

Strange Bedfellows: Homo-eroticism and Landscape in Two Bush Novels from the 1920s

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Neither E.L. Grant Watson (1885-1970) nor Marie Bjelke Petersen (1874-1969) were Australian-born, but each wrote several novels informed by first-hand observation of Australian bush settings. Cambridge-educated, Grant Watson visited Australia twice, most notably as Anarchy Brown's zoological assistant on an anthropological expedition to the North-West during 1910-11 (in a party which initially included Daisy Bates). Bjelke Petersen's formative years were spent in Denmark, whence her family emigrated for Tasmania in 1891, when Marie was sixteen. In this paper, I focus on two novels published in 1923: Watson's *The Desert Horizon* and Petersen's *Jewelled Nights*.

The Desert Horizon is a *Bildungsroman* charting the physical and psychological development of Martin O'Brian from childhood to marriage in the marginal desert country of Western Australia's North-West. According to Watson's memoirs, the innocent aloofness of the desert 'appears as a symbol of the unconscious' (*But to What Purpose* 100), and he makes it central to the novel. The desert thus moulds and reinforces Martin's psyche, as it does his physical appearance. For example, as a youth, Martin reflects that the desert

was quite oblivious to the life of men, to their needs, their sorrows or their ravings. Its innocence remained unsullied. It was the men who were proved guilty of rashness, of unjustified familiarity ... He had been threatened by that impersonal, remorseless power, but he bore no grudge. He loved the desert, he did not fear it. (115-16)

Even the death of his guardian and mentor, Alec Shaw, does not significantly alter Martin's belief in the desert's eternal innocence. During his adolescence, it acquires the status of a benign deity and lover, for after Martin is seduced and abandoned by Alec's bedmate Nance, the 'desert only remained faithful' (149). As an adult, Martin still struggles to define his relationship (as does Watson with his metaphysics): 'It revealed, as he gazed, the innermost element of his own self, some portion of personality, seemingly limitless and which was in touch with power' (287). Not all, however, share Martin's sense of harmony. For example, his adult employer George Mackay is driven by an evangelical urge to civilise the land. In his case, nature triumphs, pushing him towards eccentricity and eventual madness. Significantly, such negative views are those of a latecomer, not one raised in the desert country (like Martin). It seems that the desert must, like the Jesuits, claim its own from an early age.

The desert's role is thus to draw out latent traits in Martin's psyche, one of which is his marked preference for solitude, in which he can achieve harmony and unity with his environment. However, the 'awakening sex-consciousness' of adolescence produces 'an inner life [which] disturbed that earlier harmony, it was egotistical, restless and hungry' (100). Nance becomes 'the first woman that he had seen and recognized as essentially different and complementary to himself' (110). He does not enter into

the social life of Gum-tree Creek and its school, 'but remained rather a spectator, feeling intuitively that his deeper interest was for the open spaces of the plain' (118). As an adult, however, he begins to work with a clear sense of purpose: 'He must make good and gain for himself real power and manhood' (184). Watson establishes a syllogism: 'Money meant, in the world of men, power. If he was to be a man he must have power' (209). Land thus becomes Martin's symbol of power, but power needs a purpose, and his dreams turn to women: 'As the months passed the restlessness of adolescence grew stronger; it was in disharmony with the deep love for the bush which had grown up with his childhood' (208). He thus travels to Perth to woo and win Maggie Linton who, over time, comes to understand that the 'desert and herself were his two loves; he wanted them together, then he would know which one he loved the most' (267-68). As the novel unfolds, Martin's emotional immaturity evolves into solipsistic insensitivity. The desert, it seems, conditions Martin to share its own indifference towards humanity.

Gender is an important factor, for Watson presents the desert as an essentially male domain. Martin is inducted into the fellowship of bush men when, at twelve, he guides his motherless siblings across the desert to an unknown shearing shed. He 'had never seen so many men together before,' and is 'no longer shy' talking to them:

These strangers, who as soon as he spoke to them seemed to be no longer strangers, were men of a common experience with himself. They knew the bush intimately; for years it had formed the background and substance of their life, just as it had of his own. (63)

Similarly, at the Gum-tree Creek school, Martin finds it 'easy to talk with boys who had lived and been brought up in the same conditions as himself' (96). More intriguing is his meeting as a young man with John Sherwin, a sandal-wood cutter of Martin's own age: 'Their eyes met for a moment, and because of their mutual youthfulness and of a certain candour which was the gift of the desert, they were glad of this meeting, though it was far from their inclination to express this feeling in words' (211). At one level, this illustrates the unspoken communication which can often accompany male reticence, but I also find homo-erotic overtones, here and in a subsequent longer passage, after Sherwin confides that he came to the desert to get away from women, and counsels Martin on their shortcomings:

A silence followed in which Martin looked at his hands and his strong arms, tanned red-brown in the sun. In a meditative and dreamy way he watched the working of the muscles and tendons as he turned his hand this way and that. He made his fist hard, and breathed on the taut skin across the knuckles. Looking up he met Sherwin's eyes. They both smiled. In that glance they understood one another as men. They were made of the same fibre and muscle, urged and restrained by the same desires and fears. Martin felt the same warm impulse of love that had come to him from the men in the shearing-sheds. This other fellow, he was a man and young like himself. They were both men; the desert had made them the same; because of the desert they comprehended one another. Their senses were open to the same experience; they received from the same source the same imaginative intuition. Through their bodies flowed the same masculine perceptions. Their talk, these broken interjections, was of itself of small significance. How could it be of significance? It had but served to lead up to that glance of the eyes, that mute comprehension of the body, the interchanging meanings of the blood. (218-19)

After such a potentially subversive passage, it comes as an ironic anticlimax that Sherwin is the one to catalyse Martin's quest for a spouse. Maggie too notices the mas-

culinity of the bush. The mining boom means that Mt Gerard's 'throng of eager humanity was composed almost entirely of men' (312), and Tharameka possesses an air of vitality: 'a brutal, masculine vitality, but, like life itself, attractive' (315).

Women, on the other hand, are dysfunctional outsiders. Phoebe O'Brian dies in a claypan under unexplained circumstances, and shrewish Clara Mackay commits suicide. Jane, the alleged wife of the storekeeper at Gum-tree Creek, mocks Martin's sexual inexperience, and his sister Mary betrays him by taking up with the loathed son of a coastal dairy farmer. There are suggestions that Maggie too will not cope with the desert (confirmed in the novel's 1925 sequel *Daimon*). Only Alec Shaw's lover, Nance, blends with the landscape, although there is mystery behind her periodic visits. Nance matches Alec in bushcraft, and Martin recognises 'the naturalness of their association' (123). Seduced and then abandoned by Nance after Alec's death, Martin later regards her as 'the symbol of the desert, summing up in herself all its beauty, its tenderness, its sadness. In her arms he found its eternal youth and its undying age' (166). It is interesting, then, that Nance makes her entrance riding astride and carrying a (phallic) stockwhip (101), which she can wield as well as any man. She is, if you like, an honorary man, which casts a novel light on her sexual relationships. In general, Martin's attitudes towards women are highly chauvinistic:

He despised them as less hardy to endure physical labour. He believed, too, that because they were weak and soft and yielding they were the natural prey for the desires of men. He had seen that; in a town such as Tharameka the brutalities of sex are not disguised. Women were to be overcome and mastered. (200)

George Mackay speaks with the bitterness of age and experience: 'You'll find that women are too much for us. They wear us down in the end. They are so cock-sure. They *know*, we men only hope and believe' (221). His view seems closest to the novel's underlying misogyny (which approaches latent homosexuality). Man, either solitary or in company with his fellows, is in harmony with the desert, but woman is an intrusive, disruptive force, seeking to destroy that harmony. For Martin, the masculine desert vies with Maggie's feminine love.

Marie Bjelke Petersen's *Jewelled Nights* is a love story set in an alluvial mining camp on western Tasmania's Savage River, an exclusively male preserve of entrepreneurial diggers. The plot adopts the old device of a young woman disguised as a handsome youth, as Elaine Fleetwood borrows the identity of her brother Dick to infiltrate the mining camp. Her motive is twofold, to avoid an unwanted marriage and to help support her extravagant but distressed mother. An immediate mutual physical attraction occurs between Dick and the hero, Larry Salarno, a giant miner who (according to the unreliable narrator) doesn't unmask Dick until, two-thirds into the novel, he nurses an ill and blinded heroine. The balance of the novel resolves sub-plots, restores Elaine's sight through the miraculous power of prayer, and consummates the romance with a wedding amid sublime bush scenery.

The novel's most intriguing aspect is Petersen's portrayal of the relationship between Dick and Salarno. The narrator's convention, which I follow, is to refer to Dick as *he* until unmasked, thence as Elaine or *she*. It thus ensues that all parties other than Dick (including less astute readers) perceive an association between a lone teenage boy and an experienced older man, which produces some decidedly homoerotic overtones. Even Dick's name becomes, consciously or unconsciously, ironic. Either Petersen is writing in a far more knowing and subversive vein than is consistent with her strict Christian morality, or she naively believes that a lovingly devoted single-sex friendship (such as that, presumably, between herself and her long term

companion Sylvia Mills) can be convincingly applied to male characters in a macho frontier environment. Back, however, to the first meetings of Dick and Salarno. Dick is much taken with Salarno's

magnificent chest, a lazy anger smouldering in his dark southern eyes ... such statuesque perfection ... such vivid, startling beauty. The man was of giant height and proportions. His skin was a radiant white, and his hair, brows and eyes of lustrous blackness. He stood very still, a cool condescension in his easy, dominant bearing. (42-43)

In turn Salarno admires

the thick daring waves of [Dick's] hair. It gilded the tips of his silky lashes and turned his sombre blue eyes into pools of deepest violet. His profile was singularly attractive and the lines from chin to ear held a soft elusive beauty.

The black gaze took in every detail of his appearance. It did not miss the sweet, yet proud poise of his well-shaped head or the set of his fine shoulders and the long graceful lines of his limbs. (94)

Another covert inspection by Salarno produces a delightful Freudian slip: 'An inscrutable expression came into Salarno's black gaze and he straightened suddenly' (63). Some exchanges between the pair read as coded attempts at homosexual seduction. For instance, Salarno suggests that Dick prospect in the direction of Salarno's camp:

'Why not come—up-stream?' The question held elaborate carelessness.

'I prefer—going the other way.' A touch of insufferableness had come into the boy's manner. (51)

And later:

The older man looked him over silently for some moments, before saying with a slight change of manner, 'Ever feel kind of—lonesome round here in the evenings?'

The boy moved suddenly. 'No—oh no—I—I generally go to bed early.' He spoke rather quickly...

'I say, sonny, what about coming round to my camp to see how my company will inspire you?' (68)

If Dick's reaction to Salarno can be overlooked on the grounds that he is really Elaine, then not so the perceptions of the other diggers. Salarno is their unchallenged leader, and their campfire conversation suggests a degree of voyeuristic jealousy of the newcomer's influence:

'Dog bite me, you'd think that kid 'ad worked a spell on 'im. Never knew'd Salarno go dilly like that before. I wonder what's done it?' mused a miner squatting on the floor and leaning against a bunk.

'Why, he's a devilish good-looking cub and Salarno always was great on looks.' (87)

There is no sense of moral outrage here, but rather a knowing acceptance that such things happen. Animosity only arises because Dick begins to monopolise Salarno's time, not through any latent homophobia. There is also something decidedly odd about another digger pairing, for in his cups Gus the Poet is inclined to spoon his mate Old Trousers, taking him for a woman. Even when he tries the same trick on Dick, there is no sense of shock or moral outrage, merely amusement, in the reaction of the other miners. In Petersen's fictional world, such behaviour is condoned, even encouraged. Petersen based that world on her careful observations over several visits to the

district (Alexander 117), and it is conceivable that her very naivety makes her a sound witness. Another character, Netta Garrett, also implies that homosexual relationships are not unknown, after she fails to seduce Salarno:

I suppose that's just another way of saying you *won't*, because you are going round to play with that curly-headed boy of yours. Do you make love to him, too? I suppose you diggers down here must have someone to make love to—but why don't you try me? I'd be nicer than a boy, anyway! (143)

Salarno's cold silence in response could read as guilt. Certainly, it is not that of affronted sexuality. In any event, the friendship between Salarno and Dick becomes the talk of the district.

Salarno's reaction to all this is ambivalent. When in the company of undisguised, respectable women away from the river, he is quite the sophisticated ladies' man. On the river, however, he entertains Dick with songs of the 'I love—you' variety (83), yet recoils in apparent horror when Dick's hand steals to his shoulder. As Dick recognises, there are two environments in the novel, one civilised and conventional, the other savage and unorthodox:

The men in the ravine were apparently different from any he had come across in the upper world and he must not expect them to act in similar ways. Human beings who lived amid these terrific surroundings would naturally be influenced by them, become inoculated with them. The staggering lawlessness running riot everywhere in the ravine would necessarily reproduce itself in their characters. (70)

A subversive reading of the text suggests that such frontier lawlessness extends to the fracturing of sexual taboos (in the guise of mateship). To add to the oddity, there is a Freudian dimension to the physical appearance of the Savage River site, which is a narrow ravine hundreds of feet deep: 'the fearful chasm ... the yawning abyss ... the bottomless deep ... that engulfing ravine' (27). It might, in homo-erotic terms, represent the threatening vagina: 'The gorge was full of danger. Danger lurked in its heights, its frightful deeps, in the black swirling pools of the stream and in the pitchy gloom of the forest' (70). Fanciful perhaps, but in her male disguise Elaine is also a threat to masculine society, for she is a subversive usurper of many things male: of the external trappings of manhood (creating in the process an effeminate travesty of masculinity); of her brother's name and role as family breadwinner; of the exclusively male occupation of mining; and of Salarno's affections, whether for his fellow-miners or other women.

There is a certain synchronicity about these two novels. Both appeared in 1923, both feature homosocial frontier environments, and both are written by outsiders. The last fact suggests to me a greater freedom in interpreting observations, although it is arguable that Watson had a clearer idea of his intentions than Petersen. In any event, the texts tilt the scales of mateship further towards a subversive homo-erotic reading than do the usual Australian novels of the period.

Works cited

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