

## Moving Among Strangers, Darkly

Gabrielle Carey

My study, says my partner, has transformed into a shrine to Randolph Stow.

On one wall there is a photo of Stow as a stunningly handsome, James Dean-like, young man. He is looking quizzical as he gazes at the Western Australian landscape around him and appears to be wondering, as he did in so many of his books, how to make sense of his familiar, yet profoundly alien surroundings. Immediately it brings to mind—at least, brings to my mind—the first line of *Tourmaline*. ‘I say we have a bitter heritage, but that is not to run it down.’

Displayed on my bookshelf are seven Stow first editions. The first in the line-up is *Outrider*, with plates by Sidney Nolan. The second is *Tourmaline*, also with a specifically-designed Nolan cover, and the third, *Midnite*, with drawings by Ralph Steadman. Then there is *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea* (dust jacket slightly torn), *A Haunted Land* (perfect condition) and *The Bystander*, with my favourite cover design of all: a tall blackboy, as we called them when I was a child, now known as the grass tree, or, even more correctly, the Xanthorrhoea. I am currently trying to justify increasing our mortgage by \$7000 so I can purchase *Songs of Vagabond Scholars*, a collection of medieval

poetry translated by Stow with lithographs by Donald Friend. I am enamoured of the title; perhaps because a vagabond scholar seems such a beautiful and appropriate description of the writer himself. Number 7 of the one hundred copies produced of this collectible is being auctioned in Melbourne tomorrow. Should I call now and leave an absentee bid? My partner is not convinced the shrine needs any more Stow relics. But he hasn't seen *Songs of Vagabond Scholars*.

The desk is also covered with Stow papers and paraphernalia: books, articles, and one special folder that holds a few letters and a number of cards—precious correspondence that I was privileged to have with Stow over the years. Most precious of all are copies of scanned letters from Stow to my mother. One when he was in his final year of high school; another while at university. Apparently, during this period, they corresponded regularly. Unfortunately, only two letters remain; of these, one is torn and incomplete. When I saw it I immediately understood the frustration of the archaeologist; how was I to make sense of these fragments? Piece together a life-long friendship from only two surviving documents; written by a renowned recluse to the most inscrutable being I've ever known, my mother?

As children, my older sister, my younger brother and I, were all given *Midnite* to read or had it read to us. For me, it was one of the pivotal reading moments of my young life, equally significant as *The Little Prince* and *The Red Balloon*. I have since read *Midnite* to my daughter and then my son, and several times again for myself. The book never disappoints. Not just funny; it is LOL, as the teenagers say. Not just insightful—about Australian history and the Australian character—it is positively wise. And of course, exquisitely written. (I pity the poor primary school children of contemporary times whose library shelves are jammed with the over-production of Paul Jennings and Morris Gleitzman rather than this masterpiece of Randolph Stow's.)

When I first read *Midnite* I didn't know that my mother had grown up with the author. (Despite the fact that the scene in the book

where a drunken bushranger is caught by a Mr Macpherson is an anecdote directly based on my great-great-grandfather's discovery of the infamous Moondyne Joe in his Houghton cellars.) Even when my mother did mention her connection to Stow, she told me very little. I understood almost nothing about what had bonded her to a man she hadn't seen for decades, with whom she'd exchanged Christmas cards for fifty years; the man she called Mick, even though his name was Randolph. And no matter how much I tried to probe about her friendship with Stow, my mother remained resistant to interrogation. For a while I fantasised that they were secret sweethearts and lamented this great missed opportunity. If only my mother had married the man she had grown up with and been so fond of! I might have had a writer for a father! We might have remained on the Houghton Estate and become wealthy, land-owning, fashionable vintners! With hundreds of acres of grapevines, an orchard and a river running through the backyard! Not only that, I might have had someone to tell me stories—the proper family-lore that I longed for and that both my parents seemed so reticent to reveal, or perhaps were just incapable of telling in the way I wanted them told—as stories, with characters and dialogue and quirky, idiosyncratic details. Stories, in other words, in the way that Stow would have told them.

That short-lived fantasy was before I was aware of the twelve-year age difference between Mick and my mother, or the fact that Stow wasn't the marrying type. I suspect now that what bonded them was a certain sense of being outsiders in that conservative and parochial world of rural Western Australia. Although neither of them may have realised it consciously as they were growing up, both were desperate to escape. I wasn't destined to claim my tiny place among the landed gentry after all.

The last time I was in Perth—(the last time, that is, before my recent trip to attend UWA's superb Stow send-off in August)—was in March 2003 for my aunt's funeral. My willingness to accompany my mother

to farewell her sister wasn't all duty and self-sacrifice. I was keen to see Western Australia again, to visit Oakover, my mother's family home on the Houghton Estate since 1859, where I'd spent two long, hot Christmas holidays as a child. Ever since I'd realised the extent of my heritage after studying the label of the Houghton Centenary Port—a gift for my fortieth birthday from a friend, Elizabeth Webby, oddly enough, who had hurriedly grabbed a bottle from her cellar on the way out to my party)—I had been itching for more information. But most of all, I was intrigued by the idea of catching up with long lost relatives. I'd always felt the loss of our huge extended family on the other side of the continent. They were my kin, my tribe, my mob, and yet I wouldn't recognise any of them in the street. And they wouldn't recognise me. Perhaps they wouldn't want to recognise me. I got the impression that they considered our family as outsiders, as not really belonging to the clan. There had been very little communication over the years—only the rare Christmas card—and no phonecalls or flowers or get-well messages during my mother's life-threatening illness. I couldn't imagine why my mother was so marginalised by her own family. Had there been some serious family split? Or was it just because she'd married a left-wing activist? They had disagreed with my mother's stance on the Vietnam War of course but in those days everyone did. Surely that wasn't the reason for staying out of touch now. Perhaps it was just that my mother had been away for so long that they'd simply forgotten her. Or perhaps her leaving Western Australia permanently was interpreted as a rejection of them. After all, no-one had forced her to go; she was the one who'd decided to leave the vineyard, the church, her family.

Outside the arrivals lounge of Perth airport in 2003 the air felt clean, the atmosphere as unhurried as a country town, especially for someone who'd come directly from her inner-west ghetto in Sydney. The taxi took us through dry flat suburbs, driving without the slightest stress or urgency. I peered out the window and watched as small houses were gradually replaced by large properties. We were approaching the Swan Valley, my mother's homeland. Grapevines stretched from

the road down to the river. Boutique wineries advertised tastings and fresh table grapes.

We turned off the highway and stopped briefly before a set of ornate gates. A large sign read: ‘Sandalford Roe Estate, est. 1840.’ Below a plaque showed the Roe family crest: a reindeer surrounded by grapevines with a scroll underneath reading: ‘Vincit Veritas’. The gate opened automatically and we drove down a smooth, well-maintained road.

Until that moment I had only been dimly aware of the second wine dynasty associated with my family. I had known, of course, that we were heading for my Uncle John’s house—Uncle John was the husband of my recently deceased Aunt Margaret—but I didn’t realise he was *the* John Roe, descendant of the first Surveyor-General of W.A., John Septimus Roe. Neither did I realise that he had only recently retired as general manager of Sandalford Wines, or that although he’d sold his interest in the business, he still owned and harvested all the vines, still lived on the property and was probably a multi-millionaire. These are the kind of factual details that my mother had always been known for omitting, even before she had a brain tumour.

Now it was all there in front of me: the acres of vines, the huge winery swarming with visitors, the Sandalford label on signboards everywhere. We drove past the entrance to the Sandalford gardens and restaurant, past the busy carpark full of tourist buses, past the cellars, processing factory and warehouse, past the Sandalford ferry that brought visitors from the city to the Sandalford jetty for wine tastings and wedding receptions.

‘You didn’t tell me we were staying on the actual vineyard!’ I whispered to my mother.

‘Didn’t I? You’ve been here before though...’

‘I don’t think so. I only remember Oakover.’

‘But surely we visited?’ she responded vaguely.

‘Maybe. I don’t remember. I was ten.’

‘Was it that long ago?’

The next morning I woke early, still trying to adjust to the time difference, and decided to go for a walk along the river before breakfast. Outside dawn had just broken. Clouds of mist were rising slowly from the river, swirling and dissolving like steam from a silver mirror. A line of ducklings trailed out from their homes on the riverbank, gliding smoothly over the reflections of river gums. I walked down to the Sandalford jetty and peered into the muddy brown water of the Swan. River skaters sat lightly on the water's edge, their thin legs pressing tiny indentations into the skin of the river. This was the same river I had paddled in with my brother during our holidays at Oakover. It was so quiet and constant, so fluid and yet so permanent. I watched as a canoe glided past, oars dipping into the glassy water, dipping and lifting, the edges of the paddle streaming in sunlit ribbons. My mother had also paddled down that river in a canoe, more than sixty years ago, with her sister Margaret. I too, had inherited a love of canoeing; the way a canoe could glide in silence, how unintrusively it sat on the water. I watched enviously as the early-morning canoeist disappeared around a bend; the broken surface of the water returning to a flat, golden mirror of riverside reflections, the stillness and silence regained. The beauty of the Swan was one of the few stories my mother had told, over and over; that morning was the first time I really understood what she'd been missing.

One of the other stories she told over and over was about Randolph Stow. It was from his days as a schoolboy at Guildford Grammar School, situated on the other side of the Swan River from Oakover. 'I'll never forget,' she'd say, 'how he swam across the river one afternoon, holding his school clothes high in one hand.' Presumably Stow had stripped down to his underwear and then paddled, one-handed, across the muddy water, so he could visit Joan, my mother, and her family. Indeed, I got the impression that during that time in Perth he was virtually adopted by the Fergusons. I never quite understood why he seemed to be such a regular visitor or how the families were connected. So I simply explained it to myself by imagining he must have felt very alone, being so far from his home

in Geraldton, and that the Fergusons were somehow acquainted with the Stows in the way that all the old established families of Western Australia seemed to know each other. Little did I understand just how small and interconnected the Swan River Colony families really were. First cousins married first cousins (my grandparents), second cousins married second cousins (my parents, Joan and Alex) and absolutely everyone, it seemed, was in some way related to everyone else, as confirmed in a letter I received from Stow in 2009.

*When I was last in Australia, all of 35 years ago, I was sifting through some stuff I'd left in my mother's house, and found an old newspaper cutting about Joan and Alex's forthcoming wedding. It said that the bride and groom were related, through the Rev. George Sweeting. I knew the name well, as he had an Academy at which my grandfather Sewell was a boarder in the 1880s, on or near the site of the later Guildford Grammar School...Of course, relationships like that were typical of the old Swan River Colony families. My grandfather's oldest sister (of an age to be his mother) married a Brown: so the Sewells had Brown cousins, who had other Brown cousins (such as my housemaster at Guildford, Bim Brown), who had Ferguson cousins. (I remember overhearing Bim on the telephone to his cousin, your grandfather, saying: 'Don, I can't have you sending that boy back to school drunk'). Also, my grandfather and Douglas Ferguson of Houghton were devoted friends, in the Victorian manner of Tennyson and Hallam. My grandmother remembers visiting Douglas after he'd been ill and said: 'I never saw two men who so loved each other; they were quite funny.'*

And the connections continued. Since my recent trip to WA, I have learnt that my aunt regularly babysat Stow as a toddler, that my grandmother played tennis with Stow's grandmother, that, as a schoolboy, Stow spent a summer holiday with my aunts at the Carey beach house in Geraldton and that, during Stow's time boarding at Guildford Grammar, Oakover was like a second home.

*One year, I think 1951, I was able to repay your grandfather's hospitality a little: there was a strike of grape-pickers for more pay, and he recruited me and another Guildford boy to help out. There possibly still exists a 1951 Houghton White in which I, and Craig Mackintosh, had a hand.*

The Randolph Stow vintage. If only the man and his work were as valued as Western Australian wine. There is a C. W. Ferguson Cabernet Malbec to commemorate my great grandfather, there is an entire Jack Mann range to memorialise the 'legendary' Houghton winemaker. There is even the idiotically-named 'Bandit' Savingnon Blanc to commemorate Moondyne Joe, complete with prison-garb arrows on the screwcap. Ferguson, Mann, Moondyne Joe; these are all names that probably have some vague resonance for most Western Australians. And yet, if you mention the name Stow, most people, or at least, most people outside academic circles, look at you blankly. And when the region's—nay, possibly the nation's—greatest writer dies, one might be forgiven for feeling that the ripples barely register on the national consciousness.

It could be argued—indeed, has been argued by several editors I've spoken to about publishing some kind of recognition of Stow—that obituaries have appeared in most major newspapers, that such-and-such mentioned him on their blog, that so-and-so put a note on their website. In other words, what more could I want in an era when old Aussie authors are dropping every other week? I can tell you what I want. I want to know where this man sits in our cultural-literary consciousness. I want to know whether we are fully aware and appreciative of the great literary inheritance that his work embodies. Or is this a gift that we have left half-opened as we rush to celebrate the Young, the New and the Not-so-difficult?

When Henry Lawson died he was given the first State funeral. When Patrick White died we held public rallies to preserve his house as a museum. When Randolph Stow died, his old university held a magnificent memorial event but his books remain out of print and unread and it feels as though he were a ghost long before his time. And yet, isn't Stow as much a key to the Australian character and psyche as Lawson or White? Maybe the truth is that where White and Lawson reflect the Australian consciousness, Stow reflects more of the mysterious, dark and difficult-to-know unconscious. If that's the case, then his work warrants our attention all the more.

I will be forever grateful to my mother for many things but particularly for introducing my siblings and me to the work of Stow, which we, in turn, passed on to our children. He is truly part of our Western Australian, as well as our national heritage. And it is testimony to his greatness that even in an Australia that has transformed since the days Stow decided to abandon it, his books still penetrate. Indeed, in some ways, I believe they are more relevant and prescient than ever. Stow was, after all, a kind of seer, a visionary, perhaps even a prophet. Maybe the truth is that, like Joyce, we are still learning to be Stow's contemporaries.

Amid the paraphernalia of the Stow shrine, there is one item of correspondence that proves to me, more than any other, that Stow was a magician. It is a letter written by my six-year-old niece (now seventeen).

*Dear Mick,*

*I really enjoyed reading Midnite. I think I enjoyed it because of the names of the characters and places. Do you have any children? How did you get the idea for the book? And did you get the idea of Mrs Chiffle from Grandma?*

*I usually ride my bike to school so just when I get to the paddock I leave it at her [Grandma's] house. There is a cat next door to her that keeps coming in but can't talk.*

*Grandma gave me the book to read. Lots of love, Sinead.*

At the bottom of the letter are some carefully drawn sketches of the animal characters in *Midnite*; Khat, Red Ned, Dora, Gyp and Major.

Stow's postcard in return is enigmatic. Polite and gracious as always, he carefully ignores all of his young reader's queries.

*Dear Sinead,*

*Thank you very much for your letter and for the lovely pictures of the animals in Midnite. I liked the smile on the cat. I have a black and white cat who is getting a bit old now (she's 13) but is as cheeky as when she was a kitten. When the vicar came to see me she used to sink her claws into his leg, which he didn't like very much. She was a stray kitten, and she picked me up in a pub called 'The Billy', one hot night when all the doors were open, so her name is Billy. In India that means 'she-cat'.*

*All good wishes to you and your Grandma.*

*Mick Randolph Stow*

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# westerly

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Tribute to  
Randolph Stow,  
including two  
previously  
unpublished poems

Randolph Stow

Randolph 'Mick' Stow  
1935 – 2010

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Yet from their circular continuous sweep  
From start to start. Where going is home-turning  
Nothing is lost, what's won is all to keep.

Randolph Stow  
from 'Merry-Go-Round'



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