

Girt by Sea: islands in the novels of Thea Astley and Christopher Koch

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Australia is frequently referred to as the 'island-continent'. Calling it such implies that it is both island and continent. It is as true to say that while having features of both, Australia is neither island nor continent. That it is an island, bordered on all sides by ocean, seems apparent, but at the same time it is too vast and unknowable to be simply an island. That it is a continent is evident from the extent of the landmass, but it is a continent that cannot be occupied and embraced across its full extent as others can.

Most mainland Australians, however, clearly identify with a landmass of continental proportions. Even if this land consists of an archipelago of city-islands bordering a vast dry lagoon, the Australian experience of space is conditioned by the unambiguous physical connection which unites the far-flung population centres.

This form of spatial awareness has engendered a literature which is essentially 'continental'. Even when this literature is concerned, as it so often is, with life lived at the continental edge, it is also nervously aware of the presence of the inland. The challenge it frequently responds to – or shrinks from – is the need for Australians to locate a 'centre' in a space of continental proportions which repels occupation at its heart. As Nicholas Jose has concluded, 'Centre-seeking is a leitmotiv in Australian culture ... The singleness of the island-continent makes the longing for a centre look so feasible. Yet it is an aspiration of the most difficult metaphysical kind' (314).

There is, however, another Australian experience of space which is expressed far less frequently but one which seemingly offers more knowable and accessible landscapes in which occupants can locate their centre: the experience of islands. These are islands which are geopolitically part of Australia, but which promise ways of conceptualising the relationship between self and space, or self and landscape, or self and distance, or self and belonging, which are singularly 'Un-Australian' when

compared to the way they are experienced by those who dwell on the vast continental-island of the mainland.

This paper examines the treatment of islands in the work of Thea Astley and Christopher Koch. As will be seen, there are differences in the way in which these two writers deal with the subject matter. What they have in common, however, is that in both cases the 'island' is treated as an experience of Australia as non-continental space, and therefore, an experience which is essentially non-Australian.

Thea Astley

Thea Astley's writing is often associated with the coastal areas of northern New South Wales and Queensland. Her characters frequently move beyond the continental edge, however, and engage in an uneasy negotiation of the space between the coast and the inland. Novels such as *An Item from the Late News*, *Reaching Tin River* and *Drylands* highlight the struggle of the settler society to establish a firm spirit centre in continental landscapes which are seemingly featureless and limitless.

Characters in these novels often dream of escaping to an island, believing that within the cosseted intimacy of an island they have a chance to understand themselves in less demanding spaces than the larger and less contained expanses of the mainland. In *Girl With a Monkey*, Elsie Ford escapes to an island to find peace in 'this tiny and secret corner of the world' (116); Paul Vesper in *The Acolyte* is haunted by the memory of an idyllic island whose 'twenty miles of coast have lain at the back of my mind ... a personal lotus land ... where for a little while I pursued my own identity' (62), and Kathleen in *Coda* believes that islands are an antidote to the need to constantly battle landscape because, 'They enclose. They are their own world' (146).

Other novels, however, such as *Beachmasters*, *A Boat Load of Home Folk*, and *The Multiple Effects of Rainshadow*, are set on islands, and give their characters the opportunity to centre themselves within these confined and seemingly knowable landscapes. As the narrator of *Beachmasters* explains:

... the world beyond the island is forgotten.
 The island is the whole world.
 The island is its own planet.
 Seas beyond can boil with bombs, war, carnage. The island remains ...
 the island. (180)

Astley's fiction is, however, riddled with failed Edens, and the seemingly paradisaical islands are one more set of landscapes which fail to match their promise. An island may have seemed to be an end in itself, its own centre, but it is soon revealed that the true heart of the island is far more elusive. Having failed to find the comfort or security they seek, Astley's characters remain driven to know the island completely by pursuing its – and in the process, their own – centre. Even when they are seemingly attained, however, the island-centres prove illusory, and those who reach them inevitably suffer the exposure of their own troubled core.

In *A Boat Load of Home Folk* Kitty Trumper sets out on foot for the volcano which lies at the island's heart. When she reaches the crater's edge she realises this island-centre contains 'a turmoil that matched in its contained surgings the inward gusts of guilt that had been her terrible sea for half a lifetime' (102). She seeks absolution from her guilt by immersing herself naked in the lagoon that borders the volcano, but it is too little and too late. She is engulfed by a cyclone which brings about her lonely death.

For the others who have travelled with Miss Trumper to this island 'paradise', the trip also becomes a wretched experience. The enforced intimacy of the island creates anything but the calm centre they were seeking. It exposes the tensions in various relationships, and they are forced to confront the personal shortcomings they had hoped to escape. In an image which recalls Miss Trumper's encounter with the volcano, the outcast Father Lake realises that the island has become for him the 'middle of the world', and he finds at 'the centre of it all, like the red heart of a monstrous volcanic cone, his own blazoned guilt' (212).

Astley's most elaborate use of an island and the search for the centre is developed in 'The Genteel Poverty Bus Company', the first of the two novellas which comprise *Vanishing Points*. The protagonist is Mac Hope, a disillusioned academic who runs a no-frills bus company conducting tours of Cape York. These journeys into the northern inland have made Mac increasingly aware of the danger of exposing his fragile temperament to the unbounded space of the Cape. He dreams of an island to which he can retreat and find some comfort in a space of more contained proportions. He pores over maps of the Whitsunday coastline, searching for an island where he can engage in solitude with a less demanding landscape than the vast spaces of the Cape.

Mac eventually locates just such an island, Little Brother. He is exulted by his discovery, and feels protected by the island in a way which would be impossible on the broad expanses of the mainland. In return he 'embraced the whole island, its smallness, its roundness, its secrecies' (35). Not content, however, with having found what appears to be a centre for his being, Mac is determined to create a centre within the centre, a place where he can further isolate himself. He carves an elaborate maze through the island rainforest, so that he alone can occupy its very heart. The maze is a concentric puzzle designed to bamboozle outsiders, but Mac is aware that it is also a 'spiritual maze he was constructing' (70), a puzzle which serves as much to conceal the troubled life of its creator as it does to hide his physical whereabouts.

The paradise in miniature of Little Brother island is short-lived. Developers move onto an adjacent island and intrude on Mac's solitude with the noise generated by the resort's disco. As the battle between Mac and the developers escalates the maze becomes crucial to deceiving his would-be pursuers, and he withdraws ever further into its puzzle, ever closer to the centre of his island, nearer to his own troubled core. Ultimately, however, Mac cannot be saved by his maze. His real problem is his inability 'to solve the maze that was himself' (106). He is finally ejected from the island, still consumed by his love for the place, but aware that the landscape he thought sympathetic and knowable, was ultimately indifferent to his plight.

It gave nothing back. Nothing. It remained floating above the sea, tiny, perfect and unknowable, indifferent to the tearing he felt in the heart of him.

'I love you,' he said to the island. Its perfection remained unmoved.
(121)

It is this indifference of the island that finishes Mac. Having rejected the mass of the continent as being an unsuitable place in which to fix his centre, and having failed in his pursuit of himself on the island, he has no further hope of refuge. He takes his boat and sets out for the east, 'straight for the outer reef and the ocean beyond' (122). It is his final journey of escape from the continent.

The unresolved problem for Astley's characters is that the inadequately occupied and featureless expanses of the mainland prevent them from revealing the true centre of either the land or themselves, and as a result they remain hesitant about their identity and their place in the world. Islands seem to offer the promise of some resolution, a means of getting to know themselves in a more intimate setting. But what the smallness of the island space reveals is not the calm and secure centre they dream of, but rather their own deeply troubled selves. As the worldly and wise Doss explains in *An Item From the Late News*, 'Islands might sound marvellous, lovey, but that's another myth' (51).

Christopher Koch

With Christopher Koch, we are situated within a very particular island, Tasmania. As with Astley, Koch is attracted by the capacity to conceptualise an island as a habitable and knowable space in a manner which is inconceivable when faced with continental space.

A sense of the embraceable scale of Tasmania is conveyed in a scene from *The Doubleman*, when Richard Miller climbs a peak north of Hobart. He surveys the view and finds that,

A quarter of the island lay at my feet ...

There, hidden behind Mt Wellington, rolled the wilderness: five thousand square miles of majestically rotting rain forest: unexplored catacombs of Antarctic beech and Huon pine on which it rained and snowed eternally, ... The west was death. But the east was life: the mild, open east of farms and settlement ... I saw right to the centre of my mountain-haunted island: a hundred miles of green, farm-nested valleys, musing pastures and navy peaks (123)

Such panoptic views occur elsewhere in Australian literature, most particularly in explorers' journals, where the 360 degree views are a method used to invoke the limitless and unvarying spaces of the continental inland. In Koch's island environment, however, the panoptic gaze bears witness to the contained and

ultimately welcoming spaces which are characteristic of even larger islands such as Tasmania. It is such spaces that have induced Koch to declare:

Island people are ... different from those belonging to a continent; their feeling for native place isn't necessarily more intense, but it is perhaps more intimate. The island can be contained in the mind; it's yours, almost as your house is yours; to be away from it is always exile ...
(*Crossing the Gap* 111)

This is revealing of Koch and his attitude to island space in two ways. Firstly the stress on 'intimacy' and the metaphor of the 'house'. For Koch, island landscapes are constituted in space of domestic proportions. He frequently notes the intimate scale and temperament of his island home which indicate it is a space ideal for settlement and belonging. In *Out of Ireland*, in particular, Koch emphasises that the settlers – whether Irish or English – were islanders, familiar with the cossetting confines of island landscapes, which they were keen to reproduce in Tasmania. As the hero, Robert Devereux writes in his journal, in Van Diemen's Land 'Britannia's empire had been able to establish perfectly that pattern of domestic intimacy so dear to the English soul' (248).

Secondly, the quote highlights Koch's emphasis on exile – to be away from your island home is 'always exile'. Exile is a constant theme in Koch's fiction, which conveys a deeply felt sense of the need to join oneself to larger experiences of the world. His novels are peopled with characters who are in exile; Australians struggling to come to terms with Asia, European refugees adrift in the Antipodes, settlers and convicts discarded to the furthestmost point of the empire, and Tasmanians in Melbourne and Sydney. In Koch's fiction, for a Tasmanian to go north is to leave home and undergo an essentially foreign experience. As he has written, 'Tasmania is different: we are no longer in Australia' (*Crossing the Gap* 84).

For the young men in Koch's first novel *The Boys in the Island*, the price of being raised in an island-home is to be in an inevitable state of exile. Centred in a home which lies beyond the continental periphery, they are outcast from the promises made by the opportunity to join their lives to a larger world they identify with Melbourne and Sydney. When reached, however, their experience of the mainland provides a sharp reminder of the gulf they have crossed. The security and intimacy Francis Cullen has known on the island is contrasted with his first experience of the mainland.

Francis was alone now, ... a boy from an island. ... Urgent and tense, he peered out the window for his first sight of it, his first amazing glimpse of the Mainland ... He stared through the window, ... A fragment of flesh in a bus, carried between uncaring cliffs of electric-lit stone, ... The city did not see him, and he knew instantly that it never would; people did not matter here. (103)

One of the young men, Shane Noonan, dies on the mainland, and Francis narrowly escapes death before finding himself back in Tasmania. He knows that he is back where he belongs, but he is also aware that he will never be cured of the desire to attach himself to a larger world. His is in fact a double exile – it is his fate whether he stays on the island, or leaves it for the mainland.

For Koch, however, the exile created by being a Tasmanian is even more significant than this example suggests. He often makes the point that as a result of its geographic situation and historical circumstances, life in the island has developed in a manner which exacerbates its separation from the mainland. He writes in *The Doubleman*:

The whole of dry, Time-flattened Australia lies north of latitude forty, its climate Mediterranean and then sub-tropical. But small, mountainous Tasmania, filled with lakes and rivers, is south of latitude forty; and this makes it different. Politically, it is part of Australia; physically, it is not.

... In the upside-down frame of the Antipodes, it duplicates the Atlantic Coast of Europe ... Our spirits were conditioned by the blood-thrilling Westerlies; snow fell in our mid-winters; we walked to school through London fogs. (23)

Tempted by the topographical and climatic similarities, and aided by their island circumstances, Koch's settler-exiles set about creating an ersatz version of their European homeland in a way that was not possible on the mainland. It is a situation which has created lingering questions of identity.

Our great-grandfathers had put together a lost, unknown home in landscapes that made it all perfectly natural: Georgian houses with classical porticoes; hop fields and orchards; chimney pots rising on gentle hillslopes, in the subtle, muted lights of East Anglia ... Repertory societies were run by artistic men in tweeds; trams ran on wet tramlines; and in the midlands, the gentry mulled their claret and rode to hounds ... Who were we, marooned at forty-two degrees south? Why were we here, and not there? (*The Doubleman* 23-4)

As Koch is well aware, however, Tasmania isn't England and it never can be. In *Out of Ireland*, descriptions in Robert Devereux's journals of the emerging colonial landscape stress the Englishness of the scene while indicating that attempts to recreate England in the Antipodes are nonetheless doomed.

Roses, geraniums and hollyhocks grew round the doors of shingle-roofed cottages; substantial stone villas crouched beneath oaks and cedars ... Imperial magic! England in a looking glass! The illusion was complete – until one's glance went further, to the distant horizon in the north.

There, everything altered, and I saw that this English pastoral was contained in a larger picture; the true, virgin landscape of the island ... A country lay out there like that of a fable: one that was largely unsettled; much of it scarcely explored. (238)

Koch's Tasmania, is not England, anymore than it is Australia. Its temperament may be European, but its location is Antipodean, and it is therefore a hybrid 'other'. It is a centre unto itself, one which lies beyond the periphery of its continental neighbour, and at the margins of the consciousness of the empire which gave rise to its modern form.

Therefore Devereux can write that Hobart may have 'the air of being utterly secure and civilized, and snugly at the centre of things', but as he looks more closely he realises that it is indeed the 'last port in the Empire: civilization's outermost limit' (181). With this entry in his journal he has confronted the reality of island life as experienced by other of Koch's heroes – an island may be its own centre, but it will always be peripheral to other, larger worlds.

Conclusion

It is the likely fate of islands to remain peripheral to Australia and its literature. As long as Australia is considered as the island-continent constituted by the mainland, we will ignore those substantially smaller islands that lie within its geopolitical orbit, but which impinge hardly at all upon the relationship mainlanders have to the continental expanse of the single landmass they think of as 'Australia'. It may never be otherwise, given the obvious disparities in size and population. But then perhaps these are the conditions that islands thrive upon, conditions which accentuate their 'otherness' and which will therefore ensure that island space remains an essentially 'non-Australian' experience.

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