The Innocent Gaze: John Boyle O'Reilly's 'The King of the Vasse'

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Abstract
Tabula rasa. The world a new leaf and on the new leaf, nothing. The white clarity of the Australian, fragile atmosphere. Without a mark, a record.1
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Australia, the Great South Land, existed in the European imagination for thousands of years before the first settlement in 1788: ‘Last sea-thing dredged by sailor Time from Space.’

Very old yet very new, the newly discovered continent represented a challenge to the imagination, a challenge to relate its time, a ‘timeless’ time, outside the history in which we locate ourselves as Europeans, and its space — to our eyes it is a great and strange emptiness, ‘terra nullius’, to ours.

By and large over time we have responded to that challenge, although the High Court’s Mabo decision and the growing pressure from Aboriginal Australians claiming their rights and our attention has begun to suggest that it is not completely resolved. My purpose in this essay, therefore, is to take us back to the first moment of encounter, as it was registered by an illustrious and adventurous Irishman, John Boyle O’Reilly, appropriately enough in a collection of essays dedicated to Doireann MacDermott.

O’Reilly (1844-89), patriot, scholar and man of letters, had been sentenced to death for his part in the abortive uprising of 1865, a sentence commuted to transportation. He arrived in Western Australia in January 1868 on the last convict ship, the Hougomont. The next year he managed to escape on an American whaler and, after many adventures, reached Boston, where he became an important figure in the Irish community and later organised the rescue from Western Australia of his five fellow Fenian prisoners, the celebrated ‘Catalpa escape’. Our interest here, however, is in one of the poems he wrote later, looking back at his experience in the bush around Bunbury in the south of Western Australia, ‘The King of the Vasse’.

This poem celebrates the experience we have been talking about – the ‘moment of verbal and visual crisis as the colonial intruder stands dumb-founded before an inexpressible landscape’. It is long, about 700 lines, part narrative, part landscape description and part meditation. It attempts
to give voice to a landscape that seems strangely mute and mysterious and to the Aboriginal culture which belongs to it, aware not only of physical strangeness but also of inhabiting a different history and world-view. Unlike most of his contemporaries, O'Reilly is evidently fascinated by the land and respectful of Aboriginal culture, even if for descriptive purposes he tends to subsume it into his own categories – the Aboriginal leader is represented as a King, for instance, and his dress is reminiscent of the legendary High Kings of Ireland:

Across his breast the aged ruler wore
A leathern thong or belt...
... a short fur loka hung
In toga-folds upon his back, but flung
From his right arm and shoulder, ever there
The spear arm of the warrior is bare.

Similarly, the ceremony in which the King asserts his power, raised aloft the sacred pearl which is his talisman, is compared with the Catholic Mass:

With both long hands he raised the enthroned gem
And turned him toward the strangers: e'en on them
Before the lovely thing, an awe did fall
To see that worship deep and mystical,
That King did with upraised god, like rev'rent priest
With elevated Host at Christian feast.

O'Reilly could be accused here of Orientalism, of course, of imposing his Eurocentric perceptions. But as Said defines it, Orientalism is a ‘relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony’ and O'Reilly’s poem is about the power he senses in the Aborigines and their culture, their domination of their environment and affinity with some spiritual power which gives them a superiority over the newly arrived Europeans.

The poem begins in the early days of settlement before the introduction of the convict system:

Ere that fair Southern land was stained with crime
Brought thitherward in reeking ships and cast
Like blight upon the coast.

The indictment of this system is strong, cast in moral rather than merely political terms – not surprisingly, in the light of O'Reilly’s own experiences:

So lives this land today beneath the sun,
A weltering plague spot, where the hot tears run,
And hearts to ashes turn, and souls are dried
Like empty kilns where hopes have parched and dried.

His focus, however, is on an earlier, more innocent time: ‘Before the young land saw the old land’s sins/ Sail up the orient ocean.’ Australia figured then as a land of promise and he describes a Swedish family who have left behind an exhausted land and failing crops to ‘... sail where south winds fan the sea,/ And happier [they] and all [their] race shall be’.

The descriptions here of the new land are different from usual. There is little sense here of the ‘weird melancholy’ which Marcus Clarke found the characteristic note of the Australian landscape. Instead, O’Reilly gives us a sense of wonder and expectation as the migrants catch their first glimpse of the land:

...Every lip
Was pouring praise for what the eye did meet -
For all the air was yellow as with heat
Above the peaceful sea and dazzling sand
That wooed each other round the beauuteous land,
Where inward stretched the slumbering forest’s green.

Similarly, the descriptions of the forest are in the best traditions of the picturesque:

Earth throbs and heaves
With pregnant prescience of life and leave;
The shadows darken ‘neath the tall trees’ scree,
While round their stems the rank and velvet green
Of undergrowth is deeper still;

Where writers like Adam Lindsay Gordon found ‘flowers that had no scent and birds that had no song’, O’Reilly finds a tropical paradise:

And there, ’mid shaded green and shaded light
The steel-blue silent birds take rapid flight
From earth to tree and tree to earth; and there
The crimson-plumaged parrot cleaves the air
Like flying fire.

The first glimpse of the Aborigines is equally legendary:

‘neath the wood
That lined the beach a crowd of watchers stood:
Tall men spear-armed, with skins like dusky night,
And aspect blended of deep awe and fright.

O’Reilly’s view here is closer to that of the first French explorers of the Western coast than to those of the British. Like them, and also, like
Captain Cook, he assumes the Enlightenment’s notion of one common humanity, the view that all creatures belong to the one God and aspire to him, the view which gave rise to the notion of the Noble Savage\(^6\) – in contrast with the neo-Darwinian view which, combined with imperial notions of the British Empire with ancient Rome and of the British as God’s chosen, tended to the Manichean division which, contrasting ‘white’ to ‘black’ as good to evil, superior to inferior, civilised to savage, and so on, led them to see the Aborigines as degraded, barely human, ‘the very zero of civilisation’, as one settler saw them, ‘the connecting link between man and the monkey tribe’.\(^7\)

Irishmen like O’Reilly had felt in their own lives the effects of such attitudes – despite their ‘white’ skins, the Irish were often regarded as little more than beasts and despised for the poverty caused by their British rulers. But his world-view was more expansive. For him the crucial questions were not merely economic or political but metaphysical. This is clear in a speech he made to a group of black Americans in 1886, not long before his death:

> The thing that most deeply afflicts the colonial American is not going to be cured by politics. You have received from politics about all it can give you. You may change the law by politics; but it is not the law that is going to insult and outrage and excommunicate every colored American for generations to come... Politics tickles the skin of the social order; but the disease lies deep in the internal organs...\(^8\)

What he is concerned with, then, is internal, the spirit’s response to the new land.

At first it seems disastrous. When they first see the coastline, Jacob, the settlers’ six year old son, utters a wailing cry and then lies lifeless in his mother’s arms. But once ashore, the aboriginal ‘King’ approaches, blesses the apparently lifeless child with his talisman, the pearl, and he comes back to life. Later, he goes off with them and becomes their King, but returns to his own people when the Aborigines turn against him.

The implications are interesting. The child’s name is Jacob, the name of the eponymous ancestor of the people of Israel. Similarly, this child is a go-between between Aborigines and non-Aborigines. His cry at the first glimpse of land is portentous:

> Like one deep spell-bound did he seem to be,  
> And moved by some strange phantasy; his eyes  
> Were wide distended as in glad surprise  
> At something there he saw.

Something wonderful seems to be beckoning him:

> ...his arms reached o’er  
> The vessel’s side as if to greet the shore,  
> And sounds came from his lips like sobs of joy.
His apparent death is rather the trance of a hierophant, about to enter into this larger mystery. So the Aboriginal ‘King’, master of the land, returns him to life and later inducts him into his people as his successor. While Jacob’s family prospers:

...Soon bending green  
Land herds and homesteads and a teeming soil  
A thousand-fold repaid their patient toil,

he has a different task:

...He chose  
The woods as home, the wild, uncultured men  
As friends and comrades.

True, the settlers do not understand this choice and mutter against him. Jacob’s identification with the people of the land is necessary for them all, it is implied. Later, it is true, the Aborigines turn against him, driving him out, destroying his power by destroying his talisman, the pearl, registering the malignancy which so soon settled on relations between Aborigines and settlers.

Stripped of this talisman which unites him with them, Jacob then returns home to his own people, like Rip Van Winkle in that other colonial myth. His family are all dead and no-one knows the white-haired old man who comes so strangely amongst them to tell over again the story of the first arrival, his ear attuned still to ‘far-off voices growing still more clear’, until his peaceful death, alone in the bush, which concludes the poem as the people gather around him:

Laid earthward on his hands; and all the place  
Was dim with shadow where the people stood.  
And as they gathered there, the arching wood  
Seemed filled with awful whisperings, and stirred  
By things unseen.

A kind of priestly figure, he has been taken away from his own family to serve some larger purpose. So it is not too far-fetched to suggest that in telling his story O’Reilly is exploring the possibilities of mutual understanding between the Aboriginal inhabitants of the land and the settlers, setting himself in this way against the disastrous division, the Manichean allegory which has for so long divided ‘white’ from ‘black’ as good from evil. This conclusion also suggests that reconciliation will only come when both groups share sense of worship – in death his hands still hold the pearl’s shrine.

This is not a major poem. Nevertheless it touches on a theme which has become important recently in Australian literature, the theme of the ‘white’ aborigine, touched on by Patrick White in A Fringe of Leaves and
more recently by David Malouf's *Remembering Babylon*. In a collection of essays dedicated to Doireann MacDermott, it is good to be able to recall the memory of an Irishman who explored this theme in his own way a hundred years ago.

NOTES

The text of the poem is to be found in James Jeffrey Roche, ed., *John Boyle O'Reilly, His Life, Poems and Speeches* (Boston: Publisher unknown, 1890), pp. 685-712.

4. Ibid.