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Abstract

I arrived in Western Australia to live as a six-year-old child in 1949. The plane from Melbourne - where I was born and where my father was a young up-and-coming executive with the Dunlop Rubber Company - was a DC-6. With stops in Adelaide and Kalgoorlie for fuel, the journey took 12 hours. My mother thought we were going to the end of the world; my grandparents did too and our departure from Melbourne was a very tearful one - at least for the adults. My mother was widely thought of among her friends as very 'brave' for agreeing to set up house in Perth. Certainly in 1949 the prospect of living in Perth, WA, was not one to excite wild envy among the eastern Australian middle class. The burghers of Melbourne thought of WA, if at all, as wilderness - sand and snakes and a sea-coast bordering on quite the wrong ocean, the Indian Ocean, not the benign Pacific that they knew. God, what was next? Africa and Asia and all those sorts of places.

The Savage Crows: A Personal Chronology

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I remember vividly our arrival in Perth. It was about 10 p.m., quite dark and we stayed the night at the home of another company employee, a fat, jocular, teasing man. Before I went to bed he took my brother and me to the window and pointed outside to the darkness. 'There are blackboys out there watching you,' he said, ominously.

It took my brother and me, despite our fatigue, a long time to get to sleep. Next morning we learned that the 'blackboys' were, in fact, a species of grass-tree very common in Western Australia, a form of local vegetation with a black trunk and a bristly head. It was my first example, that I can remember, of the laconic Australian sense of humour, also of the benign form of racism that I have come to associate with Western Australia.

Both conditions have had a strong influence on me: the black humour on the one hand and the hyper-sensitivity to racism directed against the Aborigines, on the other. Both conditions, as it happens, are aired fairly thoroughly in my first novel, *The Savage Crows*, and much of it relates to WA. I thought I would discuss that novel today, despite a vague feeling of enchantment at re-examining the book eight years later, as it is possibly the only one you have had the opportunity to read.

It might be of passing interest to anyone here who has read *The Savage Crows* for me to reveal that my original title was *The Genocide Thesis*. I conceived the novel with this title and it remained the title throughout the six months of research and twelve months it took me to write it, right past the galley proof stage. It became *The Savage Crows* at the death-rattle, as it were; at the last stage of publication.

Naturally I saw the original title as representing my intentions as clearly as I thought possible and that the two threads of a novel called *The Genocide Thesis*, the 19th century story and the 20th century story, had a different emphasis and confluence in a book called *The Savage Crows*.

The story of Stephen Crisp — from the cradle to that time in life when the horror of returning to the dust from whence he came begins to torment him — was well served by the original title. Crisp, despite his being — as the doyen of Australian historians, Professor Manning Clark described him — a man 'with a perpetual uproar in the trousers', begins his research at that point in his life when, as Professor Clark says, 'like the author of the Book of Ecclesiastes, he has seen all the evil done under the sun, and is almost ready to say that all is vanity and vexation of spirit'.

Perhaps Crisp himself would put it more trenchantly than that, but obviously he is obsessed with mortality.

A brief example of what I am getting at: The stripping of Crisp, the modern protagonist, of paternity and progeny, not to mention fraternity, I would have thought provided an obvious parallel to the condition of the Tasmanian Aborigines, a unique and separate race who were wiped out by the early English settlers within one generation. It seems to have escaped notice by reviewers — the only feedback an author has — so perhaps the hammer-blow of the original title would have nudged them a bit.

If I am still moaning about it, why was the title changed? Because Williams Collins, my publishers in London and Sydney, thought the reading public would imagine *The Genocide Thesis* was either (a) an academic tract or (b) another book on Hitler, and presumably stay away in droves.

A first novelist stands on very shaky ground, so, after some heated argument, with the author declining some suggested alternatives from the publisher like *A White Horse Gallops Darkly* or some such obscurely poetic title from the Oxford Book of Quotations, I decided on *The Savage Crows*. It was, after all, the name of George Augustus Robinson's fictitious book, and a chapter title already, and it pleased everybody — especially them.

Nowadays I think it is a good, perhaps even better, title, and anyway I found the insight into the power and thinking of book salesmen very useful.

Back to the personal chronology of *The Savage Crows*. The story of the Tasmanian Aborigines had been on my mind for about twenty years, ever since I visited Melbourne Museum as a nine or ten-year old and saw a display of their relics. I remember seeing a photograph of William Lanney, the Last Man, and Truganini, the last woman and Tasmanian of either sex, and a few frayed and chipped shell trinkets, and another photograph of Aborigines, with faces quite unlike those I was used to seeing around Perth, lined up on Flinders Island where they had been exiled in the mid-19th century. They were waiting to die, passively frowning, dressed up in English suiting and smoking pipes, men and women alike.

The fact that this episode of our history was deliberately kept out of our school history books by generations of English history-attuned Australian educators also irritated me over the years. Later, as a journalist, I gained a first-hand experience of prejudice against Aborigines, and their general condition in Australian society. Eventually I came to see the subject as the complete Australian backdrop. More than that I saw it as the backdrop of the wider novel I wanted to write. With all the brashness of the youthful writer I applied to the then embryonic Literature Board of the Australia Council and was awarded a literary fellowship. I was probably lucky that two members of that first board, the chairman, Geoffrey Blainey, and Manning Clark, the Australian historians, were not averse to the fictional proposition I was putting forward. Anyway, it changed my life. I left my job as a newspaper columnist and literary editor of *The Australian* newspaper and became a fiction writer.

Immediately I became aware of the difficulties of combining fact and fiction. Not only did the historical research take longer than I had imagined, but the facts were soon in danger of creating a momentum of their own and diverting me from my course. As the gothic pile of bodies grew and grew I worried that I would end up writing the sort of thesis that obsessed Stephen Crisp. Or a sort of Australian *Bury My Heart at*

Wounded Knee which I patently didn't want, as important as these sorts of consciousness-raising exercises might be.

My intention was to try and get Australia *whole* (which sounds extraordinarily pretentious as I say this nine years later) to capture the bland, blunt-edged randomness of *our* period — as evidenced by Crisp's life and travels and contemporaries in Western and Eastern Australia — and to show the civilization with which we have replaced the life of the Aborigines.

Boiling down my intentions even further, they were, I suppose, to write a novel about guilt, certainly an old enough theme. In this case guilt with a capital G, conscious and sub-conscious guilt, guilt on a personal and national scale, working through one man's private guilts to the most guilt-inducing incident in our short two centuries of history — the genocide of the Tasmanians.

This, to me, was the Australian story.

What I am about to say now might seem at loggerheads with all that. For the late 20th century liberal writer there is a problem here, especially for the writer of an Australian novel which takes up the country's most important social issue, as *The Savage Crows* does.

Despite its having within it what could be crudely described as a 'message', I must say, and this may be misinterpreted, that the general improvement of society and even the betterment of social conditions within our own flawed and fortunate country, while of daily personal concern to me, is *not* my basic general motivation as a fiction writer.

This is a constant conflict, in this novel and other writing I have done, but I still believe I choose, as John Updike calls it, 'accuracy of execution over nobility of purpose'.

For what it's worth, I am much more at home with challenging rather than propounding ideology. I might add, however, that if my novels — and the second one, *A Cry in the Jungle Bar*, is deeply involved in Asia, have any social value at all, I think this would be strengthened, not lessened, by this position.

Returning to the chronology of *The Savage Crows*, I was going to freely interpret the historical data and not be bound unduly by factual restrictions. I didn't realise how hard a task I was setting myself. Most important was the problem of balancing and mingling fact and fiction within the 19th century sections. Obviously I wanted to write the novel on my terms, to fictionalise the historical passages, if you like. I did intend, however, to treat Robinson and Truganini honestly while allowing myself great freedom of imagination in reconstructing actual events.

This freedom of imagination, I am happy to say, nevertheless resisted two great and fashionable traps. The first was romanticising Truganini, of painting her as the noble 'Princess' of 19th century newspaper editorials. The second trap I resisted was the commercial one of throwing Robinson's leech-covered Methodist thighs over her at every opportunity.

It is worth mentioning that Robinson never did write a book of his adventures in Tasmania, though he talked about doing so. The diaries he left behind, not surprisingly, generally showed him in an advantageous light as a courageous man of God, and admitted to few human frailties beyond hunger and exhaustion, certainly nothing of a carnal nature.

I felt I should presume that this would hold true in any book he wrote about himself, but as well as his fine motives I wanted to show his gradual decline into self-aggrandisement and hint at his sexual inclinations towards Truganini, his repressed sensuality and his ill-concealed and very human anger and jealousy when she ran off with other men.

Above all, I had to keep in mind that this was Stephen Crisp's story rather than George Robinson's. Certainly Crisp and Robinson could be seen as parallels. It is presumably clear to the reader, though only flickeringly to Crisp himself, that the altruistic colonial civil servant and the disenchanted television commentator are on a similar psychological track, and religious self-righteousness equates easily enough these days with agnostic intellectual arrogance.

Here I might point out that I deliberately made Crisp a TV reporter, not — simple mindedly — because I had myself been a journalist (in the print media actually) but because I saw the TV presentator of anchor-man as Modern Man, if you like. But I also saw him as our society's equivalent of the petit-bourgeois colonial lay preacher, hectoring society at large with his opinions, his earnest superficiality, and having an influence far greater than his position in society would otherwise warrant.

On this point I'd like to briefly mention the differentiation between journalism and literature. Although you see on TV and read about what's happening in the world, the Moro trial, the Falkland Islands affair, you can't discover what's happening humanly. Unless you pass it through your own soul, you can't understand it. We live in this so-called Age of Communication, which comes in the form of distracting substitutes for reality. But the reality in these times comes from art. And Australians, unlike Europeans, live in a country that has, with a few exceptions, historically ruled art off limits.

It is hard to interest readers, because they're not used to following the

human motion of character. The action and movement of the soul is not exciting. Their excitement level has shot sky high. One week the American president is shot, the next week the Pope. This would have caused a holy war two centuries ago, but not, especially in safe, isolated Australia, it only titillates the taste for sensation.

Seeing we are talking about Australian regionalism I should report to you that the scenes in the novel which took place in Western Australia *did* cause agitation, not to mention animosity, in some circles. Several localities and scenes were drawn more or less from life and I was intrigued, I guess, to give local readers even a momentary shock of identification.

I have a theory that West Australian readers, suffering from an overdose of local outback novels, are struck by such a welcome (or unwelcome) flash of recognition when a novel pops up using a provincial suburban background and familiar characters, that they are immediately convinced this is 'real life' and that the others, being full of sentiment, climate, saltbush and squatters, are what is meant by 'fiction'.

I say this because of the number of letters I received from female readers across Western Australia pointing out smugly who my fictional characters actually were. Perfect strangers accused me slyly of old relationships with women I had never heard of. Several commiserated on my squalid, slug-ridden apartment, my career failure and my loveless state and hoped things would get better for me. Interestingly, on the matter of the novel's attack on West Australian materialism or racism, there was no comment at all, neither for nor against my proposition.

I did use a fair amount of autobiographical material in *The Savage Crows*, as first novelists tend to, but not as much as West Australian readers imagine. The relationship between Stephen Crisp and his wife, and Crisp and Anna, his girlfriend, bore little resemblance to life. But much of the family scenes from the 1950s were only a minor variation on my childhood. I did also — and I was in my 20s then — share with Crisp the wish to pin life down, to 'get it *all* down, to codify experience, to try to understand everything starting with himself and working up to the nation'. Otherwise Crisp resembles me only in my worst, depressed, obsessive moments, which of course is hardly ever. It would not be true to say that the ultimate key to the novel lies in the life of the writer.

Actually, I could identify more with Richard Cullen, the buffalo expert who is the central character in *A Cry in the Jungle Bar*, my second novel, despite his greater age, conservatism, size and football ability. Maybe this is because he is an archetypal Australian, though far, I hope, from being a stereotype. He understands people even less than Crisp

does, and is doomed never to do so. They have in common the fact that they are both lustful Romantics rather than crass womanisers, and are consequently more easily disappointed.

I do share with my characters a pathetic need for our little slice of immortality, as Crisp called it — the sad wish to try to create something which may live after you. A sorry mixture of urgency, vanity and vulnerability enters into the novelist's condition here, most novelists, in fact. When I have to pin down why I want to write novels it has a lot to do with the belief or hope that I have something to say that I fail to express satisfactorily in conversation — in person — either because I'm inarticulate, or lack the time and patience or worry about the listener's boredom.

No doubt the wish to please one's parents entered my life as early as it did both Crisp's and Cullen's, and remains forever as a desire to please the world. It does me good to know that James Joyce read all his reviews avidly, for example.

There is also, with me, as for other writers, the revenge motive. I guess in my case it is actually revenge against the Western Australia of the late 50s and early 60s. John Hawkes says: 'Fiction should achieve revenge for all the indignities of our childhood. It should be an act of rebellion against the conventional pedestrian mentality around us.' I'm with him there all the way.

Briefly, I operate something like this: I have an image of something that once happened to me, or affected me, or meant something to me. I then write it because I want it to be fixed, so that I can refer to it, build on it, and maybe so that I will not have to repeat it. Most of these things have to do with human relationships, sensuality under restraint, the irony of imperfect communications.

John Hawkes has an apt, if rather precious, metaphor for this — 'of the writer serving as his own angleworm and fishing himself out of the darkness'. Kafka's view was that a novel was an axe to break the frozen sea within us.

This frozen sea, if cracked in selected areas, thus becomes the Usable Past. Every fiction writers' handbook mentions the Usable Past, certainly every fiction writer calls on it frequently. The first time I saw the expression I immediately thought: What about the *Unusable* Past, that sounds far more interesting.

What about the dirty, libellous, dangerous material? When, I wondered, does the unusable become usable? When it is cleaned up a bit? When it is censored? When does the child-beater of memory become merely a bad-tempered parent? When does your brother's old crime become a prank? When does your sister's teenage rape become a mild

assault? When does your mother's falling-down alcoholism become change-of-life? I guess it all depends on the courage and/or brutal honesty of the writer. Either those factors or the fortunate demise of the character-to-be, in which case you'll have to answer to him or her somewhere else and not, like me, every time I return to that most provincial and conservative place at the arse-end of the earth that I very much regard as my literary region.



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