

TO THE CENTRE

Veronica Brady

Veronica Brady was born in Melbourne. After gaining her Honours degree in English and History at the University of Melbourne she joined the Loreto Order of nuns, teaching in Loreto schools in Victoria and New South Wales. Veronica Brady has studied in both the United States of America and Canada where she gained an MA and PhD from the University of Toronto. Upon returning to Australia she spent several years teaching at Christ College Teachers' College in Melbourne before accepting a position in the Department of English at the University of Western Australia. She has remained here as an Honorary Senior Research Fellow since her retirement.

Veronica has held a number of public positions, including the board of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation and The Older Australians Advisory Council. She has published widely on a variety of issues relating to Australian culture and recent works include Shall These Bones Live (a study of attitudes toward Aboriginal culture and identity in Australian literature), South of My Days (a biography of Judith Wright) and Caught in the Draught (Collected Essays). Veronica has an abiding interest in matters of justice, particularly in our relations with Aboriginal peoples, and in environmental issues.

Some of the best times of my childhood were spent wandering as a family around Victoria, sometimes close to home in the bush around St Arnaud, a former mining town on the edge of the Mallee where we lived, or driving through the flat plains of the Wimmera to explore the Grampians, the twin range which rise suddenly out of the plain. At other times we would go north through the Mallee to the Murray and on one great occasion travelled downstream nearly towards the mouth on one of the old paddle steamers. But somehow we always seemed to be passing through, on our way elsewhere rather than belonging. True, when we stopped and explored, I learned to cherish the land, sensing some mysterious presence there, in the Grampians especially -- I now realise that with its strange rock formations the area we called Wonderland must have been a special ceremonial place. But I also felt from time to time that that it did not like me very much, perhaps, I now realise, because there had been some kind of violence there in the past between settlers and the Aboriginal people of the place or perhaps because it was a place where I as a little girl should not have been.

Maybe if we had lived on the land rather than in a country town it might have been different. I am not so sure, however. By and large most of us look through coloniser's eyes, wanting to make it serve our purposes. This is a point David Malouf makes:

We came here as immigrants and brought our culture with us -- not just a language and the many forms of social organisation, but the crops and animals we needed to feed us and from which ... our economy has grown. So there ... is, at the centre of our lives here, a deep irony: that the very industry that gives us a hold on the earth has no roots in the land itself, no history, no past (1).

More recently this irony has been tinged with uneasiness as we come to understand more of the story of our dealings with the land's First Peoples and the effect our settlement here has had on it.

Patrick White's view of us as a people clinging to the fringes of the continent and to the fringes of the self makes sense to me, therefore. But not because it is negative. Rather if we think of ourselves in Tim Winton's terms as 'surrounded by ocean and ambushed from behind', waging 'a war of mystery on two fronts' it is positive. It suggests that we live in a place of possibility, of 'the spaces, the maybes' (2) in between what we are and have been and what we may become, and this is surely the aspect of colonisation and not merely for ourselves but also for the land and its First Peoples with whom we are yet to reach a proper accommodation.

The inspirational landscape I have in mind, the Lake Mungo National Park in western New South Wales helped me to understand more fully what this possibility might be. It was in fact a pretty desolate landscape, degraded by generations of overstocking and poor

pastoral practices. Over the century or so of European settlement the wind has blown most of the topsoil away to form the towering sand dunes, known as the Great Wall of China, on the eastern side of the barren depression which was once a lake thousands of year ago. It is these dunes which have made the place a tourist attraction and a National Park. What had drawn me and a group of friends here, however, was something else.

A decade or so ago when it was still a pastoral property the station manager came upon a human skeleton exposed by the wind which proved to be the remains of a woman, 50,000 to 60,000 years old. Shortly afterwards, close by, the wind exposed another skeleton, a man's this time. The woman had been fine-boned and similar in body type to contemporary Europeans. But he had been over seven feet tall and built on a gigantic scale. Nevertheless these two groups of people seem to have lived peacefully side by side until her people disappeared during the Ice Age about forty thousand years ago. Some prehistorians speculate that they travelled north across the land bridge which then connected Australia to the rest of the world and may have eventually reached Europe. The giant people, however, survived here until new peoples from the north arrived who may have been the ancestors of some contemporary Aboriginal peoples and displaced them.

The vast historical perspectives these discoveries unfold take us far beyond the horizon of the Western culture to which we belong, intensifying the feeling that the land is somehow timeless which has become a cultural cliché. But here at Lake Mungo it was becoming an imaginative reality. It helped too that we had an Aboriginal guide. He was not himself one of the people who had lived here when the first European settlers arrived. They had been killed or driven out of their country, the survivors dispersed into Government Reserves or Missions. But he had been working on the station when the remains were discovered and later had been a Park Ranger. So he had developed a relationship with the country. Just as importantly, as an Aboriginal he was part of a culture familiar with the ancient history of the land and he told us something of this history.

When Mungo Woman and Mungo Man had lived here, perhaps 50,000 years ago, the arid depression before us had been a lake teeming with fish and marine life of all kinds, its shores rich in trees, plants and animals of all kinds, wombats the size of a horse today, for example. But the coming of the Ice Age had destroyed much of this life and as the weather became warmer and rainfall diminished during the centuries that followed the lake shrank and eventually dried up. Gradually the once fertile and timbered country became the savannah the first settlers found when they arrived. But where its Aboriginal inhabitants had adapted to the land as it changed and learned to live on its terms, those settlers, our people, tried to impose on it purposes and values we had brought from the other side of the world with the result that in less than a century and a half we have turned it into the semi-desert it has now become.

In the light of this story the complacent self-satisfaction of our present culture is almost ludicrous. But contemplating it also made me feel as if I was no longer a mere spectator. The land interrogated me, reminding me of the task we have not yet properly addressed which, Mircea Eliade argues, faces a people newly arrived in an unfamiliar country, the task of transforming it imaginatively, turning it 'from chaos into cosmos' (3), making it a mythical as well as a material presence -- as the land's First Peoples have done from time immemorial. To put it another way, it means making it a 'bride country', relating to it with love rather than in terms of conquest.

This, I think, is what Joseph Furphy was getting in *Such Is Life* when he wrote that it is 'not in our cities or townships, it is not in our agricultural or mining areas that the Australian attains full consciousness of his nationality' but in the interior, in places like this with its 'monotonous variety of ... interminable scrub...; so grave, subdued, self-centred; so alien to the genial appeal of more winsome landscape'. But it is precisely this strangeness, this difference from anything we had known which made it 'an unconfined, ungauged potentiality of resource', not because it confirmed our complacencies or made us relaxed and comfortable but because it challenged them, asking us to explore its strangeness and discover the 'latent meaning' within it and then to interpret it 'faithfully and lovingly' (4). In our own times Freya Matthews puts it this way:

Born into this intimately companionable land that has for so long been singing along, humming along, with its inhabitants, non-Aboriginal Australians might also, if we collectively pause to feel the resonance of the endlessly poetic communiques that surround us, rediscover, in a contemporary context, some of the fundamental aspects of the Aboriginal relation to the world (5).

A key aspect of that relationship, of course, is a sense of the sacred, not generally common in contemporary Australia. But it happened to be Easter time and I was here with a group of people for whom the Easter story, a story of new life rising from death, still had some resonance. For once we 'white fellas' had a 'Dreaming' to connect us spiritually with the place in which we found ourselves and we decided act it out, get up early on Easter Sunday morning and watch the sun rise.

First of all we had to make a journey walking along a rough track in the half-light, our only guide a faint glimmer of light in the east. We sometimes stumbled on ruts and stones but it felt as if we were moving towards a promise signalled by the faint light which was nevertheless growing stronger as we went. We were walking through a desolate place, a land which had been 'opened by whips of greed'(6) wielded by our culture which had separated us from the larger life of the universe.

Finally we came to the rise which once had marked the edge of the lake and each of us found a place to sit and wait for the dawn, some in groups but most of us alone. But in a way we were not alone. Sitting in silence looking out across the space before us I also felt the presence of the 'invisible dead', the thousands of generations of his ancestors the indigenous leader Chief Seattle invoked upon the European settlers in USA. But we were also looking out over what the colonial poet Barcroft Boake called 'the wastes of the Never Never', 'out where the dead men lie' (7). These dead also challenge the confident story of triumphant progress, which we tell about ourselves and our history.

But nature was pointing to another story, a cycle of death and rebirth, echoed in the Easter story, as the light grew stronger, welling up from the dark earth, touching the stunted bushes and grasses and setting off the first twitterings of the desert birds, while above the slender line of cloud drifting above the horizon turned pink and gold as they caught the first rays of the sun. Then suddenly from behind the dunes it bounced up, a great crimson, new life emerging from darkness and death. This, I realised, is what the dead desired, their meaning, the meaning we had to carry on in this land. Judith Wright's poem about a pilgrimage to the grave of her grandfather who died in outback Queensland is about this task. At his graveside, earth was

....made of answers, the eyes of the dead. All those old tribes, dark trees endowed with sight, found new replies to night and day. Their glances forged a meaning between man and creature, creature and nature (8).

This is not poetic fancy. In fact, to quote Einstein:

Human beings are part of the whole we call the Universe, a small region in time and space. They regard themselves, their ideas and feelings as separate and apart from all the rest. It is something like an optical illusion in their consciousness. The illusion is a sort of prison; it restricts us to put personal aspirations first and limits our affective life to a few people very close to us. Our task should be to free ourselves from this prison, opening up our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and all of nature in its beauty (9).

The land's First Peoples whom we regard as 'primitive' and doomed to extinction knew this, that we are part of the fabric of life as a whole. The land was telling me that we have to learn from them not to dominate and exploit the natural world for our own selfish ends, learn the knowledge Patrick White invokes at the end of *Voss*, the story of the true discovery of Australia which 'overflows all maps that exist' (10).

That will not mean giving up on our culture but discovering the poetic and spiritual resources within it which will enable us to enter into the mystery of the land, deepening and, if you like, feminising the myth of exploration already important in our culture. As Stephen Muecke puts it in *No Road*, this

may mean leaving home and getting lost for a while, to admit that there may not be a road going anywhere that we all agree on, but that somewhere along that road is a local guide who knows the story we may never have heard before, a story that leads to a place in the desert ... where there is plenty of food and water (11).

But it may mean that we will be at home and able to share this sense with its First Peoples and live with them with mutual understanding and respect.

- (1) In *The Age*, Melbourne, Bicentenary edition, 23/1/1988
- (2) Winton, T. 1998. *The Riders*. Sydney, Pan Macmillan, p. 51
- (3) Eliade, M. 1974. *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, pp: 10 – 11.
- (4) In J. Barnes (ed), *The Portable Joseph Furphy*. St Lucia, Queensland University Press, p. 65.
- (5) Matthews, F. 1999. Letting the World Grow Old: An Ethos of Countermodernity, *Worldviews* 3(2): 135.
- (6) Wright, J. 1994. Jet Flight Over Derby. In *Judith Wright: Collected Poems 1942 – 1985*. Sydney, Angus & Robertson: 279.
- (7) In H.P. Heseltine (ed) *The Penguin Book of Australian Verse*. Ringwood, Penguin, p. 92.
- (8) In *Collected Poems* p. 208.
- (9) Einstein quote - not sourced
- (10) White, P. 1976. *Voss*. Ringwood, Penguin, p. 446.
- (11) Muecke, S. 1997. *No Road: Bitumen All The Way*. Fremantle, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, p. 130.