



INTRODUCTION

DAVID COAD

Université de Valenciennes

In 1990, after three years of study in France, I was in the final phases of my thesis on the religious metaphysics of Patrick White. Turning my attention away from the exceptional view of Sacré Cœur that my *chambre de bonne* provided, I put on the evening news only to learn that on the other side of the world, my thesis subject had just died in Sydney. The broadcast went on to summarise White's involvement with France, mentioning that he had studied French at Cambridge and that the country had featured as a setting in two of his novels. Tribute was paid to the greatness of Australia's only Nobel-Prize laureate.

Today, twenty-two years later, it is time to celebrate the centenary of Patrick White's birth, an event that took place in London just before the summer of 1912. White referred to his English and Australian roots in 1973 when he wrote that Australia was "in my blood – my fate – which is why I have to put up with the hateful place, when at heart I am a Londoner" (Marr, *Life* 12). White made a conscious decision to settle down in the place he both loved and hated in the late 1940s after having spent twenty years abroad. Over the next four decades, he set about filling the void, what he once termed the "Great Australian Emptiness," by giving voice to "the mystery and the poetry" (White, *Speaks* 15) of the lives of an ordinary man, an ordinary woman and, more importantly, the mystery and poetry of his own life. The centenary of White's birth has allowed scholars, libraries, galleries and the general public to appreciate again what the author left for posterity: two collections of short stories, numerous plays and a string of masterly novels.

The year 2012 brought Patrick White back to the minds of Australians in a variety of venues using different media. In September 2011, a film version of *The Eye of the Storm* directed by Fred Schepisi was released, starring Charlotte Rampling beside well-known Australian actors Geoffrey Rush and Judy Davis. The film went on to win the critics' award for the best Australian feature at the Melbourne International Film Festival and a special

prize from the jury of the Rome International Film Festival. This was the first time a feature-length film had been made of one of White's novels.

In April 2012 an exhibition opened at the National Library of Australia in Canberra entitled "The Life of Patrick White." Over the next three months visitors were able to see notebooks, photographs, letters, even recipes written by White and all acquired by the library in 2006. The exhibition moved to the State Library of New South Wales in August. Brett Whiteley's portrait of the author, "Patrick White at Centennial Park," painted in the late 1970s, was exhibited along with numerous preparatory sketches at the National Portrait Gallery in Canberra from May until July 2012. The painting famously caused friction since, while working on the portrait, the artist had asked the sitter to give him a list of his "loves" and "hates." Without letting White know, Whiteley included the list in the painting itself. Visitors to the Gallery in Canberra could observe that White hated among other things sport, liars and television. According to the list he loved cooking small meals, whiskey and sex.

The publication in 2010 of two volumes devoted to analysing White's work demonstrates a resurgent interest in the author. Rodopi Press published a collection of twelve essays in their Cross/Cultures series entitled *Remembering Patrick White: Contemporary Critical Essays*. Edited by two Senior Lecturers from the University of New South Wales, Elizabeth McMahon and Brigitta Olubas, this book has two particular merits: it exploits recent critical theory in order to appreciate White's literary output and it contains a useful bibliography of criticism on the author dating from between 1994 and 2009. As well, Sydney University Press published *Patrick White within the Western Library Tradition*, bringing together twenty-two essays by White scholar John Beston. The author's premise, "Patrick White's novels do not belong simply to Australian literature but, more widely, to the literature of the West" (Beston 3), is amply demonstrated by the author's expert personal knowledge of French, German and American literature.

Unexpectedly, a new text by Patrick White added to the publishing flurry. Part of the first draft of White's unfinished novel *The Hanging Garden* was shown to the public for the first time in the "Life of Patrick White" exhibition mentioned above. This text written in 1981 was published to coincide with the centenary. This first third of an incomplete novel may be what David Marr referred to as a "masterpiece in the making," (Marr, *Monthly*), but the emphasis should be put on the second part of that

description. While the book is not without interest, it does not add anything significant to White's previous achievement.

Two conferences have participated in putting White back into the academic limelight. A three-day international conference on the author was organised by the Association for the Study of Australasia in Asia at the University of Hyderabad in India in early November 2012. Attracting scholars from Australia and Asia, the event is evidence of the popularity of White in the Asian region. This conference follows another entitled "Patrick White: Modernist Impact/Critical Futures" held at the Institute of English Studies, University of London in 2010. Both conferences have been a means of presenting new work on the author two decades after his death.

This collection of new essays published in *Cercles* demonstrates, once again, the extent of international interest in the *œuvre* of Patrick White. Scholars from Australia, England, Brazil and Denmark have contributed critical essays that encompass the whole gamut of White's career, from *Happy Valley* to the posthumous *The Hanging Garden*. In "A Fringe of Leaves: The Edge of the Sacred," Bill Ashcroft pursues his preoccupation with the sacred in Australian literature, thus providing an interesting companion piece to an essay published in *Remembering Patrick White* entitled "The Presence of the Sacred in Patrick White" and a collection of essays the author co-wrote, *Intimate Horizons: the Post-Colonial Sacred in Australian Literature* (2009). Whereas in the "Presence" essay Ashcroft concentrated on how the presence of the sacred is located in the ordinariness of things, using a number of White's novels to support his analysis, here he explores the sacred in one particular novel, *A Fringe of Leaves*. He is interested in how White uses myth (the female captive myth and the heart of darkness myth) in order to conceive of the sacred in the Australian bush. The novel is approached by treating the possibility of imagining the sacred differently and examining the consequent failure of the heroine to bring that experience back with her to the "civilised" edge of the continent.

Two radio programmes were broadcast on ABC Radio National in Australia on 26 May 2012, two days before the centenary. Both were inspired by Patrick's White intimate relation to music. The "Into the Music" programme broadcasted "Patrick White's Ear." Composers such as Peter Sculthorpe who had set the author's words to music, a music critic, the Head of Research at the Film and Sound Archive and the former minister for Science, Barry Jones, discussed the place of music in White's work. The actress Kate Fitzpatrick who had known White read extracts from six novels.

Furthermore, "Voss Journey" a programme dating back to 2009 and based on the opera version of *Voss* was re-broadcast. Guests included the librettist David Malouf, the director Jim Sharman and the singers who had interpreted the roles of the protagonists Voss and Laura Trevelyan.

In "Rubbed by the Warming Violins': Music and Patrick White," musicologist Fiona Richards builds on this evident interest captured by the radio programmes. With expertise she identifies various pieces of music in White's stories and novels and shows how the author's use of music changes within a particular text and how music accompanies what is happening in the narrative. She also demonstrates how musical structures are deployed in the writing and how some of the writing itself reflects musical form. The autobiography of White and his published letters allow the clear identification of some musical influences. White's debt to German and French literatures has been examined elsewhere, notably by John Beston. Here Richards identifies composers of those nationalities (for example Schubert, Schumann and Brahms as well as Debussy and Meyerbeer) who inspired White. Three novels form the basis of the second part of Richard's essay where she examines *The Aunt's Story*, *Voss* and *Riders in the Chariot* and convincingly shows how each novel is infused with a particular sound quality.

An unexpected and welcome parallel is provided by Ian Alexander in his essay "Patrick White and his Brazilian Contemporaries." It is true that White had no particular interest in Brazil and only two of his novels have been translated into Portuguese, *The Tree of Man* and *Voss*. Despite this, Alexander sets himself the task of examining the work of Patrick White in relation to that of some of his Brazilian contemporaries. He successfully finds ways to contextualise White for Brazilian readers and uses Brazilian parallels to throw light on White's own relationship to Australian and Anglophone literary traditions. One section considers *The Tree of Man* in relation to João Guimarães Rosa's *Grande Sertão Veredas* in terms of their use of modernist techniques to represent the life and consciousness of ordinary rural men; another examines White's *Voss* in relation to *O Continente* by southern Brazilian writer Erico Verissimo in the context of the development of a local settler nationalism within and in relation to a broader (British or Brazilian) empire-nationalism. The final section briefly considers some of the historical difficulties in establishing significant parallels for the latter part of White's career, specifically for the period after the Brazilian military coup of 1964. Patrick White's second published novel is the centre of focus in Robyn Walton's essay "Utopianism in Patrick White's *The Living and the Dead*."

Walton addresses utopianism, a topic hitherto insufficiently treated in criticism of White's novels, and examines how it intersects with the sacred, a subject which has interested critics. The influence of Spengler and James Joyce's short story "The Dead" is discussed in relation to *The Living and the Dead*. A close reading of the novel reveals that Patrick White is attempting to work out his own trajectory at the time of writing the novel: a course somewhere between social idealism, utopian impulses and eschewed spirituality.

Finally, in "And stood breathing: Patrick White and the Novelistic Discourse of Modernism," Charles Lock draws attention to some intriguing aspects of Patrick White's style. Placing style into a broader frame of reference including biography and literary influences allows Lock to demonstrate how White's writing is a polyphony of potential voices. By using judicious parallels to excerpts written by Virginia Woolf and James Joyce, the author invites us to re-read the opening line of *The Aunt's Story* and the second sentence of *Voss* in order to see how all three writers are practitioners of what can be termed the novelistic discourse of Modernism.

It is hoped that, a hundred years after the birth of Patrick White, this collection of essays will stimulate further discussion and debate concerning the most eminent novelist of the twentieth century in Australian literature.

Works Cited

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