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Abstract

When the Australian Aborigines first saw the white newcomers to their lands just over two hundred years ago, many of them believed that these pale strangers were in fact ghosts, the spirits of the dead returning to their native country and to their relations. Later a more secular view prevailed, that the whites were only men, and frequently murderous and rapacious ones at that.1 In Louis Nowra's play Inside the Island, premiered at Nimrod in August 1980, images of whiteness, and of the haunting of white Australia by its past, are given vivid metaphorical treatment. The play is in many ways itself a ghost story, illustrating the irruption of the past into the present. It is set on a remote wheat property in western New South Wales in the summer of 1912. In the second act a picnic/cricket-match is held amongst raw recruit soldiers sent to this isolated spot on peacetime manoeuvres. The cricket ground itself had previously been an Aboriginal campsite, and was granted as a 'gift' to the government by the dead father of the property's matriarch, Mrs Lillian Dawson:
When the Australian Aborigines first saw the white newcomers to their lands just over two hundred years ago, many of them believed that these pale strangers were in fact ghosts, the spirits of the dead returning to their native country and to their relations. Later a more secular view prevailed, that the whites were only men, and frequently murderous and rapacious ones at that. In Louis Nowra’s play *Inside the Island*, premiered at Nimrod in August 1980, images of whiteness, and of the haunting of white Australia by its past, are given vivid metaphorical treatment. The play is in many ways itself a ghost story, illustrating the irruption of the past into the present. It is set on a remote wheat property in western New South Wales in the summer of 1912. In the second act a picnic/cricket-match is held amongst raw recruit soldiers sent to this isolated spot on peacetime manoeuvres. The cricket ground itself had previously been an Aboriginal campsite, and was granted as a ‘gift’ to the government by the dead father of the property’s matriarch, Mrs Lillian Dawson:

He was a great man. When he first came here it was just bush – a huge plain of Aboriginals and gum trees. He got rid of the blacks, except for those whom he converted; removed the gum trees. His picture is on the wall. Painted by a very talented Aboriginal youth who died soon after.

In the course of this match, horror and chaos erupt: the soldiers, covered in flour from the wheat bins, run mad in an orgy of violence and self-mutilation, resembling the ‘angry, gleeful ghosts’ which Edward Bond speaks of in the preface to his play *Lear*. A bushfire breaks out and devastates the property. As a dramatic image the cricket match enacts not the class-based ‘sportsman-like’ rituals so often associated with the game but the return of the repressed: a haunting. As bloodied, whitened figures dance and rave in the firelight the truths obscured behind the bland pastoral myth of settlement (‘he got rid of the blacks’) are dramatized in a nightmare vision. The soldiers themselves, victors and victims both, become the tormented maddened ghosts which haunt the ancient site – and the national consciousness.
Inside the Island is a notable contribution to the list of distinguished works of recent years which have sought to come to terms with the psychic problems of national forgetfulness of history. As Bernard Smith points out in his 1980 Boyer Lectures this task is firmly on the nation’s agenda, and by its very nature is likely to remain so for some time, possibly until some concrete reparation, again in the form of another ‘gift’ of land, is made to the Aboriginal people. He concludes by quoting Peter Berger on the subject of the beginnings of societies:

All men are vultures in that they live off the agonies of the past. At the foundation of every historical society there are vast piles of corpses, victims of the murderous acts that, directly or indirectly, led to the establishment of that society. There is no getting away from this fact, and there is nothing to be done about it. It is an inevitable burden of the human condition.  

Smith goes on to place our own history in this context:

Our special Australian problem is the recency of our historical society. Between our history and our prehistory, between our Eden and the expulsion of 1788, lies a lawless terrain in which our courts stumble. ‘Primitive accumulation’, Marx once wrote, ‘plays in political economy about the same part as original sin in theology’. And this for us has been so recent.  

Nowra, for his part, believes that the drug of forgetfulness too often obscures our sense of where we have been and hence where we can go in future. His theatre addresses itself to the national psychic predicament outlined by Smith, and never more precisely – and to some observers never more confrontationally – than in Inside the Island. As he has said of the play in a subsequent interview, ‘Considering the irrational events that go on there, it is, perversely, my most lucid and logical play in its writing; and it has to be or else you lose that play’.  

Nowra speaks in the same interview of the interest he shares with Stephen Sewell in the ‘dubious and immoral’ Australian involvement in the Vietnam war, in terms which could easily be applied to Inside the Island: ‘If a writer has value, it is to remind us of our past, because if a nation practises forgetfulness then that nation is in trouble and unfortunately Australians have a tendency towards amnesia. We are at an age now when we should be able to have the courage to remember and question’.  

The ‘irrational events’ of Inside the Island turn out to have a totally rational cause. The flour graciously donated by Mrs Dawson to the troops for their picnic lunch is, as she is aware, off-white; second-class, in fact. Still, as their captain agrees, it is only for the non-coms, and ‘They won’t know the difference’. Mrs Dawson calls it, with prophetic irony, ‘a gift like the land my father gave the government’ (p. 34). The greyness of the wheat, it transpires, is due to its being infected with ergot – the fungus Claviceps purpurea. The soldiers’ violent ordeal
Sergeant Collins, Captain Henry, Private Higgs, Lillian Dawson

Lillian Dawson, Captain Henry, Susan Dawson
thus displays the symptoms of the medieval ‘Holy Fire’, with its epileptic convulsions, delirium and hallucinations. In his ‘Author’s preface’ to the published text Nowra goes to some trouble to cite his sources for the scientific accuracy of his dramatization of the ergot poisoning, and where for reasons of narrative condensation he has deviated from the clinical symptoms. He appears to be combating with his documentation the literalness of some observers of the Nimrod production, who said in various ways ‘It couldn’t happen here’. The ergotism scenes in the play do function metaphorically, with not one but many levels of reference captured and enmeshed in the texture of the dramatization, but as a central image the poisoning does not work for some. Leonard Radic finds it ‘contrived and forced ... simply not strong enough to bear the weight of meaning thrust upon it’. But surely the phrase ‘poisoned flour’ does have specific historical connotations in the Australian context. The bag of poison, along with the gun and the axe, was a standard tool of settlement and clearance of the land. As Eric Rolls states, ‘The first settlers were enthusiastic poisoners. Everything that seemed at all likely to be troublesome was poisoned ...’. Strychnine was used for animals, arsenic for people. In the light of this, it is evident that the poisoned-flour image of *Inside the Island* is neither exotic nor forced: not only could it happen here, it has happened here.

Despite its carefully researched realistic level, the play is, as previously stated, a species of ghost story, one which realises through dramatic imagery the suppressed, the interior, the past and potential realities. The character of Rose Draper in Sewell’s *The Blind Giant is Dancing* (1983) seems to be also a kind of ghost-figure, exteriorizing as she does the central character’s encroaching moral death; a death which she has already undergone, being for the duration of the action effectively a tormented ghost. Earlier theatrical traditions had various conventions for visualizing death-in-life or demonic characters such as Rose Draper, but the largely realistic writing and performing styles of recent Australian theatre – generally very effective communicative devices – become something of an obstacle, or a challenge, to dramatists with a strong symbolist or expressionist streak. The achievement of *Inside the Island* consists of its careful exposition of the realistic groundwork in the play’s first half, thus authenticating the realistic as well as the ‘irrational’ or symbolic elements of madness and destruction, and the apocalyptic bushfire which eventually subsumes both these meanings. Nowra’s ghosts are prepared for such so that an audience can clearly understand their meanings. The soldiers become victims; but, as the captain finally realizes, ‘the terrible things were inside of them, like when people go crazy on drink’ (p. 90). But many a good ghost story has a final horrific twist in store: when the haunting turns out to be not a repressed memory of a horrible past but an
oblique and terrifying premonition of an even more dreadful future. So too in this case. The author’s citation of Gavin Souter’s *Lion and Kangaroo* in his ‘Author’s Preface’ (p. 11) as one of the play’s inspirations is a reminder that, as John McCallum has observed, *Inside the Island* is also Nowra’s Gallipoli play.\(^{12}\)

A close reading of the ‘Pozieres’ chapter of Souter’s book reveals numerous connections in theme and even imagery with the play, which bears out the specificity with which the dramatist has gone about his picture of a not quite innocent nation undergoing its ‘baptism of fire’.\(^{13}\) Souter starts by citing C. E. W. Bean’s impressions of war-devastated Picardy in which an Australian landscape is the dominant referent; he is ‘reminded of a dry creek-bed in central Australia’ (p. 231). But before the bombardment this country was, like the setting of *Inside the Island*, a wheatfield. After the grim ‘harvest’ of war, it presents another aspect which Bean describes in what appears to have been for him pre-existing imagery for utter desolation:

Imagine a gigantic ash heap ... a place where dust and rubbish have been cast for years outside some dry, derelict, godforsaken up-country township. Imagine some broken-down creek-bed in the driest of our dry central Australian districts, abandoned for a generation to the goats, in which the hens have been scratching as long as men can remember. Then take away the hens and the goats and all traces of any living or moving thing. You must not even leave a spider. Put here, in evidence of some old tumbled roof, a few roof beams and tiles sticking edgeways from the ground, and the low faded ochre stump of the windmill peeping over the top of the hill, and there you have Pozieres.\(^{14}\)

Nowra too identifies wheat country as the epitome of eerie desolation:

The cruel loneliness of the Australian country seems to be everywhere. I cannot forget the abrupt darkness that comes with a bush night and the bleak feeling of being alone and engulfed by an insidious and infinite blackness; nor can I forget the time when, in northwestern Victoria, on a day so hot even the crows refused to fly, I saw fields of rust-brown wheat stretching to the nebulous horizon, unbroken by a tree, harvester or human being, a scene that was frighteningly desolate and as mysterious as a drawing by Escher. (p. 11)

Yet Australians, it appears, have really little need to draw upon the imagery of European cultures for landscapes of death-in-life, for even when these are encountered in the metropolitan countries they are merely a recognition, a memory even, of what has long been known. The wheatfield scenes of *Inside the Island* present a challenge to a designer in suggesting the vast straight horizons and immense space, as the brown wheat, paradoxically fertile yet sterile, stretches away, dwarfing the human figure.

The perception of Australian nature as mournful and hostile was a colonial cliché, where, as Bernard Smith points out, it is reasonable to
suspect that European fear and guilt at the displacement of the 'natural' inhabitants were projected onto nature itself. But the wheat country of this play is not 'natural' in this sense of being indigenous: a wheat property is a monoculture of imported vegetation and is itself a displacement of the original landscape. The play's characters are the victims, not of 'nature' but of their own creation: a landscape ruthlessly imposed to serve a colonialist primary-export economy. The double image of wheatfield and battlefield is a standard perception of war as the harvesting of the young, and is adumbrated in the play's second scene:

Lillian: Have you ever been in a battle?
Sergeant: A real one? No, missus. I did see a man run over by one of those new mechanical ploughs last year. He was chewed up something bad. I guess a battlefield is a bit like that. (p. 27)

Nowra's use of these overlaid landscapes pushes this metaphor further to draw out the connections between the Western Front campaign and its underlying causes - Australia's colonial economic history and condition at that time. The ghostly bloodied soldiers enduring their private infernos on the Aboriginal campsite elide past, present and future in one hallucinatory moment.

The image of the cricket match, civilized and ordered, occurs in the play and in Souter's citation of 'a bush worker from Gilgandra' who described the Pozières offensive of 23 July 1916 thus: 'The lads walked across 600 yards at right angles to main road to middle of village, our prearranged objective, as though going to a cricket match' (p. 234). On the crest of the road between Pozières and Bapaume, as Bean depicts, was the stump of a former windmill 'which had once creaked as it ground the wheat of Pozières' (p. 234). A wheatmill and a creek are significant locations in Nowra's play as well, the mill being finally destroyed in the raging bushfire. These mirror-images link the 'old' and 'new' landscapes is such a way as to render the unthinkable - and in 1914 unimaginable - carnage of the Western Front as weirdly homely and familiar to the Australian mind. Pozières, the play suggests, although cataclysmic in scale, was in no true sense alien or unknown, as Australia as a nation moved towards its fate as if in a dream, entranced among landscapes which it already recognized.

The testimony which Souter cites of the effects on the Australian Imperial Force of the repeated futile attacks ordered by the British command, and of the continual bombardment, bring one close to the area of experience which Inside the Island explores in its second part. 'A sergeant who watched the survivors coming out of the rest area wrote: "They looked like men who had been in Hell ... drawn and haggard and so dazed that they appeared to be walking in a dream and their eyes looked glassy and starey"' (p. 234).
Higgs (shouting): They’re moving. They’re coming. Got to get away. Get moving.

Captain: Shhh! Who’s coming?

Higgs (more calmly): The men – that’s why we’ve got to get up the hill.

Captain: Why do you have to get up the hill?

Higgs: You fuckin’ idiot – I’ve got to get up the hill to see the top. All the corpses are coming down the hill so I’ve got to go up. I don’t want to die. (pp. 73-74)

The diary of an Adelaide journalist, Alec Raws, himself killed shortly afterwards in the wasteful offensive, fills out the concrete and emotional detail of Souter’s picture of the terrors of the second Allied attack on the night of 4 August 1916; his is the testimony which Nowra cites as ‘a unique glimpse of Australians mentally lost’ (p. 11):

I have one puttee, a dead man’s helmet, another dead man’s gas-protector, a dead man’s bayonet. My tunic is rotten with other men’s blood, and partly splattered with a comrade’s brains. It is horrible, but why should you people at home not know? Several of my friends are raving mad. I met three officers in No Man’s Land the other night, all rambling and mad. (p. 236)

Other details of Raws’ narrative of the battle are picked up in the play. The night-time entrenching-party led by Raws had no idea where they were or where their lines were. The noise of their position being shelled from three sides, their own included, was continual, and enemy flares turned night into day. The living couldn’t stop to help the wounded, and Raws resorted to a swig of whisky to summon up the necessary courage. The ground was a compost of fragments of the dead and dying; during this night many officers and men went mad (p. 237). The theatrical brilliance of the play consists of its use of the stage’s physical resources to conjure up this concealed reality. The roar of the bombardment and the glare of the bursting shells are suggested through the increasing noise and red glare of the approaching bushfire, culminating in the stage directions at the end of Act 2, Scene 7: ‘A sudden brilliance is seen, then a sudden blackout. The noise of the fire grows unbearably loud in the darkness as if the audience is going to be swallowed up by it; then it stops abruptly’ (p. 87). George Dawson, despite his resolution to the contrary, resorts to the whisky bottle (p. 72) and as the fire encircles the characters they, like the entrenching party, no longer know which way safety lies (pp. 86-87). The captain and the sergeant are helpless to help their afflicted men, who variously run into the fire, blind themselves, and imagine that red flowers (the Flanders poppies symbolizing bloody wounds?) are growing out of their chest. Some soldiers are withdrawn and stunned, others ecstatic, and another rapes and murders Susan, the daughter of George and Lillian. The musician Peter Blackwood is also killed by them. As the idiot Andy cries, as he tries to flee the dangers of the
night, ‘The men from the slaughter-house are here!’ (p. 79).

If *Inside the Island* is Nowra’s contribution to the volume of recent dramatic material dealing with the Anzac legend, it is interesting in that the author chooses not to focus on the Gallipoli landing itself. Nowra’s dramatic themes deal not with heroism, mateship or the forging of nationhood but with people lost, coerced or poisoned, who are engulfed in an inferno. His documentary inspiration for this play, and the dramatic metaphors through which the transmutation of the material are conveyed, suggest not the bronzed antique heroes dying on the plains of Illium which elsewhere pervade the imagery of Anzac, but the far more terrible and industrialized hell of modern mass-warfare, where, as happened on the Somme, two thirds of an attacking force could be dead within half an hour. However bad Gallipoli was, the Western Front was worse. As Raws attests, ‘I saw strong men who had been through Gallipoli sobbing and trembling with ague’ (p. 238).

The play’s refusal of the obvious mythic battlefield makes this point: that Australia’s authentic war-imagery is not pastoral, aristocratic or epic, but modern, industrial and mechanized, indeed postnuclear. Just as veterans of Gallipoli said that it was ‘a picnic’ compared to the Somme (pp. 231-32), so too Nowra’s picnic/cricket-game deepens to display its infernal and haunted subtext. The young soldiers of the play have all this in front of them, as the audience realizes, and it may recall too that such nightmares continue to haunt our future. The play’s resonances do not halt at the historical point of 1916. The image of maddened drugged soldiers mentally devastated by their environment suggests also Vietnam, that other engagement which the nations, while now prepared to celebrate and criticize the heroic disaster of Anzac, is in danger of forgetting. As Lillian Dawson comments: ‘If the Apocalypse came they [Australians] wouldn’t know it: they’d think it was a public holiday’ (p. 47). Perhaps our most famous public holiday remembers the wrong Apocalypse, and for limited reasons, because every war the nation has engaged in except the first – the war for the land itself – has been fought elsewhere. It is this ‘first’ war which *Inside the Island* remembers.

Nowra’s other Sydney premiere of 1980, *The Precious Woman* (Sydney Theatre Company, November) is a kind of companion play to *Inside the Island*. Between them these two plays present complementary explorations of the difficulties of being human and acting humanely in the wider social world. Inner pain and the psychic life are reflected in outer action, both social and political. The canvas of these plays is broad; the body politic itself – whether of Australia or the China of *The Precious Woman* – is the ultimate recipient of the effects of the inner life and of the haunted past forcing their way to the surface. However, the sub-theme of colonialism and its catastrophic, even apocalyptic outcomes – of yesterday and tomorrow – finds a
secure historical moment in the pre-World War One setting of Inside the Island, that being the last moment when this country could naively assume that despite the bloody price of the land’s settlement no blood-price would be exacted for the imperial relationship. The play suggests moreover that the moment of reckoning is not safely past, that a still-colonial society can at any moment awaken from its spellbound imperial sleep to face a nightmare reality undreamt of except in the worst imaginings of poets and prophets. Genocide, the Somme, Vietnam, nuclear warfare, all have in fact already ‘happened here’, and when we experience them we recognize a dream long suppressed.

NOTES

2. Louis Nowra, Inside the Island and The Precious Woman (Sydney: Currency, 1981), p. 24. All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.
4. Compare the recollections of an old Gippsland pioneer, which perfectly sum up the settler myth that, before they took over, the country consisted of ‘nothing but ...’ and was itself, essentially, nothing: ‘I stand on the top of “Kilynon”, the whole district lies stretched out before me in one grand panorama. Not a vestige remains of the vast forest that once so stubbornly resisted our labours.’ From W. M. Elliott, The Land of the Lyre Bird (1966), p. 13, quoted in Geoffrey Blainey, A Land Half Won (Melbourne: Macmillan, 1980), p. 360.
9. See Ridgman, p. 112: ‘This literalism doesn’t plague the novel or poem to the extent that it does theatre. It isn’t understood that some writers are essentially using metaphors’.

13. Souter quotes this phrase from the assessment by the Hobart Mercury of the significance of Gallipoli itself, not of the Western Front. See Lion and Kangaroo. Australia 1901-1919: The Rise of a Nation ([1976]; rpt. Sydney: Fontana, 1978), p.228. All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.


17. Souter, p. 234.