

Displaced from the Sacred Sites: David Foster's *In the New Country* and *The Land Where Stories End*

SUSAN LEVER

The University of New South Wales

In all of David Foster's novels since *Moonlite* (1981) he worries about the spiritual state of white Australians, who are depicted in *Moonlite* as forcibly removed from their sacred sites in the islands of the North Atlantic. In that novel, the people of an island in the Scottish Outer Hebrides, based on St Kilda (<http://www.kilda.org.uk>) are colonised by Christian missionaries, English entrepreneurs and scientists, forcing the survivors to migrate to the goldfields of the New West Highlands. *Moonlite* makes much play on the likenesses between the natural religion of these islanders and the spiritual beliefs of the Aboriginal people that they displace in turn as they create a colony devoted to greed.

Stephen Harris reads *Moonlite* as a postcolonial critique of imperial history and its mythologising of history as progress, and he sees satire as particularly appropriate to this enterprise. The novel satirises the supposed rationalism of the Enlightenment, as it mocks the brutality of the highland clearances, and the devastating materialism of the colonial goldfields. Foster wrote most of it in London where he became resentful of English condescension to colonials, including their attitude to the Scots. He read the Scots poet, Hugh MacDiarmid, and wrote to Geoffrey Dutton:

How heartrending to find, in that Broad Scots, which our English friends have taught us to read with an instinctive smirk, the occasional Latin! [. . .] The Scots peasant cannot think philosophically, and the intellectual cannot take seriously anything written in Scots. Well, I wonder if there's anything else I, as an Australian, can learn from MacDiarmid. I suppose that I must learn to hate well, and mould my bitterness into an invective that my own people will understand. (Dutton papers, 21 Apr 1979)

This kind of nationalism fits with the assertive attitude expressed by other Australian writers in the late 1970s, particularly in the writing of dramatists such as Jack Hibberd or John Romeril. But Foster's fiction has continued to speak for a white Australian nationalism, though it is now less likely to attack

British colonialism than to set itself against the globalising and standardising tendency of Western culture, which it portrays as a virulent, unstoppable form of colonialism.

Foster has attacked other Australian authors, such as David Malouf, for offering what he sees as a generalised version of Australia, palatable and immediately comprehensible to American and British readers, and easy to translate into French (*Studs and Nogs* 65, 68). He sees them as not only pandering to the old colonial powers but also participating in the destructive processes of cultural homogenization. Foster's commitment to recording Australian vernacular and his, sometimes obsessive, listing of the details of forest plants, or martial arts rituals, and a host of other aspects of Australian life, form part of a resistance to the simplifying tendency of international culture. While Foster is pessimistic about the survival of diverse forms of life and culture, his pugnacious response to the threat gives his work its comic energy.

From the perspective of Foster's novels, the end of the colonial empires has not meant a victory for energetic new national groups, so much as a further progression towards a global culture that is materialist and dominated by technology—and uniform throughout the Western world. For this reason Foster's work sits within the notion of a colonial present—though that is not so much a question of one nation or culture dominating another, as the loss of specific relation to place everywhere. This loss of connection with the natural world, in particular places and particular climates, has a spiritual dimension.

The Glade Within the Grove (1996) was an ambitious effort to create something of the spiritual relationship to nature that Foster believes Australians need for any meaningful survival. The novel, with its accompanying *The Ballad of Erinungarah*, proposes that the irreligiousness of contemporary Australia might provide the clear ground for a new religion to counter the destructiveness of modern technology and save the natural world. Despite Foster's pessimism about the future of the planet, he still could imagine that Australians might find a way forward, however satirical and impossible that proposition (a religion with castration as its central rite) might be. Australia may be a cultural outpost of a decrepit and moribund Western civilisation, but its very distance from the centre offered the potential for a new way.

Foster's two most recent novels, though, show little of that angry pride in being Australian. No matter how satirical, paradoxical and preposterous the premises of *The Glade*, it was driven by a concern for the whole planet and its future. *In the New Country* (1999) and *The Land Where Stories End* (2001) continue Foster's obsession with the destructiveness of humans and of male sexuality in particular, but they indicate a steady contraction of interests,

suggesting that Foster may have given up on his fellow Australians as he looks to the preservation of his own soul.

In the New Country marks a return to the more benign comic mode of the Dog Rock novels. Here, Foster gives his attention to a rural area to the west of his home in Bundanoon—part of the western slopes district of New South Wales, stretching from Mudgee to Boorowa. From its beginning, the tone of this novel is more farcical than *The Glade* or *Mates of Mars* (1991) which function mainly in the more intellectual mode of satire, and its intention of mocking the current state of Australia is evident from its opening—an hilariously detailed account of the Sydney City to Surf running race:

Gorillas, as is well known, run the City to Surf in groups of three. Any properly alert official should have suspected something amiss when, of five distinct gorilla congeries contesting last year's event, one consisted of two, rather than the customary three, gorillas. (1)

From Sydney, Foster takes us to impoverished country towns where local industries, such as the abattoirs, have closed, leaving most of the men unemployed. The Asian economic crash of 1998 and the appearance of Ovine Johnes Disease in the sheep threaten demand for Australian products and the viability of these towns. This is the New Country of the Catholic Irish who settled the area in the mid-nineteenth century and flourished sufficiently to build the imposing churches and convents found in most country towns of any size. Now, Foster suggests, it faces the same fate as the Old Country, turned into a place of quaint and amusing tourist encounters, rather than a living, spiritually vigorous culture.

In this novel, Adam Hock (Ad Hoc), stock and station agent, and Deputy Mayor of the Shire, gives a comic commentary on the state of Australia as the Olympics (and the millennium) approach. He provides a means to mock the Australian self-promotion of National Living Treasures; the obsession with sport; the absurd projects of tourism, and the ludicrous pride in overseas 'successes' like Rupert Murdoch or Peter Allen (Foster's own school contemporary and model for Dud Leahey). Where most of the New Country inhabitants look to the past (the MacPeatrick brothers are in their nineties) Ad is full of energy and ideas for the future. He wants to rebuild the tiny Fane of St Fiacre at Crooked Corner for the Japanese wedding industry, and plans the St Pat's School Reunion in an attempt to lure the district's one National Treasure, the singer-songwriter Dud Leahey (Dud Lay), back home to finance the revival of the district fortunes.

For Jarvey Foley, the Irishman given the task of restoring the Fane of St Fiacre, Australia is a Fairyland, an upturned image of his homeland. The narrative

voice sees Ireland as the land of the White Dreaming where ‘each Hibernian geologic feature has one or more attached myths’ (80). But, according to Jarvey, Ireland is ruined:

‘The trees are gone. Most all the oak and birches. Only the rhododendrons and fuschias [sic] remain and they’re not even Irish. And Ireland is all full of tourists [. . .] Well, a few tourists is all right. But they are after takin over the whole country. We’re all doin bed and breakfast for ’em.’ (95)

Most of the district population have Irish Catholic backgrounds, but the parish records kept in the Fane reveal that the MacEwes (MacYews and MacHughs) are also descended from Carmel O’Roy of the Hole, described as ‘a Woman of the Kamilaroi’—that is, they can claim to be Aborigines. In no time, they are hooning around in their Haitch Ar, drinking beer from longneck bottles and addressing everyone else as ‘Gub’. Where Shorn MacEwe had worried about ‘some bunch of abos forcing me off the place’ (64), he now has ‘Great Expectations of Native Title’ (105). Ad Hock mouths some of the platitudes of a white liberal response to native title claims—and a commercial solution:

‘They’re abos, mate. All MacEwes is blackfellas, which accounts for their low self-esteem. But we’re not prejudiced, as we’ll prove, by havin Shorn doin our caterin.’

‘Blackfellas?’

‘Yes, and I shouldn’t have said that, for ‘Koori’ is the preferred word. They’re all Kooris, but they didn’t even know that until a week ago. We robbed them of their birthright. It’s not enough we stole the country, under the bogus premise of ‘Terra Nullius’. It’s one long story of conquest and deceit, and what can a Gub do to make amends? All I can think of is to somehow raise their self-esteem, in acknowledging their true identity. I’d like to see them givin didge lessons to Japs, I think that’s what’s needed here.’ (122)

Foster mocks the earnest white concern for the rights of people who have been long removed from any connection with Aboriginal heritage. But, in this novel, all of the characters—whatever their heritage—are out of their spiritual place.

The novel is dedicated to Foster’s part-Aboriginal grandsons, ‘in the hope that Australians may learn to see them, so that they may be permitted to see themselves, as Australians, rather than as aboriginal Australians’. His essay ‘Towards Aboriginal Reconciliation’ argues that all Australians whatever their racial background, apart from the ‘initiated few who retain a tribal culture’ (*Studs and Nogs* 148) should be regarded as Australian, ‘pure and simple’. This

essay claims to understand the attitudes of rural whites to ‘people of little Aboriginal blood, ostensibly socially undisadvantaged, but encouraged to regard themselves as Aboriginal’ (147) and it incited some outraged criticism when it was first published (See Wootten). A comic novel has greater license to consider such matters: where the essay simplifies a complex situation to a frustrating degree, *In the New Country* can mock the claims of newly-discovered Aborigines to tribal lands through comic characters such as Shorn MacEwe and Ad Hock.

In the novel, the Hole is the geographical feature at the centre of native title claims, and it emerges that the winning gorilla in the City to Surf is one of the wild MacYews of the Hole, though further mysteries surround the ‘very dark Irish’ that belong there. It is situated within the boundaries of the pastoral property, Killaarney, one of the novel’s many references to Ireland.

As Andrew Riemer notes, the novel works as a classic pastoral comedy, with its simple locals plotting and planning to resist the laws and assumptions of a more sophisticated urban society. In the tradition of Shakespearean comedy, the novel culminates in a party, the St Pat’s School Reunion, and concludes with the wedding plans of Billy Minogue and Jarvey Foley. This also parodies the Shakespearean (and Furfhean) device of the heroine disguised as a man (Billy reverses a sex change plan). At the same time, the novel has an edge of savagery that recalls the bleak rural comedy of Steele Rudd’s ‘Dad and Dave’ stories.

Foster packs this novel with Australian jokes (including rural myths such as the Gucci kangaroo who wears a tourist’s jacket and sunglasses). Yet it is driven by his serious obsessions about the state of masculinity (including the ‘choice’ between adultery and celibacy for men), the treachery of eating the animals we raise, and the need for a spiritually meaningful relationship with the natural world. It asks questions about the meaning of heritage in Australia, both in terms of white history where a dead country town has more appeal than a dying one—‘No one can love a dying town, though dead ones often look quite smart’ (37)—and the claims of those with Aboriginal ancestors. The town of Knocklofty has a present so lacking in future prospects that the past must be conjured up, even artificially by Adam Hock’s tourist plans, in the hope that people from somewhere else—Japan or the USA—might invest it with meaning.

Behind this chaotic but gloomy comedy, we can discern Foster’s increasing sense of detachment from Australia. The colonial Australian malaise of

second-hand culture and second-rate standards, satirised so energetically in *Moonlite*, *Plumbum* (1983) and *Mates of Mars*, seems to have defeated him. For most of the novel, Ad Hock maintains an enthusiasm for the task of boosting Australia as an interesting place, and the novel commits itself to finding amusement, at least, in the antics of the local bushfire brigade. Yet the humour seems a little forced. White Australians have failed to embrace a Eucalypt Dreaming, and Jarvey Foley assures them that the Oak Dreaming of their Irish origins no longer can offer any spiritual alternative.

On the surface, *In the New Country* claims Australia and tries to invest it with a spiritualism borrowed from Ireland, mixed with that of Aboriginal Australia. In this way, it continues some of the obsessions of *The Glade Within the Grove*. It can only offer such claims as a joke, though, and the effort begins to show as the novel comes to its conclusion. When Ad Hock visits Dud Leahey in America he finds that Dud refers to Australia as ‘Dim Dim’ (145). By the end of the novel, Ad, too, declares that he’s ‘over Australia’: ‘I’m over the New Country. I think I’m over Australia. I’ve put the boot in, I’ve deplored it bein put in by others, and I’ve copped it myself.’ (203)

Ad Hock can be read as speaking for the author who seems to lose interest in his novel as it comes to its close (Foster sometimes refers to Australia as ‘Dim Dim’ in personal correspondence). For all its inventiveness and humour the novel leaves us with a sense of defeat. It is as if the voracious capitalism that cleared the Scottish highlands and pushed out the Australian Aborigines in *Moonlite* has returned in a more virulent form to destroy rural Australia and its one remaining force of resistance—anarchic energy.

In a sense, *In the New Country* parodies the obsessions of *The Glade Within the Grove*. There, D’Arcy (for all his self-parody) seems to believe in the possibilities of a new religion that would save the planet, and must emerge from the Australian experience. *In the New Country* can offer only the joke Catholicism of Father Carney and Jarvey Foley, spurious claims by the local ‘Aborigines’ to the land they’ve lost, and a mocking version of the sacred place: the Glade has become the Hole.

In keeping with this abandonment of hope in Australia’s capacity to serve as a sacred place for Australians of any race, Foster’s next novel, *The Land Where Stories End* (2001) makes no mention of Australia at all. In 1996, while in Ireland as a result of winning the James Joyce Suspended Sentence award, Foster suffered ‘an intense alchemical episode’ that lasted two weeks when he didn’t sleep or speak to anyone (‘Red band adventures’, 9). During this time, he took a boat trip to Skellig Michael, an imposing cliff-faced island in

the Atlantic southwest of Kerry. The island is remarkably like St Kilda, with a similar partner island and gannetry (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Skellig_Michael.jpg). Skellig Michael was settled in the seventh century by Irish monks who built stone stairways up the cliff face and subsisted there in meditation and prayer. For Foster this Holy Isle was a revelation: 'I suddenly realised why, sixteen years before, I had felt such a compelling need to write the novel *Moonlite*, and I was also presented with a fable . . . entitled *The Land Where Stories End*' ('Red band adventures', 9). Foster refers to this fable as if it was a spiritual gift, a consequence of his visit to Skellig Michael rather than a work of his own creation.

Duffy and Snellgrove published *The Land Where Stories End* with a full colour reproduction of Filippo Lippi's 'Madonna con Bambino e due angeli' on the cover; its title page claims that is narrated by the angel in this painting (http://www.duffyandsnellgrove.com.au/titles/Land_stories_end.htm). With the images from Mattheus Merian's *Atalanta Fugiens* that illustrate its section headings, these reference Foster's preoccupation with Christianity and alchemy. His other major allegiance—Australia and its vernacular life and language—is absent, and Foster himself is partly erased by the lack of acknowledgement of his authorship (his name appears only on the imprint page, at the back of the book, rather than the conventional verso of the title page). After all the years of struggle with Australia and its spiritual emptiness, Foster returns to the place of his Oak Dreaming, Ireland.

Ostensibly, *The Land Where Stories End* is a fairytale: the story of a woodcutter who seeks the hand in marriage of the King's daughter. Despite the claim that the cheeky angel in the foreground of Lippi's painting is narrator, its narrative voice makes no reference to the Italian setting of that painting. The narrator is not a child, though his mostly simple language and explanatory style implies that he addresses a child of the modern world—except, of course, that the fairytale encompasses 'dirty' things and sexual matters. The simplicity of the writing contrasts ironically with the themes of the story: the desire for a spiritual existence beyond the physical limits of human life, with its 'wees and poos' and 'dirty things'.

The Land Where Stories End marks a revisiting of the interests of the first part of *Moonlite*; this time with a firmer sense of Foster's own spiritual struggle. If *The Glade* suggests that the dying D'Arcy is renouncing the world of the flesh, *The Land Where Stories End* suggests that Foster is a full-blown Manichean. The Promised Land, where the woodcutter lives, is the World of the Flesh; the Land he seeks (Where Stories End) is the Spirit World.

Here, Foster's concerns about the imminent destruction of the world as a result of human exploitation of its resources have contracted to the state of an individual man's soul. The woodcutter is a sinner, but only in the sense that every carnal human must be—he likes to eat and drink, and to have sex with women. He cuts down trees for a living and 'enslaves and loves' (88) animals that he later eats. He is a buffoon character, simple in his desires and needs. The monsters of the forest challenge him with these carnal desires, and he suffers physical tortures, ludicrous in their extremity: 'What say I reach up your bum with my eagle claw here and pull out your liver and lights?' (90) When the King orders him to be nailed into a barrique and cast into a dungeon, the woodcutter endures the prospect of drowning in his own excreta ('wees and poos') until he begins to embrace death as a spiritual release. His release from the barrique destroys a sense of ecstasy and bliss promised by the complete breakdown of his body. It is this physical body that binds him to the Promised Land when he longs for the Land Where Stories End.

Is this a longing for death or for immortality? Foster seems to propose that living itself constitutes a sin when eating, drinking, urinating, defecating, and fucking pollute the world in one way or another. Women, of course, tempt the woodcutter to 'dirty things' but his whole means of subsistence depends on cutting down trees and killing domestic animals. The tempting witches and savage men-women who torment him in the forest represent a fearful aspect of women, but the woodcutter's affection for his wife and the comfort she gives him alleviates the misogyny in the story. The Manichean must reject women because they bind him to the flesh, not only to sexual desire but the maintenance of children. The woodcutter has already established these bonds, so his hunger for a spiritual world is proportionately difficult, not to say impossible.

All this may seem like a fable of Original Sin with its penalty of death for the crime of living. Yet the Christianity of the story is imbued with paganism and the creatures that accompany it in European fairytales—ogres, witches and leprechauns. The monks who enter the story following Saint Finn give it a context of early Celtic Christianity—a Christianity largely independent of Rome and adapted to local pagan practices. After Finn stands in the river all night, communing with God, he emerges to announce the Lord's Word—the celebration of Easter out of kilter with Rome, the wearing of the Celtic rather than Roman tonsure, the drinking of beer rather than wine as 'the blood of our Saviour' (115). The comic triviality of these insights has an historical basis—the first two of these led to conflict with Rome and the defeat of Celtic monasticism at the Synod of Whitby in 664.

This is a Celtic, Druidic version of Christianity, with an emphasis on physical deprivation and celibacy. It is Christianity as ‘Men’s Business’, as Foster claimed in his ‘Castration’ essay (*Studs and Nogs* 117-129). At the end of that essay, he cited the Dark Age Irish (‘with their Druidic reverence for Nature and ‘great hatred of Venus’) as the source of a fourth category of eunuch, ‘the saint, who retains both penis and testes’ (129). So, for all its peculiarities, *The Land Where Stories End* follows logically from Foster’s obsessions in *The Glade Within the Grove*. It marks out an aspiration for sainthood.

The Land Where Stories End has a remarkable discipline and consistency of style that allows Foster to distance himself from his material, to subdue his imaginative excesses and his anger. He no longer performs as the misanthropic satirist, but as a restrained storyteller who shares the dreams and curiosities of his audience. This restraint contrasts with the excessive and extravagant language of Foster’s big novels, *The Glade Within the Grove*, *Mates of Mars*, *Plumbum* and *Moonlite*. Though the fairytale is full of humour and wit, the language is so spare that it mimics the self-discipline that the story proposes as a source of enlightenment.

While it is certainly not without mockery and brutality, the story offers a benign attitude to the failings of the woodcutter and his family, rather than the critical satire we expect from Foster. The woodcutter’s physical predicament is common to us all, as we go about consuming and polluting the natural world. The trials of the woodcutter are narrated with a comic relish, and the final scenes when the woodcutter and the saint climb up the Holy Isle, the saint unable to feel it, the woodcutter unable to see it, convey a sense of magical revelation: ‘This was the most beautiful place ever he had seen, if only he could see it. Sharp-eyed Bran, who had climbed to the highest peak on the white island, saw two male figures, one atop the other roaming around in the sky above the sea’ (202).

The Land Where Stories End offers a sophisticated contemplation of the paradox of human existence and desire for spiritual understanding, in an apparently simple form. This form accommodates Foster’s pursuit of philosophy and abstraction, rather than the irritations of the complex social world that dominate his other novels. No matter how unpalatable we may find its Manichean view of the battle between the Flesh and the Spirit, or its insistence on the spiritual pre-eminence of men over women, the novel asks readers to recognise the destructive nature of all human activity and provides a tentative consolation for the impossibility of living without damaging the natural world.

In The New Country suggests a degree of white envy for those of Aboriginal heritage who can claim some spiritual connection to the geographical features of Australia, and for the Irish who continue to live on their own sacred island. At the same time, it mocks the tenuous nature of such claims from people long disconnected with Aboriginal culture and religion, and it declares that Ireland has also lost its sacred connections as international tourism reduces it to just another exotic location. There appears to be nowhere to turn for white Australians seeking some spiritual relationship to the physical world in which they live, and little hope for Aborigines living for generations away from their homelands. The dilapidated, moribund New Country belongs to Aboriginal claimants, the Old Country to tourists. In *The Land Where Stories End* the fairytale form allows Foster to leave Australia and its spiritual failings for a parallel world of an imagined seventh-century Ireland. His woodcutter must endure the consequences of his physical appetites and the mortality of his body but is granted a kind of enlightenment as he climbs blindly above the sea with the saint on his shoulders. Here Foster appears to be claiming Ireland as his sacred place, with the real island of Skellig Michael as inspiration. From this perspective, the white settler society of Australia shares the spiritual deprivation of the Indigenous people—both have been deprived of any ancient connection with nature, exacerbated by the industrial, technological and economic development that drives the latest version of colonialism. But a return to the place of origin and a reversion in time is impossible; *The Land Where Stories End* can only be reached by telling stories.

Writing itself appears to offer access to that sacred world, substituting an imaginary place and time for the sacred sites, forever lost to the colonial settler and the colonised indigene. Just as in *The Glade* Foster conjured up the disappearing forests of Australia with his excessive, incantatory lists of plant names, here he writes his way into his own imagination, stimulated by the experience of Skellig Michael. But, it is a more abstract world than the world of Foster's earlier fiction, no longer detailing the specificities of Australian life and language that have taken so much of his attention and care.

Foster continues to describe himself as a 'colonial mongrel' with its implication that there can be no purity of cultural allegiance and no single spiritual heritage for any Australians ('Aboriginality and the Hope of Art', 30). The progression in his novels from aggressive declarations of Australian national difference from Britain and the USA, to an awareness of the failure of white Australia to establish a spiritual relationship to the land it occupies, parallels a shift in the wider intellectual community. A white Australian writer, particularly a man, can no longer express the exuberant national pride evident in much of the

writing of the 1970s and early 1980s. Foster takes his own idiosyncratic path to examine this shift, and to seek some slight hope and consolation through writing.

WORKS CITED

- Dutton, Geoffrey. Papers. National Library of Australia, MS 7285, Series 2, Box 14, Folder 104.
- Foster, David. 'Aboriginality and the Hope of Art: Explaining Australia in Arkansas'. *Quadrant* 49.11 (Nov 2005): 22-31.
- . *Moonlite*. Melbourne: Macmillan, 1981.
- . *The Glade Within the Grove*. London: Fourth Estate, 1996; Sydney: Random House, 1996.
- . *In the New Country*. London: Fourth Estate, 1999.
- . *The Land Where Stories End as narrated by the angel depicted in 'Madonna con Bambino e due angeli' by Filippo Lippi*. Sydney: Duffy and Snellgrove, 2001.
- . *Studs and Nogs: Essays 1987-98*. Milsons Point: Random House/Vintage, 1999.
- . 'Red band adventures'. *Australian Author* 31.2 (August 1999): 8-9.
- Harris, Stephen. 'David Foster's *Moonlite*: Re-viewing History as Satirical Fable—Towards a Post-Colonial Past'. *Westerly* 42.1 (1997): 71-88.
- Riemer, Andrew. 'An Exhilarating Ramble Round the Collapse of Rural Life'. *Sydney Morning Herald* 10 April 1999 Spectrum: 9.
- Wootten, Hal. 'No room for racist sneers'. *Sydney Morning Herald* 3 July 1997: 25.