a literal change; they consider it a false alternative to say, 'you either imitate or you are' (238). Nor is becoming an identification, it is described as an 'unnatural participation' (240). They describe the writer as a sorcerer because writing is a becoming; not a becoming-writer but, for Tennant, a becoming-battler. So, the writer is a sorcerer and sorcerers 'have always held the anomalous position' (246); they haunt the fringe, live on the borderline. Deleuze and Guattari describe the anomalous as that which inevitably borders the band.

Sometimes the borderline is defined or doubled by a being of another nature that no longer belongs to the pack, or never belonged to it, and that represents a power of another order ... no band is without this phenomenon of bordering, or the anomalous. (245)

The battlers live on the dole which is administered by the police of the towns they pass through. It is the aim of the police to 'keep the travellers 'on the move', never to let them settle in a town or stay too long in one place, to drive them on, to keep them circulating' (Tennant 4). Their refrain is 'Only one dole here, you know' (25). In other words, the State apparatus serves to keep the travellers mobile. Given a chance the battlers will settle, for a time, into semi-permanent camps, as they do at Logan until flood and police combine to dislodge them. This is not an attempt by the travellers to become sedentary. They have a saying: 'Once you get on the track you're on it for life' (206). A traveller never settles down: 'He might stay in the same town for years; but he would get up again, even when he was old, and go on a walk-about' (206). Nor do the police wish to encourage nomadism. Moving the travellers on is a method of controlling their movements, denying them their own rhythms. Deleuze and Guattari quote Paul Virilio: 'the political power of the state is *polis*, police, that is, management of the public ways' (386). The administration of the dole ensures that the travellers movement 'cease[s] to be the absolute state of a moving body occupying a smooth space... [and becomes] the relative characteristic of a 'moved body' going from one point to another in a striated space' (386).

The travellers are aware of this. Snow, lying delirious in the hospital, hallucinates that he is travelling through the Australian countryside, but his journey is continually restricted by barbed wire.

He spent uncounted years, it seemed to him, looking for an open space to camp, for an open road to travel, and as soon as he found one, the wire would come up around it. He saw the wire cobwebbing the country, holding it down in plotted squares of wheat or pasture or fallow; and the railway lines shrieking their way across the humbled hills climbing and boring through high places like grey snakes, panting over the level, binding the land in a tether. Even the telegraph wires hummed to themselves: 'Mine, mine!' (198)

Snow can't move freely in this landscape; he is locked onto the road and away from the land. The road is a prison 'with walls laid flat a thousand miles each way and bound with barbed wire; the walls of other men's land' (199). And yet the battlers do consider that the country is theirs. Their nomadism is apparent in their relationship

to the ground they cover. When one of the travellers, Dick Tyrrell, joins the army his friend Thirty-Bob admonishes him: enlistment is 'a mug's game' (354). Thirty-Bob refers to a speech made by the local mayor in which he spoke of this 'land we love which you are about to defend' (353), reminding Dick that he's got 'a fat lot of land' (354). However, Thirty-Bob also gets caught up in the patriotic fervour and enlists. He's rejected as medically unfit because he has flat feet, a development he secretly rejoices in. At the army camp he suddenly realises that, like Snow in his hallucinations, he is fenced in; 'enclosed by six strands of barbed wire' (358). He is willing to fight to preserve his relationship with the land, but it must be on his own terms.

If anyone wanted to fight for the place, he decided, they could come and fight him here, on his own ground ... Sooner than give up one inch of the stretching plains and valleys, the high hills of the country he owned, he would die many times. (358)

Tennant described what she believed would happen if an invader did conquer the eastern cities. They would still have to clean out the battlers, 'men and women who could face a desert and live off the country' who move in groups too small 'to drink the hidden wells dry'. No matter what happened to the city dwellers the travellers would continue to move 'from one camp to the next, slowly travelling round their territory as the seasons changed' (207).

Tennant often described nomadic ways of life in her novels and at times adopted a nomadic life style but more than this her writing is nomadic. The land was central to Tennant's work. She even entitled her volume of popular history *Australia Her Story*. Tennant's obituary states:

... the places of her novels were not stage sets, but actors in their own right. The antithesis of Hardy's symbolic Wessex, Tennant's Australia was the story of her characters' lives. Apart from its urban and rural spaces, they were nothing, without a past or a future. (Age 22)

Or as Deleuze and Guattari put it, 'nomads have no history; they only have a geography' (393). This is made clear in the first lines of *The Battlers*. Snow's life is changed forever because of a simple geographical decision: he takes the road that runs through Currawong rather than the Belburra road. He muses later, while he's in the hospital, that it's 'funny how a country shaped people to its ideas more than they shaped the country' (207). This is reminiscent of Stephen Muecke's suggestion, in *Reading the Country*, that the authority of nomadic writing 'comes from the territory covered not the person temporarily in charge of the pen' (22). Marjorie Barnard, in her essay 'Our Literature', suggests not only that the country has shaped people's lives but that this in turn has shaped Australian literature; that the fluidity of Australian life is reflected in large rambling novels such as *The Battlers*. She writes, 'Life is discursive, and so, by reflection, there is a strong tradition ... of large discursive novels—novels of the community rather than individuals; big, formless, moving.' (Barnard, *Australian Writers Speak* 103)

Dorothy Auchterlonie also noted this tendency to describe the practices of communities in her essay 'The Novels of Kylie Tennant'. Auchterlonie wrote that Tennant's intention was

to present a living picture of a certain community of human beings as a community; her method of carrying it out is to paint her background and her subsidiary figures in strong dominant colours, and to give all her figures, including the nominally central ones equal emphasis'. (396-7)

The problem with Tennant's 'conviction that everybody is equally interesting', Auchterlonie continues, 'is that the reader cannot become very deeply involved with any one of them'. Jean Bedford echoes this position in her introduction to *The Honey Flow*. She is puzzled because even the most dramatic events seem to have little general effect in Tennant's novels, commenting:

the tragic is glanced off oddly, particularly the potentially climactic scene of Frank Hertz's despair—his threat to kill his children and his own almost heroic death. There is no classical dramatic falling away from this event: lives go on and central preoccupations remain the same ... he has been a threatening and violent presence, but somehow his absence leaves no gap. (viii)

This is an attribute of nomadic writing: 'where one person's story ends another takes off' (Muecke 22). In her book *The Novels of Kylie Tennant* Margaret Dick noted that Tennant's 'books are full of the inveterate tendency of the human species to arrange itself in hierarchies' (46), which would seem to conflict with Muecke's statement that nomadology is 'constantly in flight from ideas or practices associated with ... the hierarchy' (15). While it is true that Tennant describes the families who travel in a turn-out as the 'aristocracy of the track' (35), there is an important sense in which her writing isn't hierarchical, and that is, precisely her refusal to privilege one character over another.

Tennant has often been chided for the absence of a resolution to the social issues portrayed in her books. Adrian Mitchell, in the *Oxford History of Australian Literature*, says that Tennant 'avoids serious engagement with the social issues her novels raise' (129). Drusilla Modjeska, in *Exiles at Home*, writes that Tennant 'seems uninterested in working out the social issues that are catalogued through the lives and experiences of the characters' (232). Tennant is not polemical nor does she attempt to solve the problems of her characters fictively, but this doesn't preclude engagement with social issues. In an interview Tennant said that she disliked the society in which she found herself and felt that the way to alter it 'was to let people know what it was like' (*Hemisphere* 148). She wrote, in a letter to Xavier Pons, 'I never commented on what I described ... because I felt it was better for people to discover for themselves than to endure exhortations by the author' (374). Rather than present the reader with a ready-made solution to social ills Tennant celebrated her characters' own solutions, their adaptive practices, such as *bricolage*; using familiar objects in unfamiliar ways. *Bricolage* is the custom of the battlers. Snow plans to take a door from an abandoned church and 'fashion from it an upper decking for his wagon' (9), kerosene tins are used as seats (14), and 'camping prohibited' signs utilised to prop up overnight shelters (92). Tennant herself was described as a '*bricoleur* before her time' (*Age* 22). Margaret Dick wrote of Tennant's use of this strategy in *The Battlers*:

It is a celebration of the human spirit, not open or obvious, but evident—in Forster's phrase—in a kind of music that rises from the page. One is reminded of the painters of *l'art brut*, whose aim was to abolish accepted notions of high and low, sublime and banal, beautiful and ugly, and to put in their place, according to Dubuffet, 'another and vaster beauty, touching all objects and beings not excluding the most despised. It is an enterprise for the rehabilitation of scorned values, and in any case a work of ardent celebration'. (55)

But such a celebration doesn't seek to deny disadvantage. Dancy, who has led a horrific life that includes the murder/suicide of her parents, daily thrashings, incarceration in reformatories and gaol, and the loss of her only child, is pathetically grateful

to be offered shelter from a storm in a fragile tent that eventually blows away. 'It's me Luck' she whispers to herself. 'I'm lucky, that's what it is.' (249) (*The Battlers* 10) Modjeska is troubled by Tennant's use of humour, feeling that it 'deflects from her social criticism, operating as a shield to avoid confronting the political implications of what she describes, and as a device to reconcile her characters to the acceptance of intolerable conditions' (232). But humour is just one more adaptive practice. Amongst the battlers '[l]aughter is one of the goods that are never rationed' (xiii).

Dorothy Auchterlonie compares Tennant's work to that of George Eliot and discovers several areas of commonality. Eliot and Tennant are both 'predominantly social novelists', they share a 'broad humanity', a 'sense of fellowship with ordinary men and women', and they are aware, they have 'the power of observation' (396-8). But she finds a great difference in the structure of their novels. Tennant's novels have been described as formless. Her anonymous obituarist notes '[c]ritics have found fault with Tennant's lack of plot, her tendency to elaborate detail at the expense of broader outlines' (*Age* 22). But once again these criticisms recall Muecke's definition of nomadic writing in which '[t]here will be no general idea of what the whole thing is about, only specific lines to be followed' (22).

Auchterlonie continues 'George Eliot moves slowly and deliberately forward, consolidating her characters and creating her pattern as she goes, with her architectural aim clearly in mind all the time, whereas Kylie Tennant moves, not forward, but in a series of eddies' (399). This is reminiscent of a statement by Deleuze and Guattari: 'only nomads have absolute movement, in other words, speed; vortical or swirling movement is an essential feature' (381). Margaret Dick describes this aspect of Tennant's novels as 'a strong expanding circular movement that gradually encloses new aspects of life ... and superimposes separate experiences, separate visions' (26).

Before the theoretical model was articulated Dick, who was writing in the 1960s, described the nomadic traits in Tennant's writing. While other critics attempted to make Tennant's novels conform to a social realist model or the confines of the classic 'architectural' novel, Dick recognised that Tennant had abandoned the 'revolt against the traditions of the old world' and was instead 'temperamentally aligned' with the 'radical vanguard in Europe', that she was 'writing in a world that finds its reflection in the work of Eliot, Sartre, Camus [and] Kafka' (68) rather than that reflected by George Eliot.

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