



## The Literary Perception, 1945-1961

### Abstract for chapter 4

In this chapter, four literary views of Aboriginal Australia are isolated and discussed: the poetic and symbolic approach; that of the anthropologist as translator; the perpetuation of popular stereotypes; and the sensitive, naturalistic stance. Each view can be linked with the work of white Australian writers who published during the 1945-1961 period.

Although none of these four literary options succeeds in presenting an Aboriginal persona as a fully realistic individual, Black Australians were at least treated by some Australian authors as creative subjects.

#### *Keywords*

anthropology, Donald Stuart, Judith Wright, Patrick White, Randolph Stow

## *The Literary Perception, 1945–1961*

In the years following 1945, whether they despised Aborigines or felt genuine compassion for them, most Australians continued to believe that Black Australians were basically incapable of looking after themselves. Despite evidence to the contrary provided by incidents such as the Pilbara strike, the attitude that Aborigines were a people who for their own good had to be coerced into ‘correct’ modes of behaviour was manifested in almost all governmental Aboriginal policy until the early 1960s. Even those Aborigines who had accepted the ideal of assimilation were denied the rights held by all Australian citizens – including access to liquor, the franchise, and enumeration in the census – and faced social and legal obstacles to that citizenship.

The concept of Aborigines needing things done for them is a significant one. When they were viewed as objects of derision this naturally led to prejudice, discrimination, and the invoking of pejorative stereotypes. When they were viewed as objects of praise this could easily develop into idealisation, most frequently of traditional Aboriginal ceremonies and beliefs. Both responses were damaging because they necessitated an ideological distancing of White and Black Australians. Neither provided the means by which men and women could see the other race solely as human beings, to whom skin colour was of secondary importance. This ideological gap was just as difficult for members of either race to bridge as the physical, political and socio-economic gulf between Europeans and Aboriginal Australians. This concept was, of course, in direct conflict with the avowed aims of the assimilation policy and buttressed a host of more overt and institutionalised racial barriers. It was true that Aborigines were no longer effectively invisible in Australian society, but they were often treated as if their existence – certainly their autonomous existence – was meaningless.

Similar perceptions of Aboriginal people can be identified in the poetry and prose of the 1945-1961 period. As in the preceding fifteen year span, popular literature – which still often characterised Aborigines according to damaging and degrading stereotypes – continued to be absorbed by the reading public. On the other hand, anthropologists such as Berndt and Strehlow promoted the notion that Black Australians in their traditional culture were worthy of praise. These anthropologists' translations of traditional songs and poetry may have enhanced the reputation of tribal Aborigines, but this process concurrently denigrated the popular perception of the culture of the growing numbers of fringe-dwelling and urban Aborigines.<sup>1</sup> Through their emphasis upon traditional Aboriginal culture as the only authentic Black Australian voice, both the popular and the scientific literature of the period harmonised in a disturbing way with the prevailing governmental policies aimed at assimilation, for all non-traditional blacks were considered to be ripe material for cultural absorption.

Fortunately, other writers during the period saw far more intrinsic value in all Aboriginal culture. The poet Judith Wright set the literary stage for a period in which major writers concerned themselves with Aborigines as members of a wronged race, as symbols of indigenous and environmental values, and as subjects – not objects – worthy of sensitive compassion. Yet even in the culmination of the literature of that period, represented by the seminal works of Patrick White (*Voss* and *Riders in the Chariot*), the Aborigine continued to be one step removed from humanness and humanity. In *Riders in the Chariot* the Black Australian remains a symbol of an Aboriginal pariah, and does not have significance solely as a human being. Despite the fact that these writers progressed much further than their predecessors towards a picture of the unrepresentative Aborigine and appreciated far more completely the environmental identification of Black Australians as well as their deeply spiritual nature, they still used Aborigines to exemplify their own aesthetic and philosophical convictions. In other words, while they could outline the need for just compensation for past wrongs, they were still distanced from Black Australians as living and breathing women and men.<sup>2</sup>

There are exceptions to this: the author of *Yandy*, Donald Stuart, probably comes the closest of any White Australian writer during this period to a sensitive depiction of the Aboriginal people as Aboriginal human beings. It is important to note that during the 1945-1961 period certain White Australian authors foreshadowed an increased

sensitivity amongst the larger Australian population to the symbolic and environmental value of Aboriginal culture, a sensitivity which was non-assimilationist in perspective.

In this chapter, four literary views of Aboriginal Australians will be isolated and discussed: the poetic and symbolic approach; that of the anthropologist as translator; the perpetuation of popular stereotypes; and the sensitive, naturalistic stance. While the four sometimes intermingle, each view can be linked very directly with the work of one or more influential White Australian writers who published during the 1945-1961 period.

The decades of physical and psychological violence suffered by Australian Aborigines had to take their toll, but this was not exacted only from the victims. It was impossible for a sensitive conscience to remain untouched by the exploitation, murder, and dispossession of Aboriginal people specially if one's own ancestors had been directly involved in the process. In some parts of Australian society there was, beneath the surface, an element of guilt which was routinely sublimated by charity, and more often by distancing and ignorance. It is not surprising that, following the stresses of World War II, this latent guilt would find its way to the surface through the workings of a hyper-sensitive mind. In this case, it was the mind of a poet keenly attuned to suffering and injustice; the mind of Judith Wright.

Wright's work ushered in a phase of guilt investigation and symbolic expiation which has persisted in White Australian literature until the present day. In the period between 1945 and 1961 she was one of the most perceptive of Australian writers to come to terms with the fact of an Aboriginal Australia which had been both physically and psychologically invaded. Wright transformed her understanding into a treatment of the theme of that violation expressed in environmental and humanistic terms.

Wright's first volume of poetry, *The Moving Image*, was published in 1946. Just as the experience of the war years strongly affected the world-view of many Aborigines, the horrors of that period had a strong impact upon Wright's sensibilities. Those sensibilities were given voice in her verse, for it was during those years that she 'began writing some poetry, largely because the country seemed to be very beautiful and very threatened'.<sup>3</sup> Wright's poetry has justifiably received considerable critical attention and acclaim and I do not intend to summarise the significance of the entire corpus of her work here.<sup>4</sup> With regard to

her poetic perception of Aboriginal Australians, *The Moving Image* still remains one of her most impressive achievements.

Three of the poems published in that volume, 'Bora Ring', 'Nigger's Leap, New England' and 'Half-Caste Girl', attempt and achieve a striking reappraisal of Aboriginal culture. When compared with virtually any preceding Australian poem, their distinctiveness becomes obvious. All three exhibit a profound sense of history as the agent of malevolent time, a marked sense of place, and a singular appreciation of the symbolic and environmental importance of Aboriginal culture. Above all, a keen awareness of historical guilt 'not only racial, but explicitly familial'<sup>5</sup> surfaces in these poems. For example, in 'Bora Ring':

The song is gone; the dance  
is secret with the dancers in the earth,  
the ritual useless, and the tribal story  
lost in an alien tale . . .

Only the rider's heart  
halts at a sightless shadow, an unsaid word  
that fastens in the blood the ancient curse,  
the fear as old as Cain.<sup>6</sup>

The fear and guilt is both collective – pertaining to all of White Australia's history – and individual, referring to the participation of Wright's own ancestors in massacres of the past. The specific inheres in the universal most impressively in her 'Nigger's Leap, New England' with its disconcertingly direct and alliterative imagery:

Be dark, O lonely air.  
Make a cold quilt across the bone and skull  
that screamed falling in flesh from the lipped cliff  
and then were silent, waiting for the flies.

Then Wright vaults the memory of this particular massacre into a larger sphere:

Did we not know their blood channelled our rivers,  
and the black dust our crops ate was their dust?  
O all men are one man at last.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, her observation on the violence and precariousness of the Aboriginal post-conquest past expands outwards to embrace all humanity. In Brennan's words, this 'reminds us that the cry of the falling aboriginal is not only the cry of his passing culture, but of ours

too. His death, and the death of his people are an ominous reminder of our own ephemerality'.<sup>8</sup>

This raises a critical question: 'Did Judith Wright in 1946 use the Aborigine purely as a poetic symbol of historical injustice and of repressed Australian fear and guilt, rather than to signify a specific and continuing social problem?' Was her engagement with the theme more philosophical and artistic than socially conscious, and are the two incompatible? Regarding her poem 'Half-Caste Girl', Wright stated in 1982 that 'The little girl in the poem is based upon a person still alive . . . But a poem is very seldom real – the literal becomes transformed'. Further, she has admitted very little direct contact with Aborigines during her youth, and certainly not during the time the poems in *The Moving Image* were composed:

There were very few Aborigines around us at the time, though some passed through and some worked for us. The Bora ring of the poem was on my uncle's place . . . But, we were *not allowed* to know Aborigines in . . . terms of friendship . . . The first Aboriginal friend I had was Kath Walker.

There were on a large pastoral property such as Wright's well-established conventions and institutions which separated black from white. Yet, this did not prevent the seepage of guilt into the atmosphere:

To say that we had been the murderers was not a popular view at the time! Nobody mentioned Aborigines at all in my youth. I didn't even know there *was* a dying pillow . . . Quite certainly there was guilt. That's why there was so little said.<sup>9</sup>

In view of these admissions, it would be misleading to ascribe to Wright's poetry an explicitly sociological dimension. Her verse is far too complex to be termed overtly propagandist, and she herself rejects such a description. Rather, the Black Australian characters she creates in her poetry can be more appropriately interpreted as symbols of the Aboriginal people's unity with the environment as well as of the invasion which they had been forced to endure. It is significant that for Wright, Europeans have never atoned for that invasion and atonement is essential if there is to be harmony between black and white in Australia. In symbolic terms, it is as if the souls of the murdered blacks are in limbo, or the perpetual rootlessness and torment of Purgatory awaiting, in Healy's words, the 'new recognition, and fresh syntheses'<sup>10</sup> that can liberate them. For example, Josie in 'Half-Caste Girl':

is restless still under her rootwarm cover,  
hearing the noise of living,  
forgetting the pain of dying.<sup>11</sup>

But how are these 'fresh syntheses' to be achieved? Wright outlines the problem most succinctly in the final stanza of her poem, 'At Cooloola', published in the 1955 collection, *The Two Fires*. It is one of coming to terms with the past and with the guilt spawned by that past:

And walking on clean sand among the prints  
of bird and animal, I am challenged by a driftwood spear  
thrust from the water; and, like my grandfather,  
must quiet a heart accused by its own fear.<sup>12</sup>

This dilemma of ingrained historical guilt is repeatedly addressed in Wright's poetry, but she actually argues the potential solution most cogently in her prose. For, in *The Generations of Men* (1959) she writes:

To forgive oneself – that was the hardest task. Until the white men could recognise and forgive that deep and festering consciousness of guilt in themselves, they would not forgive the blacks for setting it there. The murder would go on – open or concealed – until the blacks were all gone, the whites forever crippled.

Is this the solution or sophistry? For immediately preceding this passage, Wright emphasises in clear terms the fundamental disjunction between White and Black Australians, a gulf which is described as being nearly impossible to bridge:

Why should the blacks, with that soft obstinacy that was almost gaiety, thus invite their own murder? They refused the conditions his people had imposed; they preferred their own stubbornness. It was unfair, unfair, that such a choice should be given, such an invitation made. 'Kill us, for we can never accept you' the blacks said; 'kill us, or forget your own ambitions'.<sup>13</sup>

There are two plausible alternatives open to the critic attempting to clarify this ambivalent view of the Aboriginal people. The first is to concur with Shirley Walker that 'Despite the strength of the presentation of evil and guilt in these poems . . . the possibility of reconciliation through love is present. Indeed, each of the poems . . . is an act of atonement in itself'.<sup>14</sup> According to this interpretation, lines such as the following, taken from 'The Dust in the Township' section of 'The Blind Man', in themselves and through their tender evocation of Aboriginal oneness with the land serve to erase at least some of the sense of historical guilt under which Wright laboured:

Under the Moreton Bay fig by the war memorial  
blind Jimmy Delaney sits alone and sings  
in the pollen-coloured dust, is of that dust  
three generations made.<sup>15</sup>

I find this interpretation less than totally convincing, largely because of the primarily symbolic rather than individualised use of Aboriginal character and place which Wright adopts in her poetry. It is true that in her verse she introduced a new sensibility to an examination of the Aboriginal theme, but that theme was itself adopted because it facilitated an examination of larger aesthetic, moral, and philosophical issues. Her verse has had such an impact because of the considerable power of her poetic and creative imagination; not exclusively because of its expiatory qualities.

The second explanation for the ambivalence which one senses in *The Generations of Men* is twofold and, I feel, more persuasive. It is that Wright's own views concerning Black Australians have not remained constant and, as she has become more actively committed to the cause, her writing has reflected this increased engagement. For example, in 1982 Wright delivered a speech at the Adelaide Festival Writers' Week in which she asserted that the dispossession of the Aborigines and their 'tragic situation':

have been my own chief social concerns, but I don't think they have done my work as a poet any harm whatever. Indeed, both have provided a spur to writing, and deepened my own knowledge and perceptions in many ways.<sup>16</sup>

The point is not that Wright has been inconsistent. The point is that in the 1945-1961 period her engagement with the Aboriginal people was almost entirely limited to detached – if extremely empathic and sensitive – poetic observation, in which Black Australian themes were the springboard for profound moral questioning. In the post-1961 era, her writing – particularly her prose – becomes far more committed to a conception of Aborigines as Aboriginal human beings, rather than as metaphysical symbols. During the period under consideration here, her work exemplifies the symbolic treatment of Aborigines in Australian literature extremely well.

However, it should be emphasised that personal contact with Black Australians was no guarantee of authorial integrity in the post-World War II period. It is intriguing and ironic that during the entire assimilation era, when Aborigines were in theory being gradually absorbed into the mainstream of Australian society, not a single

Aboriginal writer's work was published. One can only speculate upon the reasons for the hiatus in the production of Aboriginal literature between Unaipon's work in the 1920s and 1930s and Oodgeroo Noonuccal's in the 1960s. There seems to be little doubt that there would have been a market for such literature if it conformed to expectations; in short, if it looked like material derived from traditional sources. For the late 1940s and early 1950s were years in which what may be termed 'traditional Aboriginal literature not written by Aborigines' came into vogue. This was largely due to the stalwart efforts of anthropologists such as T.G.H. Strehlow and Ronald M. and Catherine H. Berndt, who sought out traditional Aboriginal myths during their field work with such groups as the Aranda and the people of Arnhem Land. These poetic renderings of the source material were invariably published and were frequently highly acclaimed. For example, R.M. Berndt's translation of 'The Wonguri-Mandijigai Song Cycle of the Moon-Bone' (which was first published in the anthropological journal *Oceania* in 1948<sup>17</sup>) has been reprinted in magazines, journals and books on numerous occasions, and most recently was given pride of place as the opening poem in Rodney Hall's *The Collins Book Of Australian Poetry*. In 1977, the respected poet and critic Les A. Murray commented that 'It stunned me when I first read it, and it may well be the greatest poem composed in Australia'.<sup>18</sup>

Setting aside a consideration of Murray's evaluation, my point here is that the publication of 'traditional Aboriginal literature' occasioned considerable interest in the late 1940s and has continued to do so until the present day. A representative example of the genre was Strehlow's *Aranda Traditions*, which first appeared in print in 1947. The book contains more conventional anthropological analysis as well as a forty-page section devoted to 'Northern Aranda Myths', which comprises traditional stories ranging from a description of the bandicoot ancestor (*gurra*) to raw meat-eating habits. It also contains a number of chants which Strehlow translates in what can only be described as poetic fashion, as in the Ulamba Chant:

Enfolded by plains lies Ljaba;  
Beyond the far horizon lies Ljaba.

Enfolded by plains lies Ljaba,  
Dimmed by the enveloping mists . . .

High in the heavens shines the afternoon sun:  
His heart is filled with yearning to turn home.

My own home, my own dear home –  
O Ulamba, rugged, chasm-cleft.

The birds are speaking with many voices  
At Ulamba, chasm-cleft Ulamba.

My own dear home, –  
Whose feet have disfigured it?

The mulga parrots have disfigured it;  
Their feet have scratched the deserted hollow.<sup>19</sup>

Without questioning either the sincerity or the integrity of Strehlow's translations, it must be conceded that they represented a daunting task. Strehlow himself has admitted that 'the difficulties of translation from Aranda to English are considerable' and that 'he [the translator] has to use inversion and certain poetical turns in an attempt to capture some of the dramatic effect of the original'.<sup>20</sup> The mediating effect of the translator upon the text is obviously important and in such cases the English version becomes very much the anthropologist's interpretation of the intent of the original, filtered through his preconceptions concerning the nature of poetry in English.<sup>21</sup>

This mediating role is made even more explicit in the case of the 'Song Cycle of the Moon-Bone'. Berndt confesses in the notes accompanying the text that 'the general translation is a poetic rendering of the song and . . . as in most translations, the euphony of the verse, the play of words, and the native subtlety of expression, have to some extent been lost'. Rodney Hall's accompanying notes are even more revealing:

The translator, a distinguished anthropologist, has tackled the problem, *boldly preferring a firmly European metre*, sufficiently derived from the King James version of *The Book of Numbers* to convey a sense of ritual and sacredness adequate for the tone of this magnificent song.<sup>22</sup>

Is it quibbling to suggest that, in view of the above, Berndt's role in the production of the English version of the text was more than that of a translator: that he was, in effect, also an editor and nearly a co-author? It can be argued that this suggestion is irrelevant, for the song cycle *is* beautifully lyrical and poetic in translation:

Blown backwards and forwards as they lie, there  
at the place of the Dugong.  
Always there, with their hanging grapes, in  
the clay pan of the Moonlight . . .

Vine plants and roots and jointed limbs,  
 with berry food, spreading  
 over the water.<sup>23</sup>

While the Moon-Bone song has been significantly altered by Berndt, the greatness which does shine through resides primarily in the original oral version.

But even if one ignores the anthropologist's very significant role in the production of this poetry, there is another sense in which the translation of this song cycle – in fact, all anthropological 'poeticising' of traditional material – was and is significant, for two main reasons. First, the conviction that tribal Aborigines of Northern Australia had a venerable culture worth preserving motivated these experts to protect whatever elements of that culture they could secure for 'posterity' or for 'the good of the tribe'. However, the formalisation of tradition can lead to a denigration of the present. All that is worthwhile belongs to the traditional realm rather than to the ongoing, adaptive life of the people. Second, a corollary of the elevation of the status of northern Australian Aborigines (even in retrospect) could have been a lowering of the perceived status of non-traditional Black Australians in the remainder of the country. It was a small step from this conviction to the belief that the latter group had entirely lost their culture – that they in fact had *no* culture – a viewpoint which was to have negative ramifications for many years. Therefore, the translations of anthropologists were, both in literary and in social terms, important factors which influenced the perceptions and opinions of those Australians either associated with, or interested in, the Aboriginal people.

In the late 1940s and early 1950s relatively few Australian novelists demonstrated either this interest or this association in their works. Of those who did (almost exclusively Western Australian writers) none fully resolved what Stow has described as 'a rather uneasy teetering between the demands of sociology on the one hand and art on the other'.<sup>24</sup> Two novels, both published in 1955, illustrate this inherent tension: Mary Durack's *Keep Him My Country* and Frederick B. Vickers's *The Mirage*. Contrary to Stow's appraisal that in the former the sociological/artistic conflict is satisfactorily resolved, Durack's book, though obviously sympathetic and well-informed, suffers from melodramatic and romantic excesses similar to those which over twenty-five years earlier had flawed Katharine Susannah Prichard's *Coonardoo*. For example, there is the same quasi-magical association of the Aboriginal woman (as lover) with the land (as possessor):

A man can break with the black women right enough, but to leave the country after – that's not so easily done. It's like something gets into the blood. Some of 'em reckon it's sorcery.<sup>25</sup>

The attempt to symbolise the Aboriginal woman as the mystically enthralling and fecund life source wears a bit thin in artistic terms. Vickers errs in just as well-intentioned a fashion in a novel which reveals more about White Australian perceptions of Aboriginal people than about Black Australian attitudes. Vickers's failing springs, above all, from a lack of empathy with Black Australians and one can only agree with Healy that as a novelist he was 'stronger on social conscience than on the Aborigine'.<sup>26</sup> In effect, no truly new novelistic ground was broken by White Australians dealing with the Aboriginal theme between the publication of *Capricornia* in 1938 and the appearance of *Voss* in 1957.

In any discussion of contemporary Australian literature, the work of Patrick White cannot be ignored. The novel *Voss* is a marvellous and resonant achievement. White's exploration of the landscape of memory and the terrain of the mind parallels Voss's own exploration of one of the harshest physical landscapes on earth – in which the Aborigines move with ease and efficiency. *Voss* is hardly an anthropological novel, although it does detail the actions of tribal blacks in their extremely demanding local environment. The Aboriginal servants Dugald and Jackie and the entire mass of faceless, undifferentiated blacks are significant, not so much because of the specific traditional customs of the people, but because of their profound spiritual – and actual – affinity with the land and its creatures. Voss's attempt to dominate the Black Australians with whom he comes in contact is as impossible as his endeavour to tame the harshness of the desert itself.

This is not a new observation, nor was White's spiritual and almost sacramental use of the Black Australian theme a radical departure from the poetic approach of, for example, Judith Wright. What was particularly impressive was White's employment of the Aboriginal people as a form of tragic chorus which lamented the folly and presumption of Voss (and European exploration and civilisation writ large) and the magnificence of his poetic sensibility in so doing. The theme of religious self-sacrifice runs through much of the novel; as Boyle of Jildra puts it:

Why, anyone who is disposed can celebrate a high old Mass, I promise, with the skull of a blackfeller and his own blood, in Central Australia.<sup>27</sup>

This is what Voss does willingly and purposefully, because the novel is based upon the belief that 'to make yourself, it is also necessary to destroy yourself'.<sup>28</sup> Healy has shown convincingly that White's Aborigines are unified in the novel with the rocks, trees, and sand which are their habitat, as in the following passage:

During the morning a party of blacks appeared, first as shreds of shy bark glimpsed between the trunks of trees, but always drifting, until, finally, they halted in human form upon the outskirts of the camp.<sup>29</sup>

To draw a further point from this observation: even though the white explorers become themselves blackened by the sun, withered by the heat and increasingly moulded by their surroundings, there always remains an essential gulf between the races. As the expedition progresses, the blacks come to accept the presence of the whites in their terrain and no longer fear them, for they both now share the same environment:

Such meetings had come to be accepted by all. The blacks squatted on their haunches, and stared up at the men that were passing, of whom they had heard, or whom they had even seen before. Once, the women would have run screaming. Now they scratched their long breasts, and squinted from under their bat's-skin hands. Unafraid of bark or mud, they examined these caked and matted men, whose smell issued less from their glands than from the dust they were wearing, and whose eyes were dried pools.<sup>30</sup>

The shared environment does *not* produce a spiritual rapport. In the critical episode in which Voss attempts to placate Jackie and his adopted tribe with the words, 'Tell your people we are necessary to one another. Blackfellow white man friend together', the attempt at conciliation is doomed. Clearly, the Aborigines did not consider the whites to be necessary to them. The lesson learned from contact between the races was a very different one, and Jackie's 'Blackfeller dead by white man'<sup>31</sup> is a simple but eloquent rebuttal. The fundamental dichotomy between black and white is beautifully, consistently, and strikingly evoked by the author in this novel.

A similar gulf in Aboriginal/white spirituality is illustrated by Randolph Stow in *To the Islands*, but the logic of the novel's plot is ultimately lacking. Stow's is a fascinating and often moving book which can be compared with *Voss* in certain respects. Both novels deal with egotistical men who wish to dominate the Aborigine as overlords; both men therefore suffer delusions of grandeur by believing that they can communicate with the blacks on the same plane; and both journey through harsh, unforgiving country in a Lear-like

endeavour to divest themselves of all the accretions of western civilisation. But Heriot cannot be equated fully with Voss, nor can Justin be paralleled with Jackie. For Stephen Heriot, a mission administrator of the old 'stock-whip' school, persuades himself that he can *become* Aboriginal if he undergoes enough self-denial on his journey to the islands. He has a profound desire to be accepted by the blacks as an equal. Hence, he speaks the native language to Justin and asserts, 'No more white man. I'm a blackfellow, son of the sun',<sup>32</sup> and a short while later he implores the tribal man Alunggu to treat him as such: 'I am one of you', he said. '*Ngaia bendjin*'.<sup>33</sup> Heriot's self-effacement is touching, but his belief that he is Aboriginal is pure self-deception, if not also pathetic. As a man lives, so will he be judged, and Heriot must logically purge many past sins before he will be accepted on equal terms by the Aborigines. Even then he will never actually *be* a Black Australian, even in world-view. This is grandiose self-delusion of the order of Voss's pseudo-royal treatment of his black 'subjects'.

Hence, the forgiveness and spiritual reconciliation between Rex and Heriot is illogical and over-sentimentalised. Heriot's inflated sense of his own importance is never fully purged during the time he craves absolution; in fact, his monomania concerning forgiveness acts to reinforce his self-centredness. Stow's desire to act as an apologist for the mission system thus produces a lack of internal consistency in his novel – despite its imagistic strengths – especially as it draws to a close. Dorothy Jones is therefore justified when she observes:

*To The Islands* is a beautiful and moving novel, but its aboriginal characters are abstractions rather than real people. This can be justified when the novelist makes a symbol of the natives as does Patrick White in *Voss*. I feel it is scarcely permissible, however, for a writer who makes race relationships a major theme.<sup>34</sup>

Despite Stow's symbolic and poetic approach to the Aboriginal theme, the different internal dynamic of his novel sets it very definitely apart from *Voss* and, ultimately, determines its lack of persuasiveness.

Although also a West Australian by birth, Donald Stuart is a very different type of writer. Stuart lived nearly all his life in the state, with the exception of three years from 1941 to 1944 when he was interned in Southeast Asia as a Japanese prisoner-of-war. Stuart spent much of that career in direct contact with Aboriginal people on the land, swag-carrying, cattle-droving, sinking wells, prospecting, mining and working on the wharves. In many respects he was the

archetypal itinerant bushman, but he saw Black Australians with a far more perceptive and empathic eye than did other travelling raconteurs such as Idriess. Moreover, he was directly and intimately involved with the aftermath of the Pilbara strike and later, with the Pindan Co-operative. The genesis of the strike provided the source material for his first – and one of his finest – novels, *Yandy*.

Whereas White is an unparalleled imagist and symbolist, Stuart is a naturalist. He admitted that one of his primary aims in writing was ‘to see completely from the Aboriginal point of view’ but he was enough of a realist to concede:

Whether I’ve succeeded or not I don’t make any claims . . . I think *Yandy* to a great extent is written from the Aboriginal point of view . . . *But* it is not for you, it is not for me, it is not for *any* white man to say, ‘Yes, that is from the Aboriginal point of view’. I say that I have tried. I say that in some books I have succeeded. But the only one who can give an opinion thoroughly on that is . . . what Elkin calls ‘the man of high degree’ – an Aboriginal proper man, fully initiated, experienced and of high degree.

He has scoffed at the suggestion that a European critic could judge his writing by this criterion:

I’ll defy any white man to say, ‘Ah, that’s all balls; he’s got that all wrong’. I don’t care whether they’re anthropologists or who they are. I’ve seen too many anthropologists who’ve got it all the wrong way ‘round . . . I refuse to give them any hearing.<sup>35</sup>

For Stuart, the Pilbara movement was motivated and sustained by traditional Aboriginal ways and beliefs, operating successfully in a modern context. It then becomes clear why in *Yandy* he emphasises the eligibility of part-Aborigines to learn the traditional law:

Nobody wants a halfcaste. Whites and blacks alike refuse to have him. What a lie! He knew well that a halfcaste who stayed true to his mother’s people could be as high in the Law as any fullblood man from the furthest reaches of the Desert country. But then, whitefellers always lied.<sup>36</sup>

It seems that a certain amount of wish-fulfillment is operative here. Stuart falls into a way of thinking which is, in its own way, remarkably similar to that which circumscribed the anthropologists Strehlow and Berndt. As Stuart possesses such a sincere and heartfelt respect for traditional Aboriginal culture, he must attempt to show that it was vibrant in 1946 and that it harmonised with modern techniques of industrial action. But, Clancy McKenna and Dooley Bin-Bin were not ‘men of high degree’, even if they did identify totally as Black Australians. They possessed an Aboriginal culture which was

not strictly traditional but was adaptive, and which was as authentic in its own terms as the Aboriginal culture of, say, 20 000 years earlier. Stuart's own admiration for the 'true' Black Australian culture blinds him to the fact that fringe-dwelling and urban Aborigines possess to this day a distinctive world-view.

Stuart's eye for detail and perceptive ear for direct speech are exemplified in *Yandy*, which is factual, economically written, measured and restrained. The novel is Stuart's affectionate celebration of the Black Australian world-view and an exploration of the positive possibilities for communally-oriented Aborigines in a contemporary environment. Underlying all of this is an idealistic optimism:

There were days and sometimes weeks when the tucker was not enough to go around and all hands downed tools and lived on the country . . . there was strife, and always the old hands carried the burden, till slowly, ever so slowly, but surely as the sun and stars, men and women came forward to match the old hands, men and women who were willing to sweat and thirst and hunger, men and women who wanted their hard times to lead to better things for their hungry ragged children, and gradually the scales tipped.<sup>37</sup>

Of all the White Australian writers who have treated Black Australian themes in their works, Stuart probably comes the closest to an appreciation of Aboriginal people as human beings. However, his belief in the exclusively genuine nature of traditional Aboriginal society ensured that he would always fail to appreciate fully the worth of contemporary Aboriginal culture.

Despite Stuart's limitations, his natural and unfeigned empathy with Black Australians is preferable to the approach which one finds in the books of a writer such as Douglas Lockwood. Stuart was frank in his criticism of Lockwood's writing, and contended that his work should be ignored in any study of the literary treatment of the Black Australian theme. In Stuart's words:

He's a journalist; he's not a man of letters . . . Douglas Lockwood is not a writer. Douglas Lockwood . . . like all good journo gets an idea and he's out for a quick quid. I don't think he's of any consequence.<sup>38</sup>

However, in terms of the perpetuation of popular stereotypes of Black Australians in literature, Lockwood *is* of consequence and his work cannot be overlooked. Though his popularity was not of the same order as that of Idriess, Lockwood's books were certainly not ignored by the Australian reading public. For example, by May 1982, over 85 000 copies of his biography of Waipuldanya [Phillip Roberts] entitled *I, The*

*Aboriginal* had been sold in Australia in various editions. Other titles did not penetrate the market to this extent but a book such as *Fair Dinkum*, first published in 1960, sold over 20000 copies consistently enough to be in print for almost exactly twenty years.<sup>39</sup> By contrast, Stuart's *Yandy* never sold more than half this number of copies, however worthy a novel it might have been.<sup>40</sup> The point is that whether or not one approves of Lockwood's subject matter, his style, or his attitude to Aboriginal people, he was a writer whose work dealing with Black Australians must be at least briefly examined.

*Fair Dinkum* is a typical example of Lockwood's writing. It comprises a number of tales – perhaps most appropriately termed yarns – which describe various events in the Northern Territory in the 1940s, and in all cases Aboriginal characters loom large. This is not to say that these characters are described with universal admiration and respect. Some are lauded for their supposedly 'instinctual' skills of tracking and telepathy, but the general pattern is one in which Black Australians are damned with faint praise:

I have lived much of my life in the bush in close touch with black men like Oondabund and Narleeba, two of the pleasantest primitives ever to hurl murderous spears, and the more I see of them the greater is my conviction that they are underrated and much maligned people.<sup>41</sup>

In the pages of *Fair Dinkum* one learns that in 1950 'wild and primitive natives still roam' (p. 9) in The Granites region of the Territory and that the Aborigines were as terrified as children by the Japanese bombing of Darwin: 'Me go walkabout now, quick time I think. Flesh belong me, him got pimple all-the-same goose' (p. 33). Lockwood also tells the reader that Black Australians have 'an obsessive interest in the spiritual and the mythical' (p. 58), that their religion is 'paganism, to be sure' (p. 67), that the 'natives' have an 'absolute addiction to films' (p. 72), and that the traditional people of the area still possess 'primitive harems' (p. 107) threatened by 'primitive wolves' (p. 109). In perhaps his most audacious and inappropriate claim, the author describes his affinity with the Northern Territory in Black Australian terms: 'Immediately I felt the old muscle-twitch, and I knew I was being called back from the Dreamtime to my own tribal land' (p. 185). Lockwood does profess respect and admiration for his Aboriginal 'friends' in *Fair Dinkum*, but his racism – and sexism – are so deeply entrenched that he blithely perjures himself throughout his book. It is possible only to speculate on the extent to which his racial opinions would have struck a

responsive chord in Australia when the book first appeared in print, but its popularity suggests that even as late as the early 1960s such attitudes were not considered to be totally unacceptable – let alone unpublishable – by at least a significant proportion of the population. What is beyond doubt is that Lockwood's work epitomises the perpetuation of Black Australian stereotypes in Australian literature.

It is worth noting that in 1961 a number of other Australian works of fiction dealing with Aboriginal themes were also published, including Stuart's *The Driven*, Gavin Casey's *Snowball*, and Nene Gare's *The Fringe Dwellers*. Although space permits only a cursory mention of these novels, a number of points are pertinent. First, all of these authors can be categorised as sensitive to Aboriginal Australians. Second, one novel in particular was very popular: *The Driven*, Stuart's somewhat idealised treatment of interracial harmony amongst a cattle-droving team, was selected as a secondary school text in New South Wales and Victoria during the 1960s. Thereby, some 50 000 copies of the novel were sold and, in addition, the Readers' Digest company included a condensed version of *The Driven* in a three-book Australian volume which sold in excess of 100 000 copies.<sup>42</sup> Third, although the distribution of *Snowball* and *The Fringe Dwellers* was initially not of the same order,<sup>43</sup> both Casey and Gare did attempt to come to terms with the problems afflicting part-Aboriginal families in urban fringe areas and, in the latter's case, did so upon the basis of substantial first-hand knowledge and field-work. The shift to an urban focus was a welcome one, which represented an overdue response of White Australian authors to the changing demographic realities of the Aboriginal situation.

Appropriately, in Patrick White's striking novel, *Riders in the Chariot* (also first published in 1961) it is a part-Aboriginal city-dweller who becomes one of the four primary foci of the book. Many critics have concentrated upon the spiritual communion between the four 'riders' in this novel,<sup>44</sup> of whom Alf Dubbo is, arguably, the most persuasively drawn.<sup>45</sup> The portrayal of Dubbo again evinces White's singular imaginative power, for the character is, according to the author, entirely an imaginative creation. When asked in interview if the persona of Alf Dubbo was based in any sense upon a living individual, White replied, 'No, not at all. I've only known one or two Aborigines in my life. The inspiration came purely from my own head . . . I don't know what Aborigines think of my books'.<sup>46</sup> All the more impressive then is White's consummate identification with the character whom Kiernan has justifiably termed 'a triumph'.<sup>47</sup>

In *Riders in the Chariot* White captures the metaphysical dilemma of a part-Aboriginal: the pressures exerted by both the Black and White Australian cultures on him; the weight of unsuccessful assimilation which lies so heavily upon his shoulders:

He avoided his own people, whatever the degree of colour, because of a certain delicacy with cutlery, acquired from the parson's sister, together with a general niceness or squeamishness of behaviour, which he could sink recklessly enough when forced, as he had throughout the reign of Mrs Spice, but which haunted him in its absence like some indefinable misery.<sup>48</sup>

It is true that Dubbo is one of the elect in this novel, by virtue of his finely-honed intuitive and spiritual perceptions and because of his status as a rejected outcast. But he is more than an untouchable; he is an *Aboriginal* untouchable, divorced from both the larger white and his traditional black society. In a real sense, then, he is not relegated to the shadow of western society so much as trapped between two conflicting world-views. The pressure and pain are immense, and are commensurate with the vivid hues of tortured paint which virtually leap on to his canvasses. The merging of the internal pain and the external expression of that torment in his paintings is made explicit by White:

The sharp pain poured in crimson tones into the limited space of room, and overflowed. It poured and overflowed his hands. These were gilded, he was forced to observe, with his own gold.<sup>49</sup>

Healy has written very perceptively that:

The fact that Alf is an Aborigine is not superfluous for White . . . Alf was destined to be Aboriginal. He was a logical successor to Jackie, with whom he joined in providing a removed but indigenous view of the society raised by Europeans in Australia over the bones and rights of the Aborigines.<sup>50</sup>

However, I feel it is wrong to contend, as Healy does, that Alf Dubbo represents 'the vehicle for an integrated conception of man in Australia, embracing black and white'; even less valid to claim that the character symbolises 'Patrick White's peace with Australia, with himself in Australia'.<sup>51</sup> Healy is not alone in his defence of this position, for Michael Cotter also maintains that:

As in Voss's acceptance of a 'eucharistic' witchetty grub . . . the relocation of cultural values that is imaged in Alf's painting is White's most significant way of projecting the notion of intercultural harmony.<sup>52</sup>

This is a tidy and idealistic stance, but I also believe it to be an

incorrect one. Alf Dubbo, caught between conflicting black and white worlds, achieves a spiritual communion with three other isolates rejected by conventional society. His vision unifies the outcasts but does not and cannot alter the prevailing mores which brought about the rejection of these unconventional individuals in the first place. To see the potential for intercultural harmony in Dubbo's artwork is to ignore its ignominious fate on the auction room floor. The vision is only meaningful if it is seen and understood by others, and in his case it is not.

I believe that White courageously shows the essential differences between Black and White Australians and highlights the societal forces which separate the two groups, but his vision of spiritual unity between the four 'riders' does not imply or reflect increasing harmony between Europeans and Aborigines in the general sphere. It acts instead to give succour and strength to those individuals whom society metaphorically crucifies through its rigidity and intolerance. The Aboriginal theme is subsumed by White's exploration of cosmic illumination through isolation and rejection. The experience the author describes is a poetic and symbolic one: he addresses the dilemma of outcast humankind.

The boundaries of the 1945-1961 period are in fact delimited by the writings of those who are still two of Australia's finest authors. It is interesting that both Judith Wright and Patrick White shared a poetic, symbolic and metaphysical appreciation of Aboriginal culture, although the latter's career – unlike Wright's – did not develop in a direction which brought him into fruitful collaboration with Black Australians. The poetic/symbolic approach to the Aboriginal theme of Wright, White and Stow ensured that all three would not succumb to the prevailing view of Black Australians at the time in which they wrote. This view characterised the 'Native Affairs' policy of the assimilation period and resulted in the depiction of Aboriginal people as mindless objects of white condescension. It also predominated in the stereotypical writings of those such as Douglas Lockwood. The empathic and naturalistic perspective of Donald Stuart was a third literary option and was one which, along with the poetic/symbolic approach, granted Black Australians at least a measure of the dignity and autonomy that they deserved. Unfortunately, Stuart's belief in the singular authenticity of traditional Aboriginal culture mirrored the viewpoint of a number of prominent and influential anthropologists. Their interpretation of Black Australian society prompted poetic translations of tribal material and, ironically, acted to retard White Australian awareness

of the fact that non-traditional Aborigines also possessed a viable and distinctive culture.

Although none of these four literary options succeeded in presenting an Aboriginal person as a fully sentient and realistic individual, Black Australians were now no longer viewed solely as objects. They were treated by some Australian authors, at least, as creative subjects, even if they were not yet portrayed simply as men and women. This conceptual failure persisted during the 1960s and 1970s and even marred the first Aboriginal novelist's attempt to portray his own people. Only very recently has the barrier been surmounted; only in the past fifteen years have Aboriginal people been fully fleshed and clothed with individualised humanity in Australian literature. This has been one of the salient achievements of contemporary Black Australian writers.

## Notes

- 1 As Stanner has noted, this process logically led to a 'romantic cult of the past' which implied a demand solely for 'traditional things' and persisted even after 1961. He rightly questions 'whether we would be right in reading from the fact of its existence to a proof of any deep-seated change of heart or mind towards the living aborigines'. He makes this point in 'The Appreciation of Difference', in *The 1968 Boyer Lectures; After the Dreaming*, (Sydney, 1969), p. 39.
- 2 In his paper, 'Painting and the Manufacture of Myth', *Meanjin*, vol. 43, no. 4, December, 1984, George Petelin illustrates how some of Australia's best-known painters of the 1945-1961 period, such as Russell Drysdale, also portrayed this detachment from living Black Australians in their work: 'The aboriginal is cast as the mystical "other" exotic and inscrutable – unknowable except as an erotic or aesthetic commodity, and relegated to a spiritual dreamtime conveniently transcendent of the other fictions of our time' (p. 548).
- 3 Quoted from 'The Poets' section of Rodney Hall, ed., *The Collins Book of Australian Poetry*, (Sydney, 1981), p. 445.
- 4 One of the best and most comprehensive critical studies of Wright's poetry is Shirley Walker's *The Poetry of Judith Wright: A Search for Unity*, (Melbourne, 1980).
- 5 *ibid.*, p. 21.
- 6 Judith Wright, 'Bora Ring', in *The Moving Image*, (Melbourne, 1946), p. 12.
- 7 *ibid.*, p. 23.
- 8 G.A. Brennan, 'The Aborigine in the Works of Judith Wright', *Westerly*, no. 4, December, 1972, p. 48.
- 9 Personal interview with Judith Wright, Canberra, July, 1982.
- 10 J.J. Healy, *Literature and the Aborigine in Australia, 1770-1975*, (St. Lucia, 1978), p. 186.
- 11 Wright, *The Moving Image*, p. 27.
- 12 Judith Wright, *Collected Poems, 1942-1970*, (Sydney, 1971), p. 140.
- 13 Judith Wright, *The Generations of Men*, (Melbourne, 1959), p. 156.
- 14 Walker, *The Poetry of Judith Wright*, p. 22.
- 15 Wright, *Collected Poems*, p. 64.

- 16 Judith Wright, 'The Writer as Social Conscience', Address at The Adelaide Festival Writers' Week, March, 1982. An edited version of the address appears in *Overland*, no. 89, October, 1982, pp. 29-31.
- 17 *Oceania*, vol. xix, September, 1948, pp. 16-50.
- 18 Les A. Murray, in 'The Human-Hair Thread', *Meanjin*, vol. 36, no.4, December, 1977, p. 565.
- 19 T.G.H. Strehlow, *Aranda Traditions*, (Melbourne, 1947), pp. 32-33.
- 20 *ibid.*, p. xx.
- 21 For further discussion of the challenges and issues involved in the translation of traditional Aboriginal song-poetry, see Tamsin Donaldson's article, 'Translating Oral Literature: Aboriginal Song Texts', *Aboriginal History*, vol. 3, part 1, 1979, pp. 62-83.
- 22 Quoted in 'The Poets' section of Rodney Hall, ed., *The Collins Book of Australian Poetry*, (Sydney, 1981), p. 444. The emphasis is mine.
- 23 'Wonguri-Mandjigai Song, the Moon-Bone Song', in *ibid.*, p. 18.
- 24 Randolph Stow, 'Negritude for the White Man', in Marie Reay, ed., *Aborigines Now*, (Sydney, 1964), p. 4.
- 25 Mary Durack, *Keep Him My Country*, (London, 1955), p. 72.
- 26 Healy, *Literature and the Aborigine*, p. 216.
- 27 Patrick White, *Voss*, (Harmondsworth, 1960), p. 168.
- 28 *ibid.*, p. 34.
- 29 *ibid.*, p. 204. This point is made in Healy, *Literature and the Aborigine*, p. 194.
- 30 White, *Voss*, p. 241.
- 31 *ibid.*, p. 365.
- 32 Randolph Stow, *To the Islands*, (London, 1958), p. 113.
- 33 *ibid.*, p. 124.
- 34 Dorothy L.M. Jones, 'The Treatment of the Aborigine in Australian Fiction', unpublished M.A. Thesis, (Adelaide, 1960), p. 152.
- 35 Personal interview with Donald Stuart, Canberra, May, 1981.
- 36 Donald Stuart, *Yandy*, (Melbourne, 1959), p. 52.

- 37 *ibid.*, p. 139.
- 38 Personal interview with Donald Stuart, Canberra, May, 1981.
- 39 Figures kindly supplied by Mr. Brian Cook, National Promotions Manager, Rigby Publishers, May, 1982.
- 40 Information kindly provided in correspondence with Mr. Brian W. Harris Managing Director, Georgian House Pty. Ltd., August, 1982.
- 41 Douglas Lockwood, *Fair Dinkum*, (Adelaide, 1969), p. 66. All further quotations will be taken from this edition and page numbers will be given in parentheses in the body of the text, immediately following each citation.
- 42 Correspondence with Mr. Brian W. Harris, Managing Director, Georgian House Pty. Ltd., August, 1982.
- 43 The release of the feature film version of *The Fringe Dwellers* in 1987 prompted the re-design and re-issue in paperback of the novel, now set quite extensively throughout Australia as an upper secondary school text.
- 44 See, for example, John Colmer's *Riders in the Chariot, Patrick White*, (Melbourne, 1978).
- 45 In support of this view see Brian Kiernan's *Patrick White*, (London, 1980), pp. 75-78.
- 46 Personal discussion with Patrick White, Canberra, May, 1983.
- 47 Kiernan, *Patrick White*, p. 75.
- 48 Patrick White, *Riders in the Chariot*, (London, 1961), p. 383.
- 49 *ibid.*, p. 515.
- 50 Healy, *Literature and the Aborigine*, p. 203.
- 51 *ibid.*, p. 204.
- 52 Michael Cotter, 'The Image of the Aboriginal in Three Modern Australian Novels', *Meanjin*, vol. 36, no. 4, December, 1977, p. 589.

