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# Aboriginal testimony, trauma and fiction: transcribing massacre in Randolph Stow's *To the Islands*

Abstract:

In 1957 the young writer Randolph Stow travelled to Forrest River Mission in East Kimberley, Western Australia to conduct research for a new novel. His experiences and observations at the mission over four months resulted in the publication of his Miles Franklin Award-winning book *To the Islands* (1958). A novel that fluctuates between the symbolic imperatives of the central narrative and the material realities of Forrest River, *To the Islands* is both a remarkable and uneasy representation of place. Particularly unsettling is Stow's inclusion of an oral account of massacre taken down verbatim at the mission in 1957. Arguing that this massacre narrative represents a moment of slippage in the novel – whereby the localised trauma of Forrest River can be seen to infiltrate Stow's *King Lear*-like narrative – this paper draws on recent archival research to suggest the massacre account in *To the Islands* allows a momentary and profound register of colonial violence, not otherwise expressed in the novel.

Biographical Note:

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**This article was written on Larrakia country, drawn from a thesis conducted on Wurundjeri country in the Kulin Nation, both places are a long way from Oombulgurri and the sites of the Forrest River Massacres – in writing of this place as a white Settler I acknowledge the ongoing traumas experienced by Oombulgurri people still fighting to return to country and pay respects to all sovereign peoples of Balangarra country. I would also like to warn readers that the following includes a detailed account of massacre, which may cause distress.*

On a rise overlooking the plains just beyond the site of Oombulgurri – formerly Forrest River Mission in East Kimberley Western Australia – a stone cairn and iron cross stands in memory of the many Aboriginal men, women and children massacred by police patrols across various sites in June 1926.[1] It is a grave for the bone fragments collected at Rounggu, Gotegotemerrie, Mowerie, Oombali and Dala and a memorial to the victims of these mass murders collectively known as the Forrest River Massacres (Green 1985: 222). Established by the families at Forrest River Mission in 1927, the cairn stands as testimony and in memory. Doris Morgan, a significant Elder at Oombulgurri, recounted the experience erecting this stone cairn to historian Neville Green in 1988:

> They went up – my husband and a couple of men… they went up there with a bag – a sack – you know a sack bag, an empty one and they pick up all the bones and bring it in and we had a burial service in memory. That cross up there? We all went up there. We had a service and when we finished service we all walked around and got stones, half the people getting stones and half the people keep it up at the cross where the cross standing now. Put it around the cross so the cross can stand firm, strong. We done that – see that cross there standing firm. (cited in Green, np)

As Doris Morgan suggests, in her call to bear witness to this history: 'we done that - see that cross there standing firm' – the cairn not only memorialises the dead but also affirms the survival and resilience of Oombulgurri peoples at Forrest River, standing strong in their collective mourning and remembering of this profound atrocity.

Significantly, Morgan's recounting of this burial service at Forrest River in 1927 is remarkably similar to the following scene described by the character Justin in Randolph Stow's 1958 novel *To the Islands*:

> They went up to Gulgudmeri River… Got the bones and put them in the bag… and brought what remained of the bones back to the mission. Next day they had the burial service up on the hill there where the cross is. (56)

In the novel, however, this service is not identified as occurring at Oombulgurri or even Forrest River. Rather, Stow renames the massacres as 'Onmalmeri' and fictionalises the key figures as characters in his storyline. Such choices superficially mask the material realities of what is clearly a retelling of the historical Forrest River Massacres. Mapping and tracing the occurrence of the massacre narrative in *To the Islands*, this essay argues that the massacre account is inconsistent with the novel's symbolic imperatives and reveals Stow's authorial ambiguities in writing his experiences at Forrest River Mission. Seemingly the one thing he can't fully appropriate into his symbolic aesthetic, Stow's inclusion of the massacre narrative is read as an implicit response to the historical trauma and the power of the Aboriginal (hi)story-telling he encountered at Forrest River .[2]

## Randolph Stow, Forrest River Mission and *To the Islands*

While it is well recognised that *To the Islands* was drawn from Stow's experiences at an Aboriginal mission in the Kimberley, it is less often acknowledged that the young writer specifically sought out Forrest River Mission as a site of research for a pre-planned novel. Indeed, in the author's note of *To the Islands*, Stow attempts to veil the autobiographical aspects of the novel by claiming: 'this is not by intention, a realistic novel; no white character, therefore, and no major incident in the plot, is drawn from life' (9). He goes on to state that: 'I have tried to restrict myself to those aspects which

could be taken as typical of any isolated, but fairly progressive mission, in Northern Australia' (9). Taken as generally representative therefore, few literary critics have sought to read the novel in relation to the specific material realities of Forrest River Mission. Yet the release of Stow's archive in 2011 presents new opportunities to reconsider the links between *To the Islands* and Forrest River Mission.

In 1957 Stow journeyed to Forrest River as a young poet and author on the cusp of a budding literary career. Having completed his tertiary studies in 1956 and with a new novel in mind, Stow had written to the mission Superintendent William Jamison to request permission to travel to Forrest River and conduct anthropological fieldwork (Averill 2010: 129). The mission was at the time a small settlement of approximately one hundred and fifty people, operating as a segregated and regimented Anglican compound. Stow arrived at Forrest River in late March, having journeyed from Perth to Wyndham then up river by barge to Forrest River. While at the Mission Stow carried out duties as the rations store-man and as bell-ringer (the bell tolled up to eight times a day to regulate time and mission chores). When not on duty, Stow further acquainted himself with the Aboriginal residents, both in the compound and in the camps on the outskirts; he learnt basic Gwini and Yiiji language, explored country and took notes on cultural knowledge and local stories. His stay at the mission, while little more than four months, had a profound effect on his burgeoning sense of the legacy of Settler colonialism as well his subsequent forays into anthropology.

The fieldwork Stow conducted with Aboriginal residents at Forrest River Mission was a means by which to gather material for a novel imaginatively conceived in his final year at university:

> As soon as I had graduated, I went to work for a few months on a mission for Aborigines, still one of the most inaccessible places on the continent, in the wild and grand tropical North of Western Australia. I had in my head the general plan of a novel, *To the Islands*, conceived during a seminar on *King Lear* in my last student year. (1985: 6)

Thus, with the plan of novel already envisioned, Stow had sought out a 'wild and grand' location to give local flavour to his *King Lear*-like narrative. It was an approach that corresponded to Stow's broader literary aspirations: 'there is a concept behind it: the concept of a literature based on figures in a landscape, more naked and disturbing than a Border ballad or a Spanish *romance*' (1964: 5). Drawing on the specificity and intensity of the Australian landscape, Stow attempted to access the dark and mysterious aesthetic quality of the European traditions in a localised setting. In the case of *To the Islands* this was achieved through a projection of the white missionary's crisis of faith on to the dramatic landscape of the Kimberley – an exploration of the human condition set against the harsh light and rough terrain of Balangarra country. It is an evocative aesthetic heavy with symbolism. Yet it is also an aesthetic that relies on a particular racialised and romanticised representation of Aboriginality.

Significantly, in his essay 'Negritude for the White Man', Stow identified the 'Jindyworobak strain' as his preferred approach to Aboriginal material in Australian literature. Claiming the Jindyworobak's as 'an enriching influence' (1961: 1), Stow affirmed works like Mary Durack's *Keep Him My Country*, Donald Stuart's *Yaralie* and Katharine Susannah Prichard's *Coonardoo* as having been positively 'coloured by Jindyworobak sensibility' (5). It is a revealing affiliation: despite the fact that the excessive primitivism of the Jindyworobak poets was widely acknowledged at the

time, Stow sought to rekindle the general 'sensibility' of this movement in his own literature. It is this romanticised pursuit and racialised representation of Aboriginality that I have in other places strongly critiqued: arguing that Stow's adherence to the literary tropes of primitivist modernism, while no doubt a reflection of his time, hindered his capacity to represent Aboriginal characters as fully human. This essay, however, while acknowledging the limitations of Stow's wider representations in *To the Islands*, takes note of a different tenor in the novel: the occurrence of a textual slippage in Stow's primitivist modernism. Here, slippage infers a literal stumble, an implicit inclusion of content that is troubling to the novel's central narrative. In this way the massacre account, as an anomalous scene that unsettles the rhythm of Stow's prose and the fictional nature of his text, is read as an instance of authorial unease. Yet as slippage, the massacre account also bears witness to the profound trauma of frontier violence as expressed through Aboriginal testimony. It is a remarkable divergence from Stow's otherwise limited representations of Aboriginality.

## Transcribing massacre

In the novel itself, the massacre narrative appears as a retelling. As the mission is descriptively emerging as a site, a 'story' is told by the Aboriginal character Justin. Introduced through the white character Gunn's eyes as 'a man of forty with the quiet dignity belonging to that age among his race' with 'homely wisdom, and strength and pride' (1962: 50), Justin exerts a powerful presence as orator:

> 'Are you going to tell us the story?'
>
> Justin leaned forward, hands gripping his knees. 'Yes, I tell you,' he said. His voice became even quieter, he was a careful story-teller and took pride not only in his narratives but in their delivery. (52)

What follows is a five-page retelling of the 'Onmalmeri' massacre as narrated to the young white mission staff Gunn and Dixon. It is a profoundly unsettling recitation, drawing the reader into a trance-like telling of intense violence. Through the presence of characters Gunn and Dixon, the reader experiences the telling as an address; there are no interjections from other characters or the novel's narrator. Direct and unflinching, the narration does not censor the violence of massacre, as Justin tells it:

> They got two good policemen, troopers from Albert Creek. Then the troopers got together, finding out who done the murder. Couldn't get the evidence who done it … So they started shooting natives from Jauada all the way up to Dampier River. So many hundred at Jauada, women, men and children. And all along the Gulgudmeri River. At Onmalmeri there was people camping near the river. They shot the old people in the camp and threw them in the water. They got the young people on a chain, they got the men separate, shot the men only. While they was on the chain the policemen told the police boys to make a big bonfire. They threw the bodies in the flame of the fire so no one would see what remained of the bodies. They were burned to bits. They took the women on a chain to a separate grave, then the police boys made a big fire bonfire before the shooting was. When they saw the big flame of fire getting up, then they started shooting the women.
>
> When they were all shot they threw them in the flame of fire to be burned to bits.
>
> When they finished at Gulgudmeri River they went all round Dala. (54)

The matter-of-fact tone of this account is harrowing. Juxtaposed against Stow's descriptive landscapes in the earlier pages of the novel, the cold violence of massacre

jolts the reader out of passive readership. It is an anomalous and unresolved scene – one that plays no immediate role in the plot and is not closely stitched into Stow's prose.

What is most notable about the treatment of this narration in the novel, however, is Stow's inclusion of a footnote at the bottom of the final page: '*This narrative was taken down verbatim from an account by Daniel Evans of a notorious massacre. Here the names of people concerned and place names have been altered' (56). Explicitly registering this account as Aboriginal oral history of a real and 'notorious' event, Stow's footnote is a remarkable intervention into the fictional genre of his text. By including this footnote Stow emerges from his authorial distance: suddenly present as someone who transcribed rather than wrote this account. So too 'Daniel Evans' emerges as a specific and contributing author – further complicating Stow's earlier insistence that the novel is 'typical of any isolated, but fairly progressive mission, in Northern Australia' (1962: 9).

Daniel Evans, the archive reveals, was the son of senior Elder 'King' Peter Warrio at Forrest River and a significant cultural leader in his own right. For Stow, Evans was a 'friend' who revealed 'details of mythology and language' (1962: 9) and adopted him into his kinship relations as 'father' (1957). The friendship between the two men was sanctioned with gifts: 'Daniel has made me a beautiful painted woomera which I think I'll send down to you by boat ... He's also given me a pearlshell bindjawindja' (1957) and seems, ostensibly at least, to have been reciprocal. A playwright researching at Forrest River Mission wrote to Stow in 1974: 'Daniel remembers you well and was most interested to hear what you were doing' (Nyland 1974).

It is Evans it seems who introduced Stow to the history of frontier violence in the area. Writing home to his mother from Forrest River in 1957, Stow relays his emerging interest in the 'Umbali' massacres, as told to him by Evans:

> I hope I'll be able to go out and camp there at Umbali for a weekend before I go. I badly want to hear the ghosts there, they are apparently quite impressive. The relics of the Umbali massacre in 1929 (I think) when the troopers shot several hundred natives because some other native speared a man who flogged him nearly to death for being inside a station boundary. My "father" Daniel tells me he went to Umbali and heard a woman rocking her baby to sleep, crying "Wawai! Wawai! Wawai!" And plenty of others claim to have heard the sound of the troopers' horses and the chains they put on the prisoners before they shot them, and the children crying. (1957)

Hearing similar reports from 'plenty of others', therefore, Stow encountered the legacy of massacres at Forrest River from people directly affected. Here, among the family and descendants of the victims, massacre was not something that could be attributed to the distant past or detached from the personal. As Stow reflected: 'this wasn't an atrocity committed way back in the dark ages. It happened in 1928, and some of the survivors, whom I knew, were men in their late thirties' (1977). While Stow's intention in visiting Forrest River, therefore, may have been to conduct anthropological fieldwork in order to give authenticity and specificity to his primitivist narrative, his encounter with trauma at Forrest River Mission seems to have had an effect on his ability to sustain the literary appropriation of this particular material. Rather than rework the massacre narrative into his own prose, or draw on the symbolic potential of its ghosts and spirits, Stow let this material sit – as local testimony.

More than simply a response to the trauma encountered at Forrest River Mission, however, Stow's decision to directly transcribe an oral account of the massacres within *To the Islands* was also seemingly influenced by the specific power of Evans's speech – his narrative performance:

> Daniel's account of this tragedy seems to me most valuable, not only as a very concise and impartial statement of what his people have suffered at our hands, but also as an example of the legend-maker in action. (Evans and Stow 1961: 45)

Recognising Evans as 'legend-maker', Stow acknowledged and affirmed the artistry and skill in his mode of Aboriginal (hi)story-telling:

> At the time of the tragedy [Evans] was a boy so could not remember all the details he gives here. They have either been picked up from others or added by himself, and he has shown a good deal of artistry in using them. (45)

Impressed by his use of story-telling techniques, particularly irony, therefore, Stow's transcription remains true to the subtle cues of Evans's speech. In stark contrast to Stow's florid prose, Evans's account invokes narrative innovations no doubt informed by a strong tradition of Aboriginal story-telling. This is evidenced in the repetition and layering of the pronoun 'they' in the narrative, which is both derisive and pragmatic:

> Then they got two good policemen, troopers from Albert Creek … So they started shooting natives ... They shot the old people ... They threw the bodies in the flame … Then they started shooting the women. (51)

Objectified simply as 'they', the perpetrators are claimed both anonymously and collectively. Here, the repetition of the anonymous 'they' is a technique that seems to heighten rather than diminish the callous violence of individuals perpetrating massacre. This collective capacity for violence is further emphasised by Evans's identification of the 'good policemen', which not only undercuts the status of police as good and reputable, but perhaps also hints at the ways violent reprisals and mass murder were both implicitly and explicitly sanctioned by the government – in service of the state. 'They' are no one person but rather everyone – 'good' policeman capable of massacre.

Evans is similarly derisive in reference to white man's justice: 'the troopers what were shooting the natives, they was in there in the big court. They paid a heavy penalty then, they done their time or something' (56). Here white man's law is responsible for the punishment of the perpetrators, it is not for Evans to say – rather his quote 'they done their time *or something*' reveals a distinct disregard for the details of state law. Such outcomes are not the primary focus of this telling – rather the specific sites of the massacres, the methods of murder, the return of the bones to Forrest River and the construction of the stone cairn, as well as the continued presence of the spirits, are what Evans' chooses to make central. Reflecting a mode of story-telling as history-making, Evans's account in *To the Islands* deploys strategies of Aboriginal oral history to teach through story – as the late senior Nyigina lawman Paddy Roe describes: 'See this is the thing they used to tell us: Story, and we know' (Roe 1983: i).

Stow's inclusion of Evans's account can be read therefore as an inscription of Aboriginal oral (hi)story-telling which precedes the significant transcription work produced by contemporary cultural studies scholars including: Stephen Muecke with Paddy Roe (1984), Jutta Malnic with David Mowaljarlai (1993) and Deborah Bird

Rose with the people of Victoria River Downs (1991).[3] For while Stow re-stories Evans's account within his own work of fiction with only a minor reference to Evans authorial contribution, his transcription nevertheless uses minimal editorial intervention and allows the narrative to occupy six pages of his novel.

The treatment of the massacre account in this way, presents the possibility for an engagement with Australia's colonial legacy in *To the Islands*. Yet it is fleeting rather than sustained. Here, the white nurse Helen's reflection later in the novel on the inheritance of massacre histories is revealing:

> Sins that aren't wiped out on the earth stay on the earth forever echoing and echoing among the people left behind. We're trying to wipe out the sin of the white men who massacred these people's relations, but we can't ever quite do it, because we're not the same white men. (Stow 1962: 94)

Such reflections on massacre and its legacy are the closest Stow comes to registering the colonial inheritance of the mission and the implications of its enterprise. There is potential in these insights for a shift in Settler consciousness, which even the missionary Heriot comes to speak: 'It was because of murders that I was ever born in this country' (159). Yet these moments do not last – Heriot's identification as a beneficiary of colonialisation makes uneasy his symbolic restoration in the novel. Therefore, having allowed the slippage of frontier violence and Aboriginal testimony in to the novel, Stow reverts to the original intention of his novel: to enact a *King Lear*-like journey of European man stripped bare within the Australian landscape. Unable to fully represent the complexity of things heard and learnt at Forrest River, Stow returns to his central narrative and the symbolic treatment of place. It is a representation which increasingly relies on a primivitist representation of Aboriginality to the detriment of the insight and knowledges shared by Daniel Evans.

Literary critics, perhaps unsure what to make of the massacre account in *To the Islands* – the palpable trauma it exudes and its *real* historical implications – often skip over Evans's account in the novel, preferring instead to offer readings of Stow's symbolic prose and transcendental conclusion. This is arguably the more 'literary' reading to present. Yet Stow's inclusion of Aboriginal oral history in *To the Islands* reveals the novel as not just as a work of fiction, but as a response to the trauma he encountered at Forrest River Mission in 1957. It is both a more complex and uneasy novel for it.

In conclusion, archival research has revealed the full extent to which Stow sought out Forrest River Mission as a site to conduct research for a pre-planned novel based on *King Lear*. This methodology aligned with Stow's interest in anthropology and the turn towards primitivism in Australian literature at the time. It was a predetermined mode, which ultimately limited Stow's capacity to represent what he encountered at Forrest River. For the most part Stow remained true to his pre-planned narrative – *To the Islands* is ultimately a novel that explores the human condition via an existential journey through the harsh and sublime Australian landscape. Stow's inclusion of Daniel Evans's oral account of massacre, however, occurs as textual slippage within this symbolic narrative. Thus, while the convenient and necessary reality of massacre is that the victims cannot speak – *To the Islands*, in its own surprising and somewhat opaque way, continues to carry the (hi)story of the Forrest River Massacres. Going against the aesthetic imperatives and fictional genre of *To the Islands*, Evans's massacre narrative enables readers to experience an Aboriginal testimony of frontier violence. It is a remarkable instance of transcription that deserves greater attention

and consideration in readings of *To the Islands*.

## Endnotes

1. Exact figures are not known. The 'Royal Commission of inquiry into Alleged Killing and Burning of Bodies of Aborigines in East Kimberley and into Police Methods when Effecting Arrests' was held by Commissioner G.T.Wood in 1927 – with the Commission concluding that the police patrol killed at least 11 Aboriginal people at three sites, and that on the evidence it is most probable that nine more Aboriginals shared a similar fate (Wood xv). For a detailed account of the Forrest River Massacres, and the conspiracy of silence that surrounded these atrocities, see Neville Green, *Forrest River Massacres*.
2. Throughout this essay I refer to (hi)story-telling with specific intent – I seek to claim 'story' not *just* as tale, legend, fiction and as no less historical. I claim Daniel Evan's oral account in Stow's novel as both history and story: (hi)story, to loosen the distinctions/ hierarchy between history/story.
3. See: Roe, Paddy. *Gularabulu*: *Stories from the West Kimberley*. Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1983; Mowaljarlai, David. *Yorro Yorro: Aboriginal Creation and the Renewal of Nature: Rock Paintings and Stories from the Australian Kimberly*. Ed. Jutta Malnic. Broome: Magabala Books, 1993; and Rose, Deborah Bird. *Hidden Histories: Black Stories from Victoria River Downs, Humbert River and Wave Hill Station*. Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1991.

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