

## Obituary *The Australian* 1/6/2010 by William Grono and Dennis Haskell

Author. Born Geraldton, WA, November 28, 1935. Died Essex, Britain, May 29, 2010, aged 74.

Randolph Stow was a kind of Australian Camus: an existentialist who saw human life as fundamentally solitary. Landscape in his work - particularly in *To the Islands*, and less obviously in *The Merry-go-round in the Sea* - is never just landscape but a site for metaphysical exploration, a means of exploring the purpose of human existence.

Julian Randolph Stow was born in Geraldton, Western Australia. He was educated at Geraldton Primary School, from which he was temporarily evacuated to family properties in the Geraldton hinterland when Broome and Darwin were bombed by the Japanese.

His high school years were spent at Geraldton High School and Guildford Church of England Grammar School.

At Guildford Grammar, where the poet and novelist Kenneth Seaforth Mackenzie had been a student before him (and Stow was conscious of the fact), he annoyed the school administration by insisting on studying agricultural science as well as Latin, something no student at the privileged school had attempted before.

Following his father's profession, he enrolled in law at the University of Western Australia in 1953, but changed to arts a year later. He graduated in 1956 with majors in English and French. By then he had written two novels and a number of poems.

By 1957 Stow had published the novels *A Haunted Land* and *The Bystander*, and the poetry collection *Act One*, which received the Australian Literature Society's gold medal.

The novel *To the Islands* was published in 1958, winning another ALS gold medal and the Miles Franklin award.

Stow published six further novels: *Tourmaline* (1963), *The Merry-go-round in the Sea* (1965), the children's classic *Midnite* (1967), *Visitants* (1979), *The Girl Green as Elderflower* (1980) and *The Suburbs of Hell* (1984).

He also published two other volumes of poetry: *Outrider* (1962), illustrated by Sidney Nolan, and *A Counterfeit Silence* (1969), a selection of verse that included some previously unpublished work.

Stow collaborated with English composer Peter Maxwell Davies on two music theatre works, *Eight Songs for a Mad King* (1969) and *Miss Donnithorne's Maggot* (1974).

Stow was alternatively prolific and silent. *A Counterfeit Silence* includes an epigraph from Thornton Wilder: "Even speech was for them a debased form of silence."

Stow suffered writer's block while working on *Visitants*, based partly on his breakdown in New Guinea while working as a patrol officer, but was released by writing *The Girl Green as Elderflower* while recuperating in the English countryside.

He wrote *The Girl* in one month and then finished *Visitants*, thought by some to be his greatest novel. One feature of Stow's writing is that he never repeated himself; each successive novel and poem seems a new venture, even while dealing with similar themes.

One of Stow's poems is titled *The Land's Meaning*, and all his work may be interpreted as searching for this. He once wrote: "The environment of a writer is as much inside him as in what he observes."

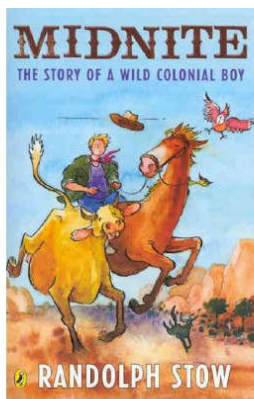
He also noted: "There are two sensations, above all, that the land offers me: the sense of size, and the sense of the past ... In the cities one is fenced in by the personalities of others. But alone in the bush, with maybe a single crow ... a phrase like 'liberation of the spirit' may begin to sound meaningful."

Stow saw liberation of the spirit as possible but difficult, and perhaps to be found as much in silence as in speech. He had an interest in Taoism, and once when asked how an interview had gone, he replied: "Oh good. I don't think he got a thing out of me!"

Stow was able to evoke the sense of a place in a succinct prose or verse, but place always had deeper psychological and philosophical implications.

Together with the work of artists such as Nolan and writers such as Patrick White, Stow's work is part of Australia's experience of high modernism. As he remained outside all Australian literary networks, his influence tends to be diffuse rather than direct, but on writers such as Dorothy Hewett and Tim Winton it is readily discernible.

Hewitt used a passage from *The Merry-go-round in the Sea* as an epigraph for her poetry collection, *Windmill Country* (1968), because of its evocation of universal themes of time, transience and mortality in WA station country: "lupins withered and foxes rotted, and the windmill whirled and whirled against all seasons of the sky, drinking from the filled dark caves below the earth."



1968 Highly Commended CBCA Book of the Year Awards

Won 1994 BILBY Award