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Broken Songs, Rainbows and Ecology

Alexis Wright: *Carpentaria*, Artarmon (NSW): Giramondo, 2006

Alexis Wright's claims to a place in an Irish-Australian magazine is slight: I'm informed (reliably or not?) that this Waanyi woman was educated by Josephites in Cloncurry in the late '50s or early '60s. Certainly, her education, Catholic or not, has served her and her people well. A more substantial claim might be her attempt to communicate a sense of the land-based sacred of her people and their claims to land-rights, but beyond those shared (but different) concerns of Irish and Aboriginal cultures, I admit the connection is tenuous.

Carpentaria is an exciting read, and a timely one given the threat to the McArthur River, and when I started the novel, I felt that Australian literature had not seen anything so dramatic or ambitious since Herbert's attempt in *Poor Fellow My Country* in 1973 to alert white Australia to its appalling race policies and failure of welfare/education/legal/religious bureaucracies in the Top End. What Herbert did (and he has a slightly more substantial claim to Irishness than Wright, but one he repudiates in his fiction) also, was to recreate (and pan-Aboriginalise and oversimplify) in fiction his well-educated (for a whitefella) sense of how Indigenous cosmology works. For all the qualifications one must make, it is nonetheless a brave effort and the most full-hearted we have in European-authored fiction.

By way of digression, Herbert's take on race is a highly equivocal one: on the one hand, he makes a powerful case for what might have been learned in the way of cultural respect and a sense of wonder at the ecology of Australia by whitefellas had their sexual liaisons with Aboriginal women been embraced openly, and not furtive or shame-bound. In a typically misogynist way, Herbert blames the prurience of European women for this. His vision was very different from the assimilationist model typical of his age: he lauded the proud creole adept in both cultures, a vision not too distant from the two-way policies Yanyuwa people want to see implemented in their homelands. Herbert has his hero, Prindy, learn much from a mixed-race mentoring committee which includes a Polish priest and a Jewish woman, and an Afghan hawkler, among others. So, while an extoller of multiculturalism before the term was in common use, he was also a race-essentialist, happy to ascribe to Irishmen and women the usual slurs about excessive drinking, internecine fights, informers, rabid fenianism, and a range of stereotypic behaviours: blarney, maudlin song-singing about exile, and sectarianism.

The publication of Barry Hill's *Broken Song* (a critical biography of T.G.H. Strehlow), with its illuminating account of how and why Strehlow's monumental *Songs of Central Australia* (1971) got it wrong, cast light for me on the limitations of colonialist anthropology. In his case, even equipped with Arrernte as his first language (as no anthropologist before him had been), there were issues of assimilating the tradition to European oral sagas/epic, a failure to deal with women (that's where Professor Berndt and his wife had it over Strehlow), and an unquestioned commitment to the 'doomed race' theory, not to mention a measure of love mingled with disgust for the people and

the culture. It's significant that Ted Strehlow made no intimate friendships among the Arrernte, despite his life's work among them. Strehlow is the tip of a much larger iceberg of anthropologist epistemology which too often doesn't deeply understand that the triumph of Aboriginal culture as inhering in the particularity of its knowledge of tiny, self-contained but interrelated territories, the deep ecology of these domains, and the sacred songs that create and are seen to bind humans and the more-than-human phenomenal world into relationship.

Two works have greatly assisted my understanding of how the eco-centric self might operate in Indigenous practice. By way of primer, Deborah Bird Rose's *Nourishing Terrains* (www.ahc.gov.au/publications/generalpubs/nourishing), which draws heavily and richly on traditional owners' understandings and voices, is a good start. Her very dynamic and multi-faceted account of 'dreamtime' cosmology helps one realize how the very term leads Europeans into morasses of misunderstanding and trivialization of the cosmology for which the terms *dreamtime/dreaming* have become shorthand. It's a book that warrants several readings as it appears to be simpler than it is. Much richer, and unfortunately available only in a limited edition (a few Melbourne university libraries have copies - Deakin and Monash), is the cultural Atlas of a single Indigenous culture, which John Bradley and Nona Cameron have compiled in collaboration with Yanyuwa families, *'Forget About Flinders': A Yanyuwa Atlas of the South West Gulf of Carpentaria* (2003). *Táin* readers may remember an early issue of the magazine in which I documented the Yanyuwa website, and its evolution, and inherent problems. Huge and deep as it is as a resource for Yanyuwa knowledge, it is limited by Yanyuwa access issues, problems of lack of IT expertise in Yanyuwa country, and by the limitations of the medium itself. The Atlas tries to remedy these inbuilt defects. Designed for Yanyuwa use in small groups (A3 format opening to double that for the foldout maps, and with large print), what this extraordinary book does is to map visually the public knowledge of Yanyuwa in a variety of modes of discourse. First, it restores Yanyuwa names to country and these are sometimes readable in terms of their etymology by using the (as yet unpublished in hard copy) dictionary of Yanyuwa online. Those who care about the preservation of Irish and have seen Brian Friel's historical play, *Translations*, know precisely the cultural relevance of this manoeuvre and what is lost if language is lost. Secondly, it maps in cartoon form (a form in which visually literate youngsters, especially Yanyuwa ones, can most easily digest huge quantities of information) how dreamings move dynamically across country. Thirdly, it gives the sacred text in prose and poetic (performance) versions, as well as other connected stories. These are organized in terms of slices of country, this being the condition under which such stories would normally be received, thereby enacting Yanyuwa pedagogy. Fourthly, in the margins are to be found discussions of variant and contested versions of the stories. What the Atlas eloquently attests to is how precisely literary, sacred and ecological knowledge is mapped onto the land, and how the songs express and create the relationship with land conceived of as interactive, living, breathing, sentient.

The notion, better understood since the Australian ecophilosophers Freya Mathews (*The Ecological Self*) and Val Plumwood (*Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason*) began to critically interrogate

and refine Deep Ecological principles, that human identity and meaning make no sense except in relation to the more-than-human world perhaps owes more to Aboriginal cosmology than Mathews or Plumwood admit, fears of being appropriative (properly) being what they are in the tense postcolonial world. However, such ecological principles make perfect sense simply in scientific terms, as we progressively and to our cost discover as global warming turns our farms into dustbowls and offshore mining interests (like Xstrata) seek to divert and irretrievably pollute with lead great tropical rivers like the McArthur. What Indigenous cosmology does is to marry good ecological sense with the sense of wonder, and it is wonder that, in the west, it is the work of poetry and novels to give us in superabundance.

It is the rare writer who tries to convey that sense of wonder in humankind's place in (not above it) the natural order, but one spectacular example in fiction which I heartily recommend, is Xavier Herbert's *Poor Fellow My Country*. It is the work of an erratic writer, full of bombast and cranky theories, but it is a highly readable and surprisingly undated encyclopaedic satiric exposé of every white bureaucracy intent on 'civilising the natives'; it is also, more importantly, a sympathetic, indeed utopic vision of what Europeans failed to learn from Aboriginal culture including ecological science, but also the sense of wonder which he saw as deriving from an intimately known landscape and as having been left in Europe. Herbert lived for decades in the Top End and had the best of Aboriginal instructors in the McGuinness family; he also had ready access to knowledgeable anthropologists (especially Stanner who was at the time writing his book on Aboriginal religion, in defiance of myth and ritual school, but also A.P. Elkin and he'd read Strehlow voraciously); his various jobs gave him a thorough-going immersion in many different kinds of Aboriginal bureaucracy. What he has to say about Aboriginal mythology and how it works is sharply observed, and it has taken academics a long time to catch up to him.

When I started Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria*, I thought I was in heaven. Wright is a Waanyi person, not perhaps as deeply learned in her culture as she would like to be (her grandmother was a key educator, and she has had an extensive political education working for various Aboriginal agencies in the Northern Territory). She offers from an Aboriginal perspective the same kinds of satiric analyses of contemporary and toxic Indigenous lifestyles that Herbert did, minus the rant and the preachiness. Superadded is a layer of myth which helps people like me feel the passion that I observe Yanyuwa people expressing about their sacred narratives. And what's more, doing it in a thoroughly engaging magic realist style designed to reel European readers into her web. The novel is huge, ambitious, systematic and has a lot going for it, but unhappily it begins more powerfully than she can resolve the multifarious issues she sets running. Perhaps ending such a novel is intrinsically difficult: Herbert whimpered out at the end of *PFMC* by knocking off all his heroes and destroying hope. Wright does not do that, quite, but she is better at exposition and satiric exposé than at suggesting the ways forward, or maybe that's the sad reality for contemporary Indigenous Australia – that the ways forward are so out of their control as to induce despair. Not that Wright despairs: the final pages of the novel have a loving grandfather taking control of a child who

knows only his own country, and one has a sense that the child's (narrative) role may be to take the elder back to Country that has been lost.

The book gives us the grainy realities of life for the Pricklebush mob who live in the dump on the outskirts of town. We become familiar with not only these fringe-dwellers but also the breakaway group on the east side of town more inured to the life of the town who fake Aboriginal identity in order to profit from the mine, and the wandering Toyota dreaming separatists who follow the songlines and keep up the traditions, not to mention the extreme separatists who blow up the mine. It's a superb demonstration of the multiple politicised fractures of Indigenous communities, where cohesion is made difficult by shades of politics around selective adoption of features of modernity. We watch these colourful characters negotiating with the town council that wants none of them, and with the police who on little evidence take innocent boys into custody and kill them. We see Queenie (what a superb character) commandeer the virgin's statue and indigenize its features and clothing in the hopes that that whitefella 'bijntich' might enrich her, and watch her inevitable decline into prostitution and despair in Redfern. There is also the Murrandoo-Yanner-like character who takes violent action against the mine (Century Zinc?).

The moments of wonder that erupt into this narrative are pure magic: we watch in astonishment as the port built on the riverbank needs to be relocated when the mighty force of the Rainbow Serpent relocates it, 'spurn[ing] human endeavour', several kilometers away. The writing is breathtaking in its energy, and it is a power underwritten by deep sacred knowledge:

Picture the creative serpent, scoring deep into – scouring down through – the slippery underground of the mudflats, leaving in its wake the thunder of tunnels collapsing to form deep sunken valleys. The sea water following in the serpent's wake, swarming in a frenzy of tidal waves, soon changed colour from ocean blue to the yellow of mud. The water filled the swirling tracks to form the mighty bending rivers spread across the vast plains of the Gulf country. The serpent traveled over the marine plains, over the salt flats, through the salt dunes, past the mangrove forests and crawled inland. Then it went back to the sea. And it came out an another spot along the coastline... When it finished creating the many reivers in its wake, it created one last river, no larger or smaller than the others, a river which offers no apologies for its discontent with people who do not know it. This is where the giant serpent continues to live deep down under the ground in a vast network of limestone aquifers. They say its being is porous; it permeates everything. It is all around in the atmosphere and is attached to the lives of the river people like skin....

The tidal river snake of flowing mud takes in breaths of a size that is difficult to comprehend. Imagine the serpent's breathing rhythms as the tide flows inland, edging towards the spring waters nestled deeply in the gorges of an ancient limestone plateau... Then with the outward breath, the tide turns and the serpent flows back to its own circulating mass of shallow waters....

To catch this breath in the river you need the patience of one who can spend days doing nothing. If you wait under the rivergum where those up-to-no-good Mission-bred kids accidentally hanged Cry-baby Sally, the tip of the dead branch points to where you will see how the serpent's breath fights its way through in a tunnel of wind, creating ripples that shimmer silver, similar to the scales of a small, nocturnal serpent, thrashing in anger whenever the light hits its slippery translucent body, making it writhe and wrench to escape back into its natural environment of darkness.

The inside knowledge about this river and coastal region is the Aboriginal Law handed down through the ages since time began. Otherwise, how would one know where to look for the hidden underwater course in the vast flooding mud plains, full of serpents and fish in the monsoon season? (pp.1-3).

What I find magnificent about this writing is its truth to the sacred (mythology-driven) realities which are simultaneously ecological ones, and the skilful melding of discourses – the oral narrative framework and the sharply observed satiric impulse. This is a writer who uses pastiche (in this case, Aboriginal oral tales) and relocates them in a naturalistic matrix in order to make serious political comment. The black humour that has settlers uncannily unsettled by the natural forces they hardly even know exist is empowering. What I find astonishing too is the fineness of the writing that brings those powerful forces into sharp focus: what else but a powerful Rainbow could breathe like the tide? Carve out the sandstone in sinuous curves, and re-carve again in the next tide or storm? Move the river several kilometers in defiance of the puny human port structures? The fine deep knowledge such writing exhibits makes sense of Indigenous people's resistance to monocultures like grazing or mining, precisely the kind of loss of biodiversity which forced them to the toxic towns and which compromised (for ever?) the biodiversity that made their existences on Country rich.

Text box close to article

Mine money talks loudest (certainly louder than water or fish-stock health....)

The Swiss-based multinational mining company, Xstrata, announced in Darwin on 3 August 2006 their intention to divert the McArthur River in order to expand what is currently an underground mining operation for silver, lead, cadmium and zinc. Agreement was given by the NT government on 13 October without discussion with or agreement from the traditional owners, or those in the lower reaches of the McArthur River, who are concerned about the current impact of the mine on their power-foods, dugong and sea-turtle. The federal mining minister has signed off on the deal.

The environmental impact statement prepared by the mine is contested by traditional owners. What the mine considers a '500-year flood' has occurred in the wet seasons in three years recently since 2000. Indigenous concern is with lead and zinc contamination from a flooded mine worsening in the lower reaches of the river and the sea-grass beds of the Gulf region. They know that already their sea-turtles have brittle shells and green bile inside. Why would you imperil a mighty tropical river, in the middle of a water crisis? In the wet, it can flood to 20 feet above the normal level, and the equivalent of Sydney Harbour in volume of water.

A speech in parliament by Barbara McCarthy, a Yanyuwa woman and member for Arnhem Land in the NT Legislative Assembly, was misreported by the ABC as a concern for sacred sites associated with the Rainbow Serpent. In fact, the burden of her speech was about ecological matters.

The existing mine has paid no royalties to the Australian government, despite having been operational for 10 years.

Carpentaria, a new novel of compassion, strength and creative genius arrives in quite a different context. In 2007 the sense of threat to Indigenous people and their land is mainly submerged, yet rises to the surface almost daily. This book stirs memories of Poor Fellow My Country; it speaks to me in a similar voice – a voice of hope. The writing is lyrical. More than this, here the poetry of life meets the moment of transcendence of enmity. Within the child Norm has decided to teach there flows in part – the gammon blood™ of the other side. Carpentaria can be read as allegory about the consequences of the destruction of the earth and us all by the high-energy, market-dominated world. When Desperance is – destructed™ the cyclone takes the good, the bad and the ugly in an act of retribution. Ecological problems need urgent and minute observation. If you want to discuss this topic with your Intermediate students, here are some lesson ideas. | Skyteach. Most plastics don't biodegrade which means they are destined to break down into smaller pieces rotating in the sea eternally. Bottle three is brought into a plant where it is squeezed flat and compressed into a block. The blocks are shredded into tiny pieces which are washed and melted so they become raw materials that can be used again. The Norman River in the Gulf of Carpentaria with the tiny fishing and port of Karumba, the airstrip seen at Karumba Point. A pano taken from a little Robinson 22 helicopter acting as the pano head doing a pivot for the panoramic view,. Hanging out the door a little for this one needless to say just concentrating on the camera not where I was or the nothingness between me and the earth, well did appear that way. Thank you all who have viewed, faved, & commented on this image, much! The Earth Story. These are tubular cloud formations which happen with regularity in Northern Australia's Gulf of