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Antipodean wanderer in the Mediterranean

MELISSA BOYDE

Diana Wood Conroy

The Fabric of the Ancient Theatre: Excavation Journals from Cyprus and the Eastern Mediterranean

Moufflon Publications Ltd. (distributed in Australia by the Australian Book Group), 2004

394 pp \$60.00 RRP

The opening image of the writer as a young girl in Australia putting together jigsaw pieces to form an image of antiquity is a metaphor for what happens in Diana Wood Conroy's book *The Fabric of the Ancient Theatre*.

Middy. The car drove off and I was left alone at the site of old Paphos. The place seemed oddly familiar – perhaps the light reminded me of the jigsaw puzzle of the Mediterranean coast that I had so obsessively put together as a child, and then scattered to be reassembled again.

The book gathers together a range of experience, reading, skill and observation drawn from Conroy's diverse background as a tapestry weaver, an archaeologist, an Aboriginal art adviser and an academic who has published widely in these fields. Like Conroy's work, the book crosses a number of genres, moving between travel book, a journal, field notes of various digs and a meditation on the relationship between past and present. It is also a love story, beautifully told – for the land, the ancient sites, the diversity of cultures, and for her father's journey there as a young soldier.

Conroy's story commences in 1995 in old Paphos, Cyprus, where she went as artist-in-residence to the excavation site of an early Hellenistic theatre, a place she returned to again and again. The leader of the excavation was Professor Richard Green of the University of Sydney

who had been invited by the director of the Department of Antiquities in Cyprus to excavate the ancient theatre site which dates from about 300 BC and was in use for approximately 700 years. Early on in the excavation the team uncovered diverse artefacts and fragments: ‘a bit of terracotta dog figurine with traces of a hair pattern’, ‘large animal bones’, ‘a small bronze figurine of Athena ... hand raised to hold a spear’, and ‘a tiny fragile glass perfume vessel’. Over a period of seven years Conroy worked on making visual records of artefacts such as these. One of her principal tasks was to study the wall paintings of the *parados*, the passage leading into the theatre. These frescoes are related to textile images of ribbons and drapery in the overall decorative scheme.

Accounts of this dig at Paphos are interwoven with images from contemporary Cypriot life – Conroy is the traveller describing the landscape: ‘the deep silence ... one hawk hovering’; the food: ‘a delicious lunch of fresh *horiatico* or country bread, fetta, fat black olives from Athens, tomatoes and cucumbers’; local customs: ‘the feast of Paskha (Easter) approaches ... and a constant stream of black-clothed women head towards St Mary Covered With Cloud’; and the weather: ‘winter has returned with an icy wind that blows dust and grit’. In Cairo she gives glimpses of the city’s past and present – the accommodation: ‘Now I’m sitting in bed in the Victoria Hotel in Cairo, where Bertrand Russell once stayed’, or inside the Coptic Museum: ‘rooms of figured textiles, dense intricate carvings and painted heads ... Curving wefts outlined vigorous gestures – Heracles grappling a lion, a Nereid waving from a shell’, or in a taxi: ‘suddenly we were moving through a cemetery of imitation houses for the dead, terracotta houses with no roofs, open to the sky ... Children were playing in those unreal streets in the dusk with no lights, a make-believe town.’

The narrative of the archaeological dig, written over seven years, brings the ancient theatre site to life, referring to it as ‘a body, worked on day to day, with a life of its own’ and describing the impact on the workers who, after long days digging, experience vivid dreams. She recounts the performance theorist Peggy Phelan’s work on Elizabethan theatres, which suggests that the theatre conformed to ‘the convoluted shape of a stomach, into which the audience was ingested, and from which it was excreted’. Interestingly, Conroy notes that ‘the entrances and exits of ancient theatres are known as *vomitoria*, because they eject the audience from the curved solar plexus of the *cavea* seats’. The past, the present, life, death, illness and dreams are seamlessly interwoven in Conroy’s evocation of the ruins:

If the theatre can be a metaphor of the body, in dreams the house or the building stands for the self. Visiting the stony ruins of the city of Kourion not far from Paphos, uninhabited since the seventh century, Grahame, a well-known theatre personality from Sydney, starts a conversation about a mutual, once dear, friend, an actor. He is now very ill – ‘Not AIDS, arthritis? A very sick boy, but what a voice’. To talk about him is almost like remembering the dead, in this dead city washed with light, perched on the cliff above the great arc of the sea. Its joints also are lying in pieces.

Not surprisingly, given the archaeological emphasis, the book is filled with allusions to classical mythology. The theatre was dedicated to Aphrodite ‘the goddess of sailors ... born from the sea, from the semen of the genitals of Uranus, thrown into the sea by the Titan, Cronus’, and Conroy provides details of the myths surrounding her which vary enormously, from celebration of her divinity to denigration based on rumours of temple prostitution dating from the fifth century BC.

Conroy displays great interest in another mythological figure, Ariadne, whose gift of thread to Theseus enabled him to find his way into and out of the labyrinth. While these events supposedly occurred at Knossos on Crete, in one mythological tradition Ariadne landed on Cyprus and died there. Conroy writes evocatively about the steep acropolis of Amathus perched high overlooking the sea, according to Plutarch the place where Ariadne died in childbirth:

I sat alone on the site and drew in the wind, the sketchbook almost blown out of my hand ... Looking down from the acropolis to the sea, you can see the trapezoid dark shape of the old harbour floating in the blue, now sunk below water level. The patterns of myths and ceremonies, of deities and saints are like that dark shape below the surface of the water.

This is a very rich book filled with literary allusions. Conroy cites, amongst others, Lawrence Durrell writing on Aphrodite, and Sappho’s prayer to her which begins ‘Immortal Aphrodite on your richly decorated throne, beguiling daughter of Zeus, I beg you, honoured goddess, do not crush my heart with pain and anguish.’ As well, interspersed throughout the journal are various accounts from ancient to more recent histories, such as E M Forster’s on the notable woman scholar Hypatia who was lynched and killed on her way to a lecture in 415 AD

by the Christian Patriarch Theophilos and his army of monks – ‘with her the Greece that is a spirit expired, the Greece that tried to discover truth and create beauty and that had created Alexandria.’

Conroy’s journal is illustrated with an array of the author’s archaeological drawings, watercolours and tapestries. Among her drawings are images of flowers growing wild in the landscape. She makes lists of plants growing on the site:

... almond, lemon, terebinth, carob, pomegranate, prickly pear, olive, bay and palm. The smaller plants are yellow daisies, poppies, asphodel, wormwood, a few orchids, white clusters of wild garlic, a small yellow pea, a tiny pink pea, purple irises, and in rock crevices, cyclamens. Also I’ve found sorrel and rocket, and a bluebell ...

and weaves into these anecdotes culled from early Greek writers, such as Pythagoras’s belief that eating asphodel and mallow, considered ‘perfect natural food, such as the gods might have eaten’, showed human affinity with the deities, or Dioscurides who stresses that rocket ‘being eaten raw in any quantity doth provoke venery’ (an aphrodisiac).

Two of Conroy’s tapestries, details of which are illustrated, pick up threads from the past. In one, part of a triptych on the theme ‘Sarajevo’, an inscription taken from a plaster cast of a memorial to those killed in the Persian wars (480 BC) is figured in white letters, both in Greek and English, on a black background: ‘These by the Hellespont lost their glorious youth in battle’.

Conroy’s father was a young Australian soldier in Alexandria in 1941, just prior to the battle of El Alamein, and another tapestry, *Alexandria*, blends an image taken from antiquity – a mosaic of cubes in brilliant colours fading into darkness – with an inscription in his handwriting across the top: ‘At midnight the regiment marched to a camp at Ikingi Maryut nine miles from Alexandria.’ Retracing the steps of her father Conroy sets off for Ikingi Maryut but finds a different kind of destruction on the way. She is transported

... across a devastated landscape, along a putrid canal, with abandoned concrete shells of old factories, full of building rubbish ... People had set up forges beside the road, mending car parts, using old car bodies as improvised workshops. A truck dumped more rubble beside the road. Four older men sat in chairs amongst all of this, talking and drinking tea.

Everyone stared at me in the horse-drawn cab so far from the tourist route

...

Through writing and through her practice as a tapestry weaver Conroy blends motifs from antiquity, memory, history and emotion, placing these in the present through her art. She brings to her Mediterranean wanderings a distinctively Antipodean perspective – not only through the journey into her father’s wartime experiences so far from home but also in the rich comparisons her knowledge of Australian Indigenous cultures brings to her appreciation of ancient life in Cyprus and the Eastern Mediterranean:

I come from another kind of country, *terra australis*, on the other foot of the world. Antipodean, where the Aboriginal past is unimaginably old, expressed in geological time frames such as ‘before the last ice age’. Living with Aboriginal people who have a matter-of-fact relationship to such aeons of time taught me another kind of tentative kinship to the Greek past I studied as a young woman. People in Yirrkala or on Bathurst Island in northern Australia have an intersecting relationship with a mythical period that allows them to move in and out of the present, and to perceive the past as a kind of doubling of the present, a faint shadow or mirrored gleam in the most ordinary activities.

The vision of the book – the piecing together of fragments of the ancient past and intertwining them with the complexities of everyday life in the present – stems, at least in part, from Conroy’s experience working over many years with Aboriginal artists.

Like a jigsaw puzzle *The Fabric of the Ancient Theatre* has many parts. But unlike the reproduced image that emerges in a jigsaw Conroy’s view of the ancient theatre offers multiple dimensions which, as an artist, she draws through a vivid and original evocation of place.

Melissa Boyde