

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

On Rex Ingamells

Robert Wood · Wednesday, June 13th, 2018

You know those moments that stick in your mind, that begin to take on another hue as if they were a film, the kind of blue that is thick and indigo, that seem to illuminate from the inside out, those moments that glow? You know those? The ones where you are underwater and so attuned that you can see the particles of the universe with your eyes and through to the spirit of a river or the ocean or a people even though it is merely memory and the projection of itself? You know those moments. I am having one of those now, thinking of another time I had one of those as well.

I see us now, ankle deep in water, the pebbles and sticks underfoot pressing deep into skin as we watch for fish to surface, listening to the sound of the bush. I am right there even as I sit and write it now, about to catch something that will never come. I turn my head and see my mentor my left. I wonder: does he have something? Has he caught a fish I do not know about? The two of us had gone to Bourketown in the Gulf of Carpentaria to see novelist Alexis Wright speak. He was telling me about Neville Shute, who had flown through here on his way further south, stopping in a light plane to refuel and restock before traveling on his journey that would inspire *In the Wet*, *A Town Like Alice* and *On the Beach*. This was the mid-century in Australia, something where the frontier seemed more glamorous, or at least more open in one way, a truer 'frontier', meaning that it was less tame, more wild, cut off from 'the world'. Paradoxically, one only sees this as the cities are being built and the mines being dug into the ground, when 'the frontier' itself is receding into the sepia photographs of tin mines with horse drawn carts and men with wheelbarrows and pickaxes walking for days to carve out a little space in the ground. Like the pastoral, and maybe everything we seek to name, the owl of the frontier, be that boobook or tawny frogmouth flies at dusk. If it keeps flying until dawn depends on how long the night goes on and how strong its wings are, but whatever the case, it is worth smiling when we see that owl once more. This 'Australia', this mid-century Australia, is, of course, alive all over the place right now. It is there in the suburbs where I grew up, in the reclaimed farmland people are rejuvenating, in the attitudes of how the nation expands in the North, planning for an invasion, a population explosion and being a food bowl for Asia all at once.

From that mid-century Australia, that hinge moment after the spectacular war that ushered in the atomic era, the plastic revolution and the United Nations, I have found a refraction of our own time in the writing of Rex Ingamells and his Jindyworobaks. As if to pre-emptively parrot, and racially appropriate, conversations by Indigenous people in the present, he wrote about 'country' in *Great South Land*, his long poem about the history of Australia. Country was:

a master constellation of the Spirit,

*bespeaking the Secret Life, the earnest Totems,
the Brotherhood of Man and Bird and Beast,
and Tree and Flower, and everything observed,
Water and Stone and Sacred Tjuringa,
the Wind, the Rain, the Sun, the Moon and Stars.*

It is at once cosmic ('master constellation'), 'secret' and 'earnest' implying that this relationship and whole is both a natural thing ('Tree and Flower') and social construction ('Brotherhood'). It is important to note that after a list of natural objects Ingamells invokes the 'Tjuringa', profanely bringing the sacred objects of Indigenous peoples into this list.

There are several passages of high Romantic lyric heraldry in *Great South Land* when Ingamells writes about country, mistaking it simply for 'nature' or 'land'. In the section 'The Land's Own Character' there is a long list of birds from galahs to parrots, rosellas, ringnecks, lorikeets, parakeets, cockatoos, corellas, wrens, swifts and ducks. In his 'Homage to the Ocean', Ingamells makes his language active using the words 'scavenging', 'wallowing', 'heaving', 'swelling', 'breaking', 'crashing', 'hurling', 'fashioning', 'tearing', 'building', 'piling', 'traversing', 'ravening', 'devouring', 'murmuring', 'dragging', 'wheeling'. For him, the natural world is alive and thrilling, something that rings true with Australia's popular idea of itself and my experience with my mentor up in Carpentaria.

I have heard it said now though, especially by liberals blind to their own time, that Ingamells, like the rest of the Jindyworobaks, is beyond the pale and we can learn nothing from him, not even in negation. It shuts down the conversation and functions as a dismissal, a reason not to interrogate his writing or what the Jindyworobaks still have to teach us. If Ingamells could not see the fact that Aboriginal people are an ongoing, living presence, he did regard 'them' as 'custodians' of nature with a pronounced, if spectral, importance. In our time there is both a trace of the dying race theory as well as a hypervisibility of 'Aborigines'. Everywhere we encounter the discourse that would have us believe that traditional life is no more, just as we hear from 'Aboriginal' voices, which the market is keen to use as authenticating a diversity principle that neglects certain individuals. Yet the former disregards the inherent dynamism that pre-existed settlement and the latter flattens the differences between Ngarluma, Kulin and Gamilaroi people, both of which are imperial manoeuvres that are not much better than the Jindyworobak position. What might be the response?

In poetry, we might do better to map the life of peoples pre-1788, which includes contact with Dutch and Macassars. Furthermore, we might think of Indigenous internal others that were living as neighbours on this continent, which would be to acknowledge local diversity and the keen particularity of different groups from different ecologies. That relies on a different source base from the social sciences of the classically disciplined Historian, and means taking as sacrosanct the oral traditions that chronicle life in the *longue duree*.

We might also do better to understand the forms that poetries take and the language of poetics – what does a *tjab*i look like? What do we mean when we say we want to encourage *julajulara* in the listener? These are not secondary questions to imagining a new fate for Australia. Just as we might encourage the abolition of the states and the re-organisation of the governance of this place to truly recognise it never was a *terra nullius*, in poetry we might begin to imagine the narrative, content,

style, terminology, vernacular of cultures that have an intimate relationship to the place as it exists in the world at large. As Ingamells himself said:

There is no self-contained or isolated

corner of human or of global History.

Beginning to do that work of history will lead us to being historic ourselves, will lead to a reconciliation through self-determination as a way of being in the world and a way of being in language that is truly powerful over and above the views that Ingamells held.

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