Three Creative Fellows

One of Nugget Coombs’s ideas for the Australian National University was that it should offer a series of Creative Fellowships through which the concept of the university as the nation’s flagship for research in the sciences and humanities would be extended to the creative arts. Plans, drafted by May 1964, were ratified by the university's council at its meeting of 10 July. Some months earlier Coombs had obtained Russell Drysdale’s ‘ideal of a Fellowship Grant.’ Presumably he consulted other artists, too, and among them Sidney Nolan: who told his biographer that he was first approached about taking a fellowship by Coombs. Although the university’s negotiations with Nolan did not begin until August, and the formal letter of invitation is dated 8 November, he knew before leaving Australia in April 1964 that a fellowship was in the offing. The fellowships were to be by invitation to artists of two categories: longer-term residential fellowships for up-and-coming artists — the first of these was John Perceval; shorter term fellowships, with an option of only a minimal stay in Canberra, for creators (not necessarily in the visual arts; not necessarily Australian) who were prominent internationally — the first of these was Sidney Nolan.

The 2007 exhibition celebrates three different interpretations of creativity by three senior fellows: Sidney Nolan (in 1965), Arthur Boyd (in 1971-72), and Narritjin Maymuru (in 1978).

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Sidney Nolan and his wife, Cynthia (née Reed), a writer, arrived in Australia on 8 March 1965 and in Canberra the following day, when it was arranged that his fellowship would commence on 20 March (on which day Nolan was in Sydney, on the eve of flying out of the country). Nolan’s work during the fellowship was tied to the rhythm of his creativity, both its fieldwork and its solid results. True to his practice since settling in London in 1953, he did not paint a stroke while he was in Australia, but used the period of his fellowship for fieldwork. Very little time was spent in Canberra. His first project (with Cynthia) was to visit the highlands of New Guinea for a month. A holiday afterwards at Green Island off the Queensland coast was interrupted by the news that his father had died: he
flew to Melbourne for the funeral. In early May the Nolans took up residence at University House, where Cynthia decorated the apartment with New Guinea artefacts and enjoyed working in the library and walking in the bush. They visited Sydney and Melbourne for exhibitions and other events, accepted an official invitation to Grenfell for the Henry Lawson festival in early June, flew to the Simpson Desert for a week, and for two and a half months between 15 June and the end of August travelled to Indonesia, Pakistan, Nepal, Afghanistan and China. Nolan’s contribution to the university community was two exhibitions. The first, of fourteen Antarctic paintings, was shown in the R. G. Menzies Library in June, and coincided with a conference about Antarctica. The second, of which the star work was *Riverbend* [Plate 1], was held at the Albert Hall between 26 August and 8 September, at the conclusion of the fellowship. The Nolans were in Peking. They did not return to Canberra. Nolan took serious note of the University’s hope that the fellowships would contribute to creativity in Australia. Believing that Australia’s context was Asian, he travelled in Melanesia and Asia. The reasoning was sound, even prescient of Australia’s future, however the process of digesting the experience proved difficult for Nolan. In the event, his creative contribution did not relate to his study in Asia but was the breakthrough work he painted in anticipation, *Riverbend*.

He began painting this extended series of panels in London in late December, immediately after the official announcement that he had accepted a fellowship. The first panel was completed on 27 December, panels two and three were painted the following day, and panels four and five on 29 December. Whereas the first four panels had Ned Kelly as their subject, the second of that day’s panels and the subsequent four continued the idea of a river landscape without human protagonists. Panel six was painted after the Christmas-New Year break, on 10 January 1965, the following two on 12 January, and the final panel two days later. At eleven metres long *Riverbend* was the first of several panoramic murals Nolan produced between 1964 and 1967. It proved to be pivotal in his career for integrating his grandest Australian themes, those of the nineteenth-century outlaw Ned Kelly (now given overtones, among other things, of the explorers Burke and Wills), and the primeval Australian scene. Reviewers of *Riverbend* noted how the landscape dwarfed the human drama within it. Nolan himself described *Riverbend* and the 25 smaller works that preceded it, not as ‘Kelly’ paintings but as ‘Wimmera landscapes’.
In Riverbend he conjured up a watery paradise. Australia, during his visit in the summer of 1964 had been in the first stages of a drought that finally ended in 1968. In the context, the image was therapeutic. The eye pans across a stretch of river with a thick fringe of tall young trees growing on the banks and in the water. The river is so thoroughly accompanied by saplings along its meandering course that there is no clear distinction between the water and shore. They meld together, milky brown water adjacent to closely toned banks, the water without perceptible flow and the trees growing thickly in the water as well as on the banks. The scene is identifiable as an area of frequent inundation, reminiscent of the Barmah lakes on the Murray River near the outlet of the Goulburn River, more specifically a bend in the Goulburn at Toolamba near Shepparton. The marriage of those places happened serendipitously when Nolan's 1964 Christmas card to Albert Tucker, explaining that he had been '[d]igging deeper into my early memories', crossed with Tucker's Christmas note to him, 'the only sustaining thing is the bush — just come back from a few days in the Barmah forests on the Murray, a swamp'.

Nolan identified the Riverbend as the scene of boyhood visits from the city into his father's home country:

'The painting is a combination (in my mind) of the Goulburn River, at Shepparton, where I spent my boyhood holidays, and the Murray. It is very much my father’s country… I can still evoke in myself, in my studio on the Thames, the river that I saw as a boy: A big long river, with the sun coming through the leaves, the vertical leaves of the gum tree. I've never seen it anywhere else.'

The memory had accompanied Nolan for decades. Indeed, it had informed his first (1945-47) series of Ned Kelly paintings. In 1945, planning one of the preliminary paintings of the series, he contrasted the gelid winter light of boyhood holidays at Toolamba with the ‘transparent light’ of the Heidelberg School’s high summer:

'[[It has to have an opposite quality, rain & mud & cold mornings that are also typical of the country. This is probably one aspect that Roberts, Streeton, [&c] did not touch in their preoccupation with exploring the transparent light. I can remember winter holidays at Toolamba in which mud and impassable roads & floods seemed to be the only visual constant. The dreaming that [D. H.] Lawrence said belonged to our landscape is not summed up in simple terms, even in wet conditions the same essence persists.]]'
In memory, the sunlight filtering through pendant leaves flickered disturbingly on the muddy flanks of the river. How to reproduce the kinetic effect had preoccupied him throughout the latter months of 1964 when he painted around twenty-five Kelly subjects on 48 x 60 inch masonite panels before launching into Riverbend. During one of his and Arthur Boyd’s regular visits to the National Gallery in London, Nolan took note of how the problem had been dealt with by Cézanne in *Dans Le Parc du Château*.

“I noticed that Cézanne had very broken shapes that he cut through with the trunks of trees. The stereoscopic effect comes partially from the sudden placement of the straight edge against the mottled and divided background.”

Viewers today are struck by another comparison. Very similar optical techniques to create effects of movement and shifting light are to be seen in bark paintings — in the geometric passages of 1960s-1970s paintings by Narritjin Maymuru, for example [see Plates 15-17, 19]. *Riverbend* had its first exhibition in Sydney in May 1965, when there were lengthy, highly appreciative reviews from newspaper critics. None, however, noted the (high modernist) optical tremor that Nolan had produced through interspersing the narrow stripes of tree trunks with the oblique stripes of tree-shadows and dappled spots of sunlight [see details, Plates 3,4]. Through 1965 Nolan continued to be preoccupied by *Riverbend*. He carried around an envelope of black and white photographs of the nine panels, and during the long Asia trip would often take out the photographs and look at them consideringly.14 In monologue conversations with Cynthia (noted down by her), he complained that art critics had not seen that light was the key to *Riverbend*.

“They don’t get the fact that in River Bend the light is obviously stronger than those who shoot or are shot.”15 “Well, and I keep repeating that for me the bush is “light”. Have you noticed that on the tops of the trees it’s menacing? Only when it’s filtered it becomes beautiful — as opposed to light on olive trees. In Australia the light filtering through trees doesn’t form shadows, but mottled forms of light.”16

In 1964 the Australian National University, on the strength of fifteen years’ solid support from Prime Minister Sir Robert Menzies, was at the height of its power as Australia’s national university, with an emphasis on path-finding research. In response to his forthcoming Creative Fellowship, Nolan broached a new theme and a new format. The image of a generous river sustaining a forest of young trees was an optimistic
‘true’ image of Australian fecundity and growth — presumably Nolan was also thinking about Canberra as the seat of government and source of the life-giving funding that would have a fruitful outcome in research. *Riverbend* was exhibited in Canberra at the end of Nolan’s creative fellowship, and was acquired by the Australian National University two years later with money contributed by several large corporations. Nolan spent the first six months of 1966 in New York where he produced a second *Riverbend*, very like the first, for exhibition in that city. The twin work was acquired by Rupert Murdoch’s media corporation and hangs in the company’s boardroom in New York.

There was a deeper issue involved in *Riverbend* than Ned Kelly, landscape and light. Since 1962 Nolan had been reflecting on the nature of his creativity. The series on Leda and the Swan, exhibited in 1960, had been thought slick. Nolan abandoned polyvinyl acetate as a medium and painted his Africa series in oil paints. Those were likened to a tourist’s album of snapshots, the critic for *The Times* accusing Nolan of spreading himself too thinly:

‘If you are Leonardo [da Vinci] himself and you produce hypothetical Leonardo greeting cards and design a ballet and travel down the Nile for a magazine and thus produce sketches and appear in person in a Leonardo film on television — then suddenly the public will become weary and your image, overdisseminated and overworked will seem lacking in surprise or, more seriously, in any real meaning.’

Visiting out-of-the-way places around the world, seeking scenes unfamiliar to his senses, Nolan travelled, he said, in the hope of catching sight of the totality of things. To the end of his life he tried to understand what drove him to scan foreign territory with “concentration” and return home periodically to renew his memory of the light. Self-examination merely brought the realisation that his creativity depended on seeing – a long-cultivated style of snapshot views, peripheral glimpses leading to offbeat observations – and a process of mental gestation that was inaccessible to his conscious thought. What follows is my attempt to give the context of Nolan’s thinking and imagining.

I’ll begin with his process of painting, which was swift and semi-automatic. *Riverbend* is painted in oils, and the oleaginous textures are typical of that medium, yet, as with the earlier paintings in ripolin enamel and polyvinyl acetate, the effects are of dragged and wiped paint, of
smooth and rough textures, transparency and a blind milkiness. A peculiarity of Nolan's manner of working is that controlled and abstracted techniques were employed to illusory ends. One is never given a resting point in 'reality'; instead there is a teasing interplay between abstraction and representation.

The amount of time Nolan spent in thinking about his subjects was infinitely greater than the time taken to paint a work. Visiting Nolan's London studio in February 1965, soon after Riverbend was completed, James Gleeson learnt that 'the gestation of some paintings might take [Nolan] many months before the actual painting begins. … He will keep turning the idea over and over in his mind, and then one day, no doubt, he will see in his mind’s eye what he has been waiting to see — and perhaps in no more than a couple of hours, complete the process that has been occupying his attention for months.'

Nolan described a semi-automatic process of painting:

'If the moment is right … the paint itself, which is just an intractable material, actually begins to spread itself into forms; you think of a tree and a tree evolves; you think of a horse’s head and that appears. … If you are lucky enough to achieve this state, which might last for twenty minutes, something inexplicable happens and when you come out of it, the picture more or less is completed, or at least it can be finished quite consciously.'

In 1962, he told Hazel de Berg:

'I really cook the images in myself until I’ve got them as clear as I can possibly get them … but once I get in front of the canvas I’m very quick to get something down, and then I hope that something takes over for a brief period in the painting to melt all the images together. It is very difficult to do this, I think, intellectually and you are dependent on some rather irrational process at some point in the painting to weld the things together. I do lots of drawing but I don’t do drawings for paintings … I like to work against the clock, so to speak, wait for the bell lap and then race … It’s a bit difficult to put into words, but I think what painters try to get at, or what I try to get at anyway, is that a painting is an extension of yourself … I believe in the past that Chinese artists working at their bamboo paintings would put their fingers right into the brush, the bristles of the brush, and work there in order to feel this kind of electric thing flowing through them, that they want to get as close as possible to the ink … [T]he other obsession, or compulsion in a way, is that the growth [of a painting as part of oneself] will be something that other people can
recognise, that it has got a meaning for them, and I think this is the rather
knife-edged thing that painters are on, that they want to produce
something out of themselves but they want it to be something other
people will recognise... you want it to be part of the common experience
and to be recognised as such.20

Nolan was clear about some of the ingredients that went into making
Riverbend.

"I painted River Bend for my old man", he said sadly, "he's all mixed
up with it".21

Sidney Henry Nolan's poor health may have been the reason Nolan
undertook to base himself in Australia in 1965. From 1962 the artist had
made one or more trips yearly to see his parents. In 1963 he paid for them,
his sisters, and their husbands, to visit Europe, a trip his father enjoyed
despite his heart condition. Nolan went to Melbourne on several
occasions during February and March 1964. As his father's health
worsened Nolan phoned home weekly, then more frequently, from
wherever he was in the world. Sidney senior's health continued to decline
through the later part of 1964 and he died at home on 20 April 1965, six
weeks after the Nolans arrived in Australia

Nolan's Ned Kelly was a family story that over time became entwined
with the artist's reflections about himself and the human predicament. He
told Elwyn Lynn, 'I base my Kelly on my father's brother [Bill] — a good
axeman and terribly Irish.' His original ambition in painting the story had
been pride in his family's working-class Irish-Australian heritage: 'I
wanted to prove that an untrained factory worker could look at modern
art and it would come out of the country.'22 Twenty years later, in
Riverbend, he had an ambivalent concept of Australia as a compelling
natural setting for bizarre human acts:

'Our light is pure impressionism, our life is expressionism — this
explains a great deal of Australian art. In River Bend one tried for this...
I wanted a dappled light in purity and a painting quite unclassical,
[showing] a place that is used — occupied [and] used by our Irish Anglo
Saxons with its discursive mode.'23

He told Lynn that the outlaw's story and the Toolamba landscape, two
of the ingredients for this "modern art", had been embedded in him
when he was a boy. An anecdote he recounted in connection with his
Uncle Bill (alias Ned Kelly) was particularly oblique, yet one recognises, in
the story of violence flowering from a chance observation, the same
inexplicable shock of disconnection that is typical of Nolan's art. Nolan
told the story in three sequential snapshots collaged with some philosophical reflections and a quotation from Mao Tse Tung:

‘[Bill Nolan] saw a fish in the Goulburn River – will be in a narrow channel – the return with a gun – like knowledge and premeditation – resourcefulness – I’ve written a little poem – In the end I wrote the fish shows his fin and so like beginning and end of human speech – Mao – mouths of guns. Small genuine stories move you as a kid and you find a vehicle for them. The minutiae of all life.’

One of Mao’s sayings was that political power came less from words than from the mouths of guns. Nolan transposed the saying to the violence of Uncle Bill Nolan: a man with a gun, and a famous axeman in the forests at Daunt’s Bend, Toolamba. The connection of place and folk history with his family, via Nolan’s inward gaze, gave edge to the artist’s vision during the several weeks while he painted the Riverbend panels. The scene of life was the scene of death. His father was dying. A tiny fish (Christian symbol of death and regeneration) swims into the vicinity of Ned as he nurses the dead Scanlon in the first panel of Riverbend [Plate 2]. A boy, like a tadpole, appears in the foreground of a preliminary work, Figures and wattle 1964. Riverbend is a primeval Eden of water, mud, sprouting trees, mottled light and sprite-sized men of the same colour and nakedness as the trees. The disappearance into the scene of Nolan’s famous personage, Ned Kelly, makes Riverbend the most unusual of his many paintings that imagined the life and circumstances of the nineteenth-century outlaw. Camouflaged in the flickering light between the trees, Ned and Scanlon meld with nature. Kelly in particular is small, bare, vulnerable, and of ambiguous tenderness. When Riverbend was shown in Australia a debate sprang up in letters to newspapers, “Was Ned Kelly a homosexual?” More appropriately, in the first panel he and Scanlon are a colonial pieta. Further downriver Scanlon’s swollen corpse floats like a dead fish on the water [Plate 5] but in the next panel he is shown drifting lightly from the trees, like a scarf of peeled bark [Plate 4]. As with the young airman in Rupert Brooke’s famous poem he is ecstatically diving to death, “into clearness leaping.” Death by flying, by falling and by water had especial meaning for Nolan who described the experience of travelling in a foreign country as, “like a dream in which you drown and fly at the same time.”

Robert Melville, in a catalogue essay written in early January 1965, while Nolan was finishing Riverbend, commented that whereas the first two series of Ned Kelly paintings had been accompanied by titles and
quotations from historical documents, ‘partly to affirm the factual basis of the series’: ‘they would not be suitable for the Kelly series he had just completed.’ In Riverbend the poetry is not localised. The outlaw and constable are joined in a quest for the meaning of life:

‘Kelly is still the man with the helmet-head but … he is naked, and nakedness is timeless. He is no longer a bushranger but a man on a journey… When he struggles with another man it is as if they were dreaming the same dream, sleeping uneasily at different camp sites…’

Melville says the imagery would be well supported by lines from T. S. Eliot’s “The Wasteland” ‘which envisages a man watching himself from far off’:

When I count there are only you and I together
But when I look ahead up the white road
There is always another one walking beside you
Wrapped in a brown mantle, hooded

and Eliot’s note that those lines were stimulated by the account of an Antarctic expedition; ‘it was related that the party of explorers, at the extremity of their strength, had the constant delusion that there was one more member than could actually be counted.’

Melville decided that the many journeys undertaken by Nolan – to the US, Egypt, Africa, Greece and Antarctica – had not dispersed his creativity. There was a profound continuity in Nolan’s art, which demonstrated, movingly, that the journeys had been one journey:

‘[I]n the paintings of the Australian journeys into the outback, where the bushranger Ned Kelly and the explorers Burke & Wills are always out ahead of him, like guides who keep their distance … he seems to reach the heart of his intention.’

Riverbend is a landscape of unmistakable presence. In it Nolan made an overt connection between his deep feeling for his Irish-Australian heritage and a concept of Australia as a primeval scene. The idea of timelessness or all-time had been first expressed by Nolan in the 1948–1950 landscapes of Northern and Central Australia and it influenced the 1964 images of the frozen Antarctic as well as Riverbend.

Cynthia Nolan related a story Nolan told her in 1965.

‘Last night a professor of psychology and a psychoanalyst had been telling him what the nine paintings that comprised the River Bend panel were about. “You are preoccupied with death and violence. You have
accepted this and resolved it, … [There] are signs of a castration complex in your paintings, they terrify me just as the Australian bush terrifies me,” [said the] professor… “But…you have realised…the meaning of the stars in space… these two experiences amalgamated and so you experience a kind of terrible joy. Your abstract knowledge fuses with … the stars, millions of miles away, [which] may even not exist any more.”

Australia as a scene at the beginning of the world had been a trope since the late nineteenth century. Nolan’s interest in the idea could have been rekindled by his traveller’s search for meaning, his father’s declining health, conversations with his friend Alan Moorehead, indications of drought in the hinterland in March 1964 when Drysdale drove him and the Director of the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Hal Missingham, to Adelaide, and a particular insight he was given during that journey. Drysdale wrote:

“Today just before we entered Yass I drove a mile out on the Wee Jasper road. On a ridge on either side of the road is an outcrop of Silurian fossil deposits of coral reefs, which once grew in a warm Silurian sea. Hal & Sid were fascinated with [the contrast between the past and] the lovely blonde landscape rolling away around us.”

Nolan had a yearning for totality. In October 1964 he suggested to a sceptical Scottish broadcaster that it was indeed possible in modern times to paint a myth of Australia:

‘[E]ven if one had a completely urban upbringing, there always was, and there still is a terrific sense of a primeval landscape stretching for ever …. [T]he objective world is so strong there that … one accepts it willy–nilly.”

Likewise, he’d found Antarctica ‘enormous and lethal’. However, to an artist of his time the sensation of sublime ‘awe and fear’ was insufficient; the existential flow of one’s perceptions had also to be tapped:

‘I must be able to place that kind of sequence of one emotion running over the other, find a concrete form for it … I think this is a general preoccupation with all of us now that we are concerned with finding out what we are, because we have learned now that, in fact, we don’t know what we are.”

Talking with Charles Spencer that month, Nolan tried again to describe his vision of creativity tied to a personal journey, and met with a sceptical response. The artist referred to Bertrand Russell’s hope that ‘before dying he would say something definitive about life — not any specific aspect … the stuff of life, its totality.’ Spencer saw the quest for totality as a mark
of Nolan’s provincialism: ‘This need for solution, the optimistic belief that man can understand and master the confusion of life, is surely at variance with our 20th century despair of finding a cohesive pattern.’ He asked why all the faces in Nolan’s paintings based on Shakespeare’s Sonnets were so ‘enigmatically, unpredictably Australian.’ Agreeing that his Shakespeare ‘looked like a swagman,’ Nolan wondered whether it wasn’t part of the ungovernable egoism of creativity that Shakespeare, indeed the world, would be seen in terms of one’s own experience? — ‘In saying something powerful about yourself poetically, you become reconciled to it.’ To Spencer, Nolan’s ‘outsidedness is really the equation of his Australianness.’ To Nolan, on the other hand, ‘outsidedness’ was a condition of creativity.”

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Arthur Boyd, the second creative fellow represented in this exhibition, spent the five months of his fellowship (21 September 1971 – 29 February 1972) in Canberra. His home base since 1959 had been London, where Australian artists and writers had been having the effect of an ‘antipodean’ new wave. Their art was raw and uncompromising, and it expressed Australian realities that were exotic to international audiences yet touched on universal human myths.

When Boyd was approached by the Australian National University in early May 1970 he was fifty. Events during the past two or three years had put him in the position of considering the tenor of his art and life. In 1967 a first monograph, written by Franz Philipp, had pointed to the meaningful recurrence of motifs and stories in his work. The following year, returning to Australia on a visit, Boyd recovered his dead father’s drawings (seeing in them much that resembled his own work) and travelled around the painting sites of his father, his grandfather, and his own early career. The university’s letter of invitation arrived at the end of a major retrospective at the National Gallery of Victoria. This phase of Boyd’s self-reflection was to have a formidable outcome in the series of paintings that followed his creative fellowship in Canberra.

The paintings produced during 1972-73 were dubbed the ‘Caged Painter’ series by Ursula Hoff in her 1986 monograph on the artist; the name stuck, and was formalised by Janet McKenzie in a monograph published in 2000. Tom Rosenthal, an English publisher friend, has said