

THE
**LAND'S
MEANING**

new selected poems

**RANDOLPH
STOW**

ABOUT RANDOLPH STOW

Julian Randolph Stow was born in Geraldton, Western Australia, in 1935. He did a double major in French and English at the University of Western Australia and lectured in English Literature at the universities of Adelaide, Western Australia and Leeds. He was a storeman on the Umbalgari mission in 1957. In 1959 he was seconded to the Trobriand Islands, Papua New Guinea, as assistant to Charles Julius, the government anthropologist where he subsequently became a cadet patrol officer. Stow moved permanently to Suffolk, his ancestral county, in 1969. From 1981 he lived in nearby Old Harwich. His novel *To the Islands* won the Miles Franklin Literary Award in 1958 and he was awarded the Patrick White Award in 1979. As well as producing fiction and poetry, he wrote libretti for music theatre works by Peter Maxwell Davies. Randolph Stow died in 2010.

ABOUT JOHN KINSELLA

John Kinsella's many volumes of poetry include *The Silo: A Pastoral Symphony*, *The Hunt*, *The New Arcadia*, *Divine Comedy: Journeys Through a Regional Geography*, *Peripheral Light* and *Armour*. He is also the author of volumes of short stories, novels, plays, and criticism. Born in Western Australia, John Kinsella lives in the Wheatbelt though he has spent many years living and teaching in England and the USA. He is a Professorial Research Fellow at the University of Western Australia and an Extraordinary Fellow of Churchill College, Cambridge University, where he is also the Judith E. Wilson Fellow in Poetry for 2011–12. He has collaborated on creative work with many poets, writers, artists, theoreticians, and composers. He is editor of *The Penguin Anthology of Australian Poetry* (2009).

*From Lernonville to Tourmaline
Through the red wind and the rain ...*

– POEM FRAGMENT FROM A DREAM, RANDOLPH STOW

*I really have nothing to say about poetry in general (except
that mine tries to counterfeit the communication for those who
communicate by silence). And these poems are mostly private
letters.*

– RANDOLPH STOW

CONTENTS

Introduction.....	9
-------------------	---

Collected Early Poems

The Farmer's Tale.....	68
Seashells and Sandalwood.....	70
Sea Children.....	71
Country Children.....	72
As He Lay Dying.....	73
Child Portraits, with Background.....	74
The Conventional Young Man, at Springtime.....	76
'The Language of Flowers'.....	77
For One Dying.....	78
Socratic Dialogue.....	79
Before Eden.....	80
The First Monarch.....	81
Madame Yuan Ying Disoriented.....	82
Chorale for the Death of Icarus.....	84
Rite of Spring.....	85
A Fancy for his Death.....	86

Outrider I

Dust.....	88
In Praise of Hillbillies.....	89
The Utopia of Lord Mayor Howard.....	91
The Embarkation.....	93
The Ship Becalmed.....	95
The Land's Meaning.....	96
Strange Fruit.....	98
Ruins of the City of Hay.....	100
The Ghost at Anlaby.....	102
Wine.....	103
The Recluse.....	104
At Sandalwood.....	105
Portrait of Luke.....	106

Outrider II

The Dying Chair	108
Sleep	109
Kāpisiim! O Kiriwina	110
Jimmy Woodsers	111
Landscapes.....	113
Convalescence.....	114
Outrider	115
The Calenture.....	117
Landfall	118

Stations

A Feast.....	120
The Singing Bones.....	121
A Wind from the Sea.....	123
Western Wind When Will Thou Blow.....	124
Stations.....	125
Thailand Railway.....	134
<i>From The Testament of Tourmaline</i>	143

Libretti

Eight Songs for a Mad King.....	150
Miss Donnithorne's Maggot.....	155

Masks

Endymion	162
Ishmael.....	163
Persephone.....	164
Penelope	165
Enkidu.....	166
Efire	168
Setthathirath.....	169

Uncollected Poems

Three Poems by Clément Marot (1496–1544)	172
Montebellos	174
Anarchy.....	175
The Wind-Rose	176
Frost-Parrots.....	178
Jasmine of Madagascar	179
Orphans Betrothed.....	180
Simplicities of Summer	182
Alof de Vignacourt Sits for his Portrait	183
A Pomegranate in Winter	184
This Desirable Anglo-Irish Property	185
The Clock in the Empty House	187

Late Poems

Clichés.....	190
On a Favourite Cat.....	193
Country and Western	194
Still Life with Amaryllis Belladonna.....	196
Merry-go-round.....	197

Appendices

From <i>The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea</i>	200
From <i>Tourmaline</i>	205
From <i>The Girl Green as Elderflower</i>	206
Contents, <i>Australian Poetry 1964</i>	209
Contents, <i>Outrider: Poems 1956–1962</i>	213
Contents, <i>A Counterfeit Silence: Selected Poems</i>	214
Historical Note, <i>Miss Donnithorne's Maggot</i>	216
CD Liner Notes, <i>Miss Donnithorne's Maggot</i>	219

Notes Accompanying Poems and Appendices	222
--	-----

References	226
-------------------------	-----

Acknowledgements	228
-------------------------------	-----

RANDOLPH STOW (1935–2010):
AN INTRODUCTION TO HIS POETRY

Randolph Stow's slim body of poetry weighs more than most oeuvres many times its size. So often identified as a definitive poetry of Midwest Australia, it actually encompasses a much broader global geography in its subject matter and sensibilities. Undoubtedly, though, its nerve centre is the land from Geraldton to Kalgoorlie, and north to the Kimberley.

But we should think of Stow's voice as part of something beyond the poems – or rather 'voices', because his poetry often dramatised the voices of those who could not speak in such contexts, or had been silenced by time and circumstance, the 'I' of a poem often a shifting persona, or a 'character' in a narrative in which the poet is hidden or obscured, haunting the lines. Be it those he writes of, be it the land itself, or the many other voices that make 'place', his poems are about connections and threads, even when they speak of isolation.

Of writing of the Midwest region, I also think of the Yamaji poet Charmaine Papertalk-Green, and her articulation – bringing different meaning to the dereliction and hauntings of the outback – of the continuing colonialism of mining companies. I also think over the necessity of Stow's version of Geraldton to the town's desire for continuity and uniformity of identity. There is a school literary award named after Stow, and though he didn't return to Geraldton for over thirty years, the town resonated with him and he with it. A town of ships in the harbour and massive combine harvesters on the sand plains. Of sheep and gun culture. Of a braggable number of days of sunshine and skin cancer. Beachlife and racism. Of wheat (and canola) and minerals, of seafaring and land-usage.

Groundbreaking, historic, and essential, Stow's poetry is haunting, lyrical, mythical, spiritual and anchored in place. However, it is also

a prime case for what Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra have called ‘paranoid’ reading, and a reader will do well to see not only the acknowledged ghosts in the poems, but the unacknowledged and even, on occasion, displaced ghosts as well. Under the surface of so many of the earlier poems and, I would argue, the later wherever they are situated, is knowledge of the fundamentally unaddressed wrongs inflicted on indigenous peoples in Australia, and in the then (when Stow was working there) Australian colonial possession of Papua and New Guinea (from 1920 to 1975 it was an Australian territory care of the League of Nations mandate, though Australia had taken control of Papua from the British in 1906, and of New Guinea from the Germans in the First World War, while West New Guinea was controlled by the Dutch and later the Indonesians). There’s a frustrated awareness that reaches across his novels and poetry, and even of the epiphanic *To the Islands* Stow said he wrote as propaganda to support missionaries whom he saw as maligned.

All poetry that comes out of colonial-station backgrounds, out of farming ‘country’ in Australia, either embraces, denies, or fights hard to escape the issues of theft and occupation of indigenous lands, and the cultural abuse that goes with this. Stow’s poetry is more aware than most ‘white’ Australian poetry, though it treads a tormented line. It carries the trauma of the search for personal spiritual, emotional and clan-belonging identity, fracturing out over the planet, seeking to draw connections and intertexts wherever possible, to join the world of the living and unliving if not to attempt, then to envisage, a reconciliation with the ennui of Western cultural heritages in the face of often greater local forces.

It also runs the risk of what Peter Minter has termed ‘anthropologising’ indigenous culture, by giving it a silence in the poetry, or projecting a colonial-white existential angst through the lens placed on interactions with indigenous cultures (especially with the New Guinea/Trobriand poems of *Outrider*). Since Stow was an

anthropologist for a time, this is not surprising, and he does constantly scarify his Western subjectivity through witnessing the ironies of 'contact', and the social engineering never far away from this (which inevitably fails in the face of the spiritual power of the 'other').

It is not surprising that one of Stow's favourite novelists was Conrad. The sea abounds, and *An Outcast of the Islands* and *Heart of Darkness* resonate. Stow's colonial forebears are cast more tragically than criminally in terms of their role in the occupation of Australia. They were landowners, lawyers, judges, ministers, in South Australia and Western Australia, and as the pre-eminent Stow scholar Anthony J. Hassall says in his chronology of Stow's life to 1990, 'The Stow family is connected to the Randolphins of Virginia, to Thomas Jefferson and (allegedly) to Pocahontas'. Of course, the connection even anecdotally can only be as a form of colonisation (with all its bodily implications), so this already shows one of the many corners of the paradox of Stow's work. The ongoing colonial search for opportunity and profit, as well as a rebooting of lineage (branching of family), is most often dressed up in the conventions of discourse as the search for the Edenic and idyllic, and few writers with modernist sensibilities such as Stow, especially brought up surrounded by the trappings of colonial pastoralism, would do anything but show its failure. The problem comes with the balance of empathy for their failing to gain a paradise they were so deluded about. Shouldn't they be condemned out and out? This is the crisis. Stow is cautious here, naturally having sympathy and empathy beyond his reasoning.

The 'harsh' Australian land immediately offers the prick to the bubble, and a resolution of failure of ideal. From a Heaven/Hell binary, a transformative possibility is offered through the act of writing, and Stow, despite his glib takes in interviews on his purpose for writing, was driven to transform, to transcend the condition of this colonial meltdown into material reality (from crop failure to the death of stock, dying of thirst to going mad in the sun, from

cliché to dissolution of Western myths of right/s). But one should always be wary of imposing a model of crisis on any writer, though Stow reaches into his family's colonial background readily enough. His grandfather was also a Buddhist, and this brought Stow into contact with spiritual literature that opened a different way. Cross-pollination is a characteristic of Stow's poetry, drawing threads from Judaeo-Christian and Eastern traditions, and it is often guilt-laden and semi-anthropologised (though always, in the end, putting human above 'data'), to proffer alternative ways of seeing and articulating a crisis he found too disturbing to leave unsaid, but still did not want to articulate specifically. His poetry is richly metaphoric, and uses partial conceits that interweave to paint what often appears to be a narrative, but is in fact a series of glimpses woven together with the music of language. Stow loved language as a thing in itself. He loved to listen to speech.

*

Julian Randolph Stow, known as 'Mick' to his mates, was born in Geraldton in 1935. The maternal side of his family, the Sewells, were established on Sandsprings Station (the Sandalwood of his writing) in 1866 (having acquired it in the 1850s). He attended Geraldton Primary School, then Geraldton High School, and in 1950–52 the elite Guildford Grammar School in Perth. He wrote his two early novels, *A Haunted Land* (1956) and *The Bystander* (1957), during the long summer holidays while at university. His first book of poetry, *Act One*, appeared in 1957 in London (Macdonald). After university where he did an arts degree, he worked on an Anglican mission at Forrest River (the Umbalgari), tutored for six months at the University of Adelaide, then studied anthropology and linguistics at the University of Sydney in 1958. His prize-winning novel *To the Islands* was published in 1958, and in 1959 he went to New Guinea as assistant to the (Australian)

government anthropologist and then became a cadet patrol officer in the Trobriand Islands, where he contracted malaria. The following years saw him visiting England, working on a master of arts (on Conrad) at UWA, lecturing at Leeds University, and publishing his poetic masterwork, *Outrider*, in London in 1963 (Macdonald). Subsequently novels and other works were published, and he undertook extensive world travels. In 1969 he moved to Suffolk, then to Old Harwich in 1981. *A Counterfeit Silence: Selected Poems* appeared in 1969 in Australia. To this day, it remains the definitive Stow poetry collation, as he was not to publish another separate volume of poetry.

Despite the paradoxes and seeming contradictions, the gaps and fractures, the divisions between old and new, material and spiritual, Stow wrote poems of *connection*. It is tempting to think of him as a 'liminal' poet, mapping those spaces either side of a metaphorical border, giving word to the inarticulacy of blurred edges and zones where different worlds meet. These factors are certainly evident in his poems, but there is something more cathartic and more resolved than a first, second and maybe a lifetime of readings reveal. I say 'connection' because I think the poems were written as gestures towards a completion or resolution the poet knew could never be achieved. But that doesn't stop one trying.

*

Stow was born into a Geraldton that was still small (it's a small city now of just over thirty thousand, but it thinks of itself as a 'capital' of the Midwest in many ways), and a long way from the rest of the world in terms of population, goods, and the exchange of global ideas. A town of the seaworld and the landworld. Not just a coastal town, but a place of congress and conflict between different modes of living and making a living. His writing of that area speaks the language of the sea *and* the land. Where they meet, clash, dissolve, reform. Where

they connect. Where the sand mixes in the waves and it is neither shore nor sea, then is definitively one or the other. All of these, and a dissolution of cultural coordinates fuelled by angst, often in a single poem, can work entirely figuratively, with images of states of being clashing and dissolving, as in the unsettling poem of ‘temptation’ and the fall from Paradise, ‘Strange Fruit’:

Suicide of the night – ah, flotsam:

(the great
poised thunderous breaker of darkness rearing above you,
and your bones awash, in the shallows, glimmering, stony,
like gods of forgotten tribes, in forgotten deserts)

take care. Take care.

Stow’s use of parenthesis in his poems often accommodates the warning voice, the seeing, even sometimes prophetically observational, and the directional – dramatically working like spoken stage directions, as if they are rooms or portholes within the poem itself. The voice hides, lurks in them. Though not highly innovative in linearity or syntax or even verse form, outside his flexible use of the couplet, he is radical in his voice-play. Often there are voices behind voices, from the glib to the ecstatic.

In an early poem, ‘Seashells and Sandalwood’ (the latter being the fictional name of a family property as well as a wood highly valued in China and exported there from Australia to the point of species extinction), we see the connection and exchange between the two states of being:

My childhood was seashells and sandalwood, windmills
and yachts in the southerly, ploughshares and keels,

Stow would remain interested in the sea all his life, and was particularly interested in the 'Shipwreck Coast' (as some in Geraldton 'promote' it). He said in an interview with John B. Beston, conducted in Perth in 1974: 'I've been interested in the *Batavia* ever since I was a child, then I went on to become interested in the East India Company and in the history of the whole Indian Ocean. Maybe I'll do a big nonfiction work on the Indian Ocean – by the year 2000 or so?' (351) The Houtman Abrolhos Islands and the Midwest coastline of Australia were notorious for shipwrecks. The stories of the *Batavia* – with the 1629 mutiny by Jacobsz and Cornelisz and other crew members, the shipwreck, the bloodshed/massacre that followed, and the subsequent trial – are bleak hauntings of Geraldton and the region.

The sea is marked with blood, literal and mythological, and the cost of exploration, of commercial and nationalistic empire-building is evident, though this pales in the context of the brutality and theft inflicted on indigenous peoples in this process. In fact, it is said that some of the shipwrecked survivors became part of Yamaji and other tribes in the Champion Bay area, and the connections and blurrings are increased at once.

In an article 'The Southland of Antichrist: The *Batavia* Disaster of 1629', Stow wrote tellingly:

One pair of opposed myths which one notices throughout this history/mythology of Australia is, on the one hand, the myth of Australia as prison, and on the other of Australia as Eden ... the feeling that the island-continent is a natural gaol, and that Australian society is the gaoler ... Opposing this is another tradition which paints Australia as potential paradise. This is the Arcadia of some eighteenth century mariners and artists, the 'millennial Eden' of Bernard O'Dowd's not altogether starry-eyed sonnet, the 'promised land' of Judith Wright's mad Bullocky. (411–12)

Though he goes on to examine another possible pairing of myths, it is salient that this binary is his departure point. It was a struggle for so much Australian literature of the 1950s (through to the '80s and beyond): an expressing of their inherent flaws and failure (and it's this as much as the myths Stow divulges in the context of the *Batavia* horrors that results from a century that produces 'Adolf Hitler' and later 'Manson').

It's a 'grey' area as they say, with all the problems using such a term might entail. Strangely, or maybe not so, 'grey' is a dominant colour/symbol throughout Stow's poetry. A liminal space, but also something decisive. We all know what grey is. It's not indecisive, and it is potent in its many ways, though we might wish to see it as anomalous.

In the poem 'A Wind From the Sea', written in rhyming couplets that give it a sense of building a strangely delicate *and* ominous finality, 'grey' becomes the cement and the ambiguity between states. The wind brings 'green and grey', the house 'patchpeels in grey and green', a house and a window and something behind, including 'grey/tatters of lacework' worked by the weather. The room behind the curtain is imbued with grey ('bloom'). The person in the room is treating 'grey' as Lady Macbeth treats blood, 'Out, damned spot! out, I say.' The figure is an 'it', not a 'he' or a 'she'.

This gender-lack is a Stow sidestep. There's also an avoidance of naming location. It could be many places in the world. Old world or new world. But it carries the elements of 'civilisation' in the lace, and the house, and the mannerisms of presentation. Yet is it 'civilised'? There's a crisis of 'civilising' in Stow's work. The figure is looking out through the lace into the weather: 'Wind, salt wind, across its face'. The essence of the sea has come through the window, merging land and water, solid and liquid and air ... states. Grey is the failure of sexuality and desire. It is entangled with weather and the lyric, an imploded subjectivity, a failed or lost Eden. What can be said about this, and what can't. In something so apparently 'light', the

forbidden is foremost.

A poet Stow came to admire greatly, Saint-John Perse, wrote in *Amers*:

Poésie pour accompagner la marche d'une récitation en l'honneur de
la Mer.

Poésie pour assister le chant d'une marche au pourtour de la Mer.

Comme l'entreprise du tour d'autel et la gravitation du choeur au
circuit de la strophe.

There are many meeting places in this quote. Where poetry and the sea, poetry and ritual, the sea and ritual, the sea and cycles of life connect. Poetry, for Stow, was a necessary part of an ecology. As natural as the sea, and potentially as forceful. And language is both the expression of these forces and an embodiment. It also *makes* 'Nature'. Stow was drawn to language; he was compelled. When he left Geraldton High School and went to Guildford Grammar in Perth as a boarder, he studied French. He would continue this at the University of Western Australia, boarding at St George's College there, and switching from a law degree to an arts degree, majoring in French. It was to French poets he looked, especially the Symbolists, especially Baudelaire and Rimbaud, for his own rapidly maturing poetic voice. Rimbaud remained with him all his life.

*

The first poems of the Uncollected Poems section in this selection of Randolph Stow's poetry are taken from *Westerly* literary journal published out of the English Department of the University of Western Australia, where Stow would later tutor. Unsurprisingly they are translations from the French, and old French at that, 'Three Poems by Clément Marot (1496–1544)'. They are not overly strict

translations, done with a modern ease and a comfort of diction, by a young poet who knew his own voice but respected originals.

This selection is also part of a personal journey for me, and no doubt the poems herein are part of many others' journeys, aside from the life narrative of Randolph Stow himself. I first read Stow's poetry as a third-year high-school student at Geraldton Senior High School, in Alexander Craig's landmark collection *Twelve Poets*. Poems such as 'Dust' and 'The Land's Meaning' spoke directly to me of the place I lived in physically, but also the place I dwelt in (isolation) within. The poems connected the external and internal worlds, but also the conscious and the unconscious. They seemed to be about mutability, especially in an ancient land that in many ways appeared to remain constant, always to be there. But dust is something that works its way into everything, and yet it is vague, elusive, and ineffable. It made me think about my certainties. About the damage and change being wrought on what we were constantly told was a 'timeless' land, and especially about impacts of colonisation and the new colonial 'belonging'. Did I belong? Whose land was this? And then there was Stow's brief comment to accompany the poems, which riveted me to my chair in the English classroom of the new building down the hill at GSHS. I remember first reading it on a hot March day in 1978, staring out through the window, down through the eucalypts towards the hospital, and further on, the dunes and Back Beach with its crushing dumpers. The Indian Ocean. That year had already become a torment and I sought escape in the bush, on the sand, along the erosions of the Chapman River valley. Other than one friend and my family, I felt very alone, and wrote poems to myself. I read:

I really have nothing to say about poetry in general (except that mine tries to counterfeit the communication of those who communicate by silence). And these poems are mostly private letters.

R.S.