

Western Literature Association--Conference 1991

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Melancholy in new worlds--Ivan Doig's Montana and David Malouf's Queensland.

Abstract:

In O Brave New World (New York, Viking, 1967 [1954]), Howard Mumford Jones claims that a characteristic of writing of the American West is "melancholy . . . increased by the sense of human transience" (p.384). This is true also of much Australian writing of settlement. In his trilogy starting with Dancing at the Rascal Fair (New York: Macmillan, 1987), Ivan Doig tells with great affection the story of a family's apparently successful settlement in Montana, yet his tale is punctuated with tragedy and finishes in renunciation. David Malouf, in Harland's Half Acre (Harmondsworth: Penguin 1985 [1984]) traces with similar affection the process of settlement in southern Queensland only to show how a particular family is dispossessed, broken as a family, and finishes with only the ambiguous achievement of a half acre of painting. At the centre of both works we find, not Mumford's immensity of land dwarfing human achievement, but an failure of humans to accept the nature of the land they settle.

Paper:

The twin hopes of immigrants in all new lands have been to escape the oppressions or restrictions of the old land and to build for themselves a new home in the new. Sometimes these hopes are defeated by the failure of the newcomers to adjust, by their surrender to the call of the old that leads to either alienation or return. More commonly, however, the migrants sublimate the appeal of their past by projecting it on the new. They see the new land not for its own sake but as a place where the wrongs of the old world can be righted and its true values realized. Frequently, as Hawthorne tells us of the New England settlers, this merely means transplanting old world injustices into a new setting. In Australia, this happened most evidently with the Highland and island clansmen who, having been bloodily cleared from their lands in Scotland, proceeded with equal savagery to clear the Aborigines from Gippsland and the Western District of Victoria in order to construct an imitation of the baronial lifestyle of the oppressors of their homelands. In both his autobiographical This House of Sky and the trilogy of novels that begins chronologically with Dancing at the Rascal Fair, Ivan Doig tells a similar story of emigration from a depressed Scotland to the hopes of America, specifically Montana. Because his story starts a couple of generations after the highland clearances, its events are less savage than earlier histories, either in Australia or America. The original Blackfoot tribes of

the area have been reduced to the remnant on the reservation, and are represented in the novel only by the family of the Meti Toussaint Rennie. The novel therefore is concerned purely with the struggle of the newcomers against the land and against themselves. In this struggle, the land compels their respect as it makes them its own. Finally, however, the first generation of settlers is defeated by the pride and ambition they bring from home.

For the young Angus McCaskill and Rob Barclay, the new land offers the opportunity to realize all the hopes whose fulfilment had been denied at home. As Rob puts it when he decides on the site of his home, "I didn't come all the miles from one River Street to live down there on another." (p.92) So he builds his house on a hill, away from both the river and his neighbors. This is an act of hubris, denying both the imperative of the land and his own need for other people, and eventually brings the change of the friendship of Angus and Rob into bitter enmity, and Rob's own death. By contrast, Angus succumbs immediately to the lure of the land, but is betrayed by his failure to win his first love and his marriage instead to Adair, the strong-willed sister of Rob who is as unable to break her love for Scotland as Angus is able to break his love for Anne. The conflict that destroys them in the new land is rooted in the old that they can never leave. From this old land comes the title of the book, the rhyme of the rascal fair that runs throughout it as the motif through which Angus McCaskill tries to rhyme together the contradictory elements of life and make meaning or pattern from them. In the end, however, the pattern remains hidden, and the

meaning remains for the succeeding generations to build in their own lives.

The rascal fair itself was in Scotland the day of festival when farmers and workers "met to bargain out each season's wages and terms and put themselves around a drink or so. . . ." It was a day of magic when the old town filled with color and laughter, the noise of peddlers and musicians, the hubbub and gossip and banter of the townsfolk, and the cry of the Highland dancer "known as fergus the Dervish". (Doig, 1987, p.12). The novel tells how Angus and Rob Barclay, trying only to replant the spirit of this fair in Montana, become Americans in the process.

They arrive in the territory just as it becomes a state, and find there the freedom that Scotland had granted them only once a year and the land it allowed them never. Yet their journey is shadowed by contradictory omens. On the first stage, at the dock in Greenock, they find themselves "stepping off towards America past a drowned horse!" symbol of the fate of the free spirit in the old world. They celebrate their translation to a new country by growing sideboards and sending a photograph of their new selves back home to "Let them in old Scotland see what Montanians are". (p.33) They continue their journey up into the high country until they want to "leap high and click our heels in the air" and send their "echo into the canyons of time: here is Montana, here is America, here is all yet to come". (p.47) To which the reader can only respond with the Scots phrase repeated constantly through the novel and its successors, "Maybe so, maybe no".

Immediately, the "all yet to come" brings them to their Scotch Heaven in the new world. It brings also portents of

disaster to temper their joy. These portents include Warren Williamson, whose Double W ranch held half of the Noon Creek country as a reminder that "those white-handed men of money were here as in Scotland, those whose gilt family crests properly translated would read something like, Formerly robbers, now thieves." (p.70) Through the trilogy, Williamson's money, and his exploitative attitudes to both land and labor, transmute themselves into the kind of corporate power that is both the fulfilment of the American dream and the antithesis of the dreams of independence brought by the first settlers. But while Williamson's money is the ultimate image of the failure to care for the land, more immediate are the images of the land's vengeance on the interlopers. The dancing of the rascal fair is brought to an end by Rob's brutal death, but long before, when the boys first arrive in Gros Ventre, its hopes are contradicted by their first encounter with Rob's cousin Lucas Barclay. Angus and Rob have followed him as the forerunner who will be their own guide to prosperity, but when they finally track him to his saloon, he returns their joyful greeting by laying on the dark polished wood of the bar two stumps of amputation where his hands had been. (p.51) The mine from which he had tried to wrest a fortune had blown his hands off as he tried to tamp in the fuse. This is the price Lucas pays to become an American.

America fulfils its promise also for Rob and Angus, but they too have to pay their price. Angus and Rob endure drought, fire, snow; neighbours are killed in dreadful accidents, are driven off their properties by debt, or die in the flu epidemic. But these are the normal hardships of homesteading and of life at the end

of the last century and the beginning of this. Beyond these, and beyond the apparent success of the homesteaders of Scotch Heaven, there is an inability of the newcomers to make a fit with the land.

This is most evident in Adair Barclay, who becomes Angus's wife but never overcomes her longing for Scotland. It is apparent also in Rob, whose determination to get away from the narrow streets of Nethermuir leads him on a restless pursuit of money, precipitates his attempts to bring Scotland to Montana by ordering and his sister's lives for them, and eventually leads to his death by drowning in the dam he has made to give himself independence both from the seasons and from Angus. Most of all, however, it is embodied in the failures of Angus's marriage and the turning of his closest friendship into the enmity that leads directly to Rob's death.

The seeds of conflict can be discerned even in some of Angus's first glimpses of the new land he is to make his own. As an old man reflecting on his life, he reflects that

it was the water winding its way through that valley--its heartstream, so to speak--that captured me then and there. .

. This was the first flowing root of that pattern of waves I watched from the deck of the emigrant ship. But greatly more than that, too, this quiet creek. Here at last was water in its proper dose for me. Plentiful fluid fuel for grass and hay, according to the browsing cows and the green pockets of meadow between the creek's twists. Shelter from the wind and whatever rode it in winter stood in thick evidence, creekbank growth of big willows and frequent groves of quaking ash . .

I sat transfixed in the saddle and slowly tutored myself about the join of this tremendous western attic to the rest of the Two Medicine country. No human sign was anywhere around, except for the tiny pair of homesteads just above the mouth of the North Fork, . . . (p.75)

Angus is frequently through the novel to be seized by this revelation of the country, but it never seems to affect either Rob or his sister Adair, whom Angus marries. Rob's concern is to get away on his own and there build a life patterned only by his own desires. This leads him into unprofitable land speculation, exploitation of new settlers, and poor business deals. Worse, they lead him to plan Angus's life for him, and so generate the conflict that, when Angus is unable to conform to Rob's expectations, precipitates disaster. The symbols of this disaster are the dam he constructs to free himself from both the land and Angus, and his mistreatment of the old horse that has served them both so well, and that he drives to their common deaths in his reservoir.

Although the book is ostensibly about the successful settlement of Scotch heaven, and the accompanying translation of the Scots into Americans, it is in fact about disaster. Rob, the cheerful extrovert, dies as a bitter misanthrope. Angus fails to win his first love, and settles instead for an ambiguous marriage to Adair. This marriage brings distinct satisfactions, but is unable to displace Anna from his thoughts or Adair's knowledge. It is Anne with whom he wishes to share his vision of the land, but his chance does not come until years after they are both

married, when they meet by chance in the Two Medicine country, and chastely, if not altogether innocently, watch the dawn together. This moment of mutual understanding, misinterpreted by Rob, breaks their lifelong friendship, loses Angus the regard of his son, and precipitates the feud that ends only in Rob's death. The consequences of the feud continue into the next generation, the time of English Creek, when the original McCaskill land has passed into the hands of a later homesteader, Anna's daughter Beth turns her back on the past, her older son breaks with his father Varick, and only the younger son Jick insists on probing into the past until he can find his own place in the continuing story. This story finds its end at the end of the third book in the trilogy, Ride with Me, Maria Montana, only when Jick makes his family's peace with the land by renouncing it in favor of the Indians and the buffalo that they had dispossessed.

In recent years, the family saga of settlement in Australia seems to have fallen into disfavor. Between the wars it was a common genre, with examples ranging from the celebratory of Miles Franklin's All that Swagger to the savagery of Brian Penton's aptly named Landtakers, which describes the simultaneous destruction of the land by the settlers and the settlers by the land. Patrick White engages with the same theme in The Tree of Man, but the land here remains a more or less passive factor in his account of human fallibility. The land is significant in Peter Mathers' bizarre narratives, but as an element in their surreal comedy rather than as a factor in the production of a culture. The postwar Australian writers who have looked most closely at the function of the land are Randolph Stow and



Christopher Koch. Both, however, tend to deal with events affecting a single generation. The absence of generational sagas presumably reflects the failure of confidence among Australian writers about the authenticity of applying particular interpretative frameworks to the experience of settlement.

David Malouf, in Harland's Half Acre, avoids this problem by presenting his chronicle as the deliberate reconstruction of experience by a variety of observers whose chief text is not their own memories, but the work of a painter, Frank Harland. The novel begins, not with recollection, but with an act of naming that simultaneously renders the land familiar and foreign.

Named like so much else in Australia for a place on the far side of the globe that its finders meant to honour and were piously homesick for, Killarney bears no resemblance to its Irish original. (p.3)

Like Doig's first comers in Scotch Heaven, Malouf's Irish settlers, members of a different segment of the Celtic diaspora, want to reproduce their past in the new land. But, after this opening paragraph, Malouf makes no attempt to chronicle their settlement. In what is perhaps a typically Australian gesture, he starts instead with the family already in decline, the hopes and pretensions of the founders already declining into ruin or indifference. In place of either a virgin landscape or the dreams they sought to impose on it, he describes the land's present tatterdemalion appearance:

It is lush country but of the green, sub-tropical kind, with sawmills in untidy paddocks, peak-roofed weatherboard

farms, and on the skyline of low hills, bunyah pines, hoop pines and Scotch firs of forbidding blackness. Tin roofs flare out of an acre of stumps. Iron windmills churn. On all sides in the wet months there is the flash of water. These are the so-called lakes. Rising abruptly around fence-posts to turn good pasture for a time into a chain of weed-choked lily-ponds, they are remnants of a sea that feeds one of the great river-systems of the continent--fugitive, not always visible above ground, but attracting at all times of the year a variety of water-fowl and real enough to have had, when the native peoples were here, an equally poetic name that no-one has bothered to record. (p.3)

The difference between this and Angus McCaskill's perceptions of the majesty of the Rockies is evident. The simple explanation of course is that the two landscapes are vastly different. But there is also an ambivalence about the settlement in Malouf's description that is lacking in Doig's. Angus McCaskill recognizes that the settlers can destroy the land through their greed as they fill it with more stock than it can carry. The chief offenders are the ranchers, but he knows that "even Rob's penchant for more sheep was a formula the land eventually would not be able to stand" (p.232). But for those who observe the limits, the land is good. When he takes the Hebners up to claim new land, they pause to look back on the valley where "Twenty years of building and contriving and fixing and starting over again" has eventually given them what his stern Calvinist neighbor Ninian Duff had called "bragging rights" (p.91) over the

"hay-green valley of the North Fork, the newly lamed bands of sheep on its ridges around, the graceful wooded line of the creek and its periodic tidy knots that were our houses and outbuildings." (p.266) This created harmony of people and the land, the Eden of Scotch Heaven, is destroyed only when greed drives them too far, and when the war shatters these American families by involving their sons in the broils of the old world from which their parents had tried to flee.

By contrast, Malouf's Australian settlers seem mere transients. Their occupation of the land is haphazard and precarious, threatened by a nature they have not bothered to learn. The settlers have even forgotten the names of the past, and with them the understanding of the land that they themselves lack. Yet the land is still lush, and it does support its inhabitants. The land is the given, not the object, and the novel is in essence a record of how it makes these transients its own, rather than of how they establish themselves in the land. Malouf starts his story a generation after the pioneering struggles, which are understood in retrospect through the perceptions of the children, just as the reality of the land itself is eventually revealed through the perceptions of the painter.

Malouf disposes of the actual process of settlement in a couple of paragraphs, beginning with the blunt statement that "Harlands are brought up on the story of how they first won and then lost the land." His story effectively starts from this fact of their failure. In retrospect, he tells us of the overland trek that brought the first three Harland brothers to an area

that immediately reminded them of home, that is, of "a place they had never laid eyes on but whose lakes and greenness were original in their minds". Their first coming into their future is thus in effect their coming into their past, and they take possession with a ruthlessness that matches the bloody dispossession of their Irish ancestors: "One brief bloody encounter established the white man's power and it was soon made official with white man's Law." Yet the new land gives them no more permanence than the old, and the paragraph in which they come into possession concludes by noting that "Within a generation the Harlands had squandered most of what they owned and were reduced to day-laboring for others; or, like young Clem Harland, to grubbing a livelihood from odd patches of what was once a princely estate." (p.3)

Although the novel is about the life of Frank Harland, his father Clem represents the mystery of the land that he spends his life trying to unlock. Clem is introduced to us as already a failure, "a dreamy, fresh-faced youth, not keen on hard work . . . He was full of notions, all cloudily unreal." (pp.3-4) The talk in which he shapes these cloudy notions is his reality. The author explains, "He made himself up out of it. He made the world out of it. His cloudy speculations, the odd questions he put, the tales he told of experiences that had come to him at different times and places, were flesh and spirit to him because they touched on what he was most deeply moved by, the mystery of himself." (p.5) Clem's apparent helplessness nevertheless attracts a wife who attempts to refine and toughen him to the actuality of things, but after bearing him two children she dies,

victim of her reality when she is poisoned by a rosethorn in the garden she has cultivated. Then Clem marries for a second time, this time to a waif, and Frank is banished to relatives while she bears a further three boys. When she dies, a victim of the same Spanish flu that across the Pacific decimates the settlers of Scotch Heaven in Dancing at the Rascal Fair, Frank returns to share the rest of his childhood with his four brothers and their loving but helpless father in the cocoon-like warmth of their one room shack. In this shack, each boy in turn moves up through the bed hierarchy and out into the wider world, but in another sense none of them leaves it. The older brother drops out into a criminal life, the next brother to Frank becomes in his turn a housekeeper for the others in Brisbane, where he recreates the kind of warm sanctuary they had known as boys. Their house is a typical Queensland dwelling, raised high on stilts to catch the breeze. Underneath, the stilts and vines enclose a mysterious space of darkness, and here their nephew eventually hangs himself. This death shatters their illusions of security, just as their father's amiable nullity, his possessive warmth, had never completely hidden the menaces of the physical world outside the reality he tried to construct with his words. The initial assault of settlement, the quick dispossession of the natives, cannot be so easily expiated, not even in the city built to keep the settlers safe from the land and their past. So, at the end of the novel, Frank Harland returns to the bush, this time neither as a settler seeking to dominate it nor as a sojourner trying to keep it at bay, but as a painter trying to discover its inward structures, to allow its patterns to construct his life

and his work. Only thus, on his canvas, does he enter into possession of his modest half acre.

In its own way, Malouf's novel is as much a story of the settlement of Queensland as Doig's trilogy is of the settlement of Montana. Both similarly end in a form of discovery and renunciation. Yet Doig's work, for all its elements of tragedy, is finally optimistic, a love-song to the country of his birth. Malouf celebrates the harsh beauty of the land, but never overcomes the alienation of its people from it. His human reality, whether of words or of pictures or of the city, remains foreign to its setting. The past exists not in images of settlement, but of loss: the lost mansions of the first settlers, the loss of their dreams, and behind them the lost lives of the first people, the only people who were fully at home. The future he offers is not one of independence or self-reliance, but one of learning to exist at the edge of a lush but unforgiving country on the rim of a still unknown ocean.