

Coral Ann Howells

Patrick White Centenary: The Legacy of a Prodigal Son.

Cynthia vanden Dreisen & Bill Ashcroft ed. 2014. *Patrick White Centenary: The Legacy of a Prodigal Son*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, pp. xxiv + 511. £57.99. ISBN 1443860409.

This multi-authored volume forms part of the celebrations commemorating the centenary of the birth of Australia's literary icon, Patrick White, in 2012. In November that year an international conference was held in India at the University of Hyderabad, and that is the basis for this book. It comprises chapters by thirty-four specialists in White studies from Australia and India, New Zealand, Fiji, Singapore, South Africa, Italy, Germany and Spain, Canada and the USA. Not surprisingly, the collection reads like 'a series of time-lapse criss-crossings, depicted in different colours', to borrow an image from another postcolonial writer, Michael Ondaatje, in *The Cat's Table*. Yet this diversity of voices and transdisciplinary approaches has produced a complex portrait of White the man and the artist with his "many-faceted face" (172) and a reconfiguring of major directions in White criticism.

The editorial introduction orients readers to this collection, which is arranged in five sections: "Revaluations", "Genre", "Individual Novels", "Comparative Studies" and "Socio-Political Issues". That design is a kind of hold-all, though there are common thematic issues centred on White's distinctive brand of cultural nationalism which is symptomatic of the transition from colonial to postcolonial identity in Australia following the Second World War. White, a Cambridge-educated returned expatriate, was a dedicated nationalist and mythmaker who believed fiction to be an effective instrument for cultural and moral reform. However, increasingly the novelist emerged as a public intellectual, using his celebrity status to fight for Indigenous rights, ethnic minorities, nuclear

disarmament, and protection of the environment. Indeed there seem to be two key reference points here: Voss (1957) and the *Mabo* case (1992) which “recognised ‘native title’ as part of the common law of the nation” (413); together they suggest an interesting counterpoint between colonial and postcolonial discourses of national identity.

“Revaluations” opens with John Barnes’s “Prodigal Son”, mapping the territory in prospect. It is Bill Ashcroft’s “Horizons of Hope”, a profound analysis of White as postcolonial writer and visionary which sets up resonances throughout the volume as he explores White’s antipodean modernist project of “chasing down a postcolonial earthed sacred” (26), highlighting White’s sense of the presence of the sacred in material things as he quotes the epigraph to *The Solid Mandala*: “There is another world, but it is in this one” (41). Ashcroft’s dual emphasis on the spiritual and the corporeal which is at the heart of White’s utopian vision is developed with different inflections by Satendra Nandan’s “Patrick White: The Quest of the Artist”, Lyn McCredden’s “Language and the Sacred in Patrick White’s Novels”, Bridget Grogan’s feminine focus on corporeality and abjection in Voss, and Jessica White’s “Inscribing Landscape in Patrick White’s Novels” where Australianness is written on the skin and on the psyche. Later these concentric circles widen to include essays by Antonella Riem and Julie Mehta.

White’s work extends beyond the novel, and essays in the “Genre” section introduce new perspectives that extend the range of White criticism. Pavithra Narayanan discusses his non-fictional political essays and speeches, May-Brit Akerholt (who worked with White on *The Ham Funeral*) his plays, and Glen Phillips his early poetry, which White “airbrushed” out of his autobiography (198). Though Sissy Helff discusses film adaptations, curiously there is no mention of the 1986 operatic adaptation of Voss with libretto by David Malouf. The most exciting essay here is Greg Battye’s “Looking at Patrick White Looking: Portraits in Paint and on Film”, which asks fascinating questions related to the visual representation of subjectivity.

"Individual Novels" begins with Antonella Riem's brilliant essay, "The Spirit of the Creative Word in Voss", which illuminates his concept of the Australian sacred through her analysis of his poetic language and Aboriginal spirituality. Referring to Ashcroft's statement that "the energy of his work is to locate the sacred in a place in which, to European eyes, *it does not belong*" (228), Riem argues for the importance of Aboriginal cultural beliefs which offer "a partnership cultural paradigm as an alternative mode of living" (230). However, writing from an Aboriginal standpoint, Jeanine Leane offers a less sympathetic account of White's representation of the Australian Aborigine in *A Fringe of Leaves*, arguing that his narrative, "fundamentally aligned with the more familiar colonial discourse" (246), does not disturb white Australians' images of the Indigenous Other. Turning to *The Hanging Garden*, we have the first critical perspectives on White's last unfinished novel (or perhaps it is finished, as Alastair Niven speculates). Elizabeth Webby and Margaret Harris, who together prepared the novel transcript from the White archives, give us new insights into White's portrayals of children in that novel and *Happy Valley*. Brian Kiernan's clever essay "Twyborn Moments of Grace" provides a postmodern moment as he plays with different fashionable critical approaches to *The Twyborn Affair*, suggesting that White's novels, like all great literary works, are endlessly available for reinterpretation.

With "Comparative Studies" and "Socio-Political Issues" the net is spread so wide that this collection is in danger of losing focus. Many of the comparative essays, though testifying to the transnational dimensions of postcolonial studies, strike me as quite speculative. Mark Williams's "Patrick White and James Baxter: Public Intellectuals or Suburban Jeremiahs?" is the exception, with his close comparison between the Australian novelist and the New Zealand poet, both of whom sought to reinvent more truthful versions of their national histories in a postcolonial context. The essays in the final section move beyond White's historical moment into the 'heterotopic space' of contemporary Australia, so this section might be seen as 'supplementary' (in the Derridean sense of the 'supplement')

which gestures towards the incompleteness of the preceding narrative). The major concern is with Aboriginal issues, though White was also concerned with Australians' racist prejudices against ethnic and religious minorities. As Keith Truscott remarks in "Mabo – Twenty Years On: An Indigenous Perspective", "It is highly appropriate that this memorial conference [...] should also provide a platform for highlighting contemporary developments in the field of Aboriginal rights of which perhaps the most important has been the historic event of the Mabo decision" (443-444). Writing from a post-Mabo perspective, Truscott and Kieran Dolin point to Indigenous writing and art as vehicles of hope, though the overall impression of this final section is an echo of White's ambivalent utopianism, where Australia "hovers on the edge of a future that lies at the very heart of the real" (41).

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