

Alice Springs: Dreams and Retrospectives

VINCENT WOODS

I met Michael in Alice Springs. He was the same age as my father but looked younger. They might have been brothers. He might have been my uncle. I loved him immediately.

We drank in the Memorial Club and he told me, with blue eyes dancing, that nobody writes good books anymore.

"Not like A. J. Cronin's *The Citadel*" I protested, and promised to give him a list of books he would like. I mentioned John Pilger's *A Secret Country*.

"Is he" asked Michael, "the man who wrote *Heroes*".

I could have hugged him, this seventy eight year old man from Navan who had, he said, "no education" and who was as passionate about Pilger's magnificent journalism as I was myself.

He was visiting his son and had been fishing in the north with Sean and Sally and their two children. He was burned a deep red-brown. He wore a claddagh ring and was as trim and straight as a man of forty. We talked about divorce.

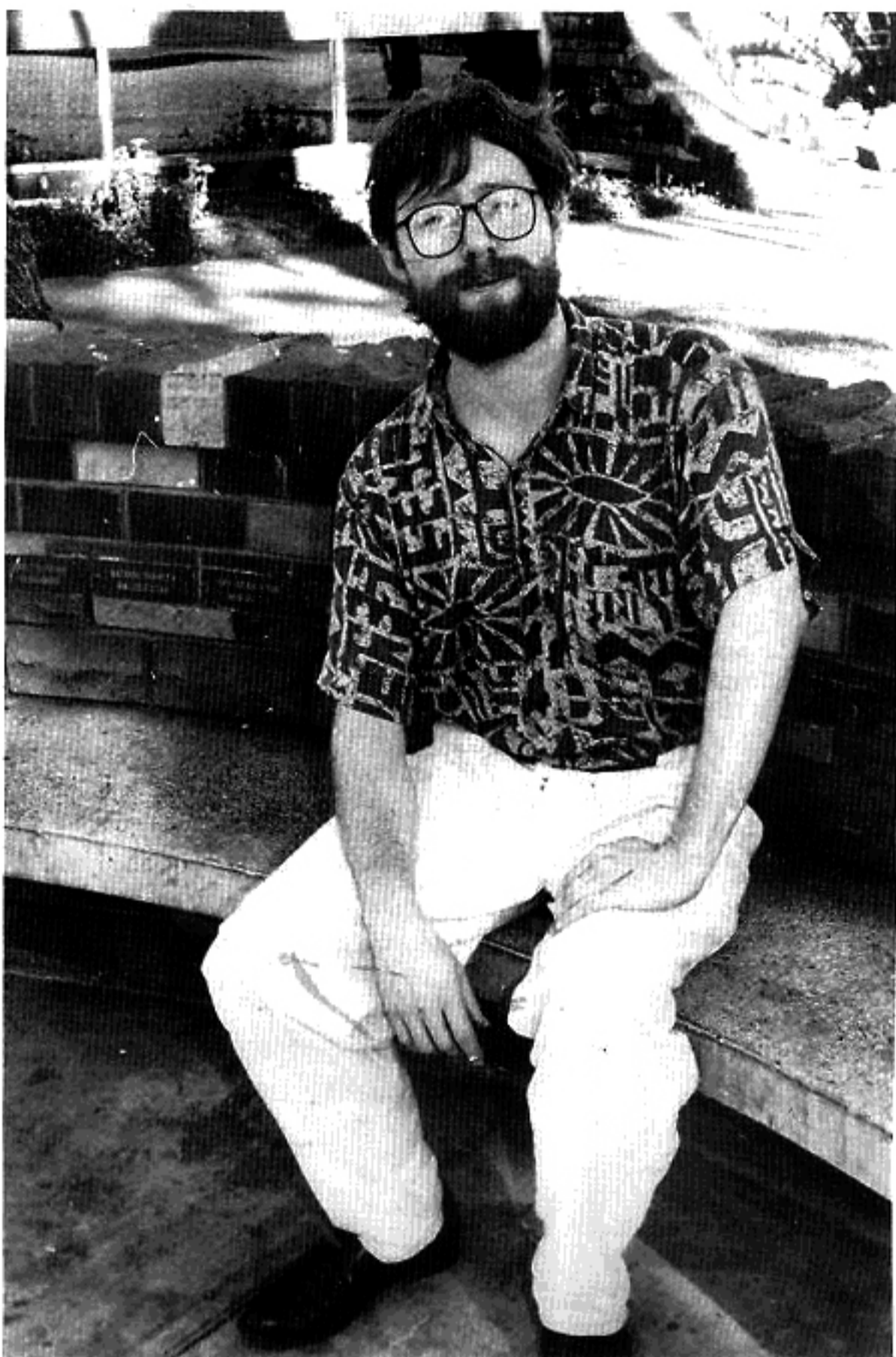
"In my time," he said, "a man's word was his honour. You made a pledge and you kept it."

"Not so different, I replied, "to my time, when we made a pledge of marriage in all faith and honesty and grew up to more complex truths."

Michael had the rare ability to listen, to seek for understanding. Later, or earlier, I said that the right to choose to be poor was of the greatest importance. He raised his hand slightly and said,

"No, not to be poor - but to do what we want."

Like my father, Michael had read everything he could get his hands on. Driving west, through a dry lake bed, Sean said his Dad would read the backs of cereal packets, the small print on every box or paper that came into the house. We were searching for the



Vincent Woods in Alice Springs ... "Much of my work is about dis possession. There are parallels here with the people of Ireland.

Black Knight, a man who wanders in the desert with his camels and goats. We jolted across the creek which in the rainy seasons becomes a slosh of mud and brings the locals to do exotic wheelies in their jeeps. We passed the abandoned wrecks of cars but the Knight was not to be seen. I mentioned Mick Hanly's song *Crusader*, inspired by Robyn Davidson's trek across the desert from Alice west to the Indian Ocean. Sean

exploded in a snort of cynical indignation.

"That's a load of bullshit" he said. "On her own me arse, she had National Geographic on her tail and now she's in London going to parties with Doris Lessing. I have an Aboriginal mate who went by camel from here to Brisbane - no cameras, no newspaper reports and no one to know where he was"

"It's still a great song", I ventured.

"Hmmpf," he said, "next you'll tell me you like Big Tom and Maisie Mc Daniels."

"I do like Maisie Mc Daniels."

In one of the many gift shops in Alice I saw a bark painting I liked. It cost sixty dollars and I thought of buying it for my brother and his wife as a belated wedding present. I talked to the woman who ran the gallery. She showed me photographs of the artist. He reminded me of my uncle Mickey: big, strong, with a fine wide face and no shirt.

"He just lives there in the wilderness," said the woman, with a tinge of genuine wonder, "in a tin hut and just paints and hunts. He isn't married so when he dies no one else will paint his particular stories."

She was trying to sell me, not just a painting, but part of somebody's soul.

I admired two spears, slender and gold-white, threaded with kangaroo gut.

"Yes, she said, "aren't they lovely? Sometimes the men bring in spears that they've actually used in hunting and they're very special."

I said I'd think about the painting - and maybe the spears; the gallery would ship any purchase

of more than a hundred dollars free of charge to Ireland.

I had a strange night's sleep. I dreamt of the bark painting and the man who'd painted it, of the curving yellow lizard and the icon effect of the knotted sticks which formed a frame. Someone was taking me from where I was, pulling me from myself. I didn't know whether I was awake or asleep. The room seemed filled with an acrid smell of smoke and there was jumble of sound somewhere in my head.

"If I'm awake," I thought, "why don't I get out of bed and look from the window to see if someone has lit a fire outside?"

I couldn't move.

A week passed before I returned to the gallery, still unsure whether or not I would buy the painting. Everything was changed and for a moment I panicked, thinking it had been sold. I found it in a different stack. The price tag had changed too: it was now \$120 - double the price. I nodded to the woman, who was talking to a customer. She smiled and I left the shop.

I wrote to my parents about the beauty of the landscape, about climbing Uluru (which I will never again call Ayers Rock) on my 30th birthday, about the yellow, the blue, the pink desert flowers, the miracles

of tree and shrub, the hot red sand. In a flora reserve named after Olive Pink, a marvellous Tasmanian woman, I planted a eucalyptus tree and gave it my name and that of my parents, Woods-Guihen. In time it will grow. Olive Pink died in 1975, aged ninety one. She had fought some of the earliest land rights battles for and with the local Aboriginal communities and loved the place, its people and all its living things. If she liked someone she would entertain them in her simple hut, putting a sheet of plywood on her bed to make a table and serving sherry and madeira cake. People she disliked were known to receive bouquets of poisonous flowers to make them itch. She reminded me of Mrs Lee, one of the dearest friends of my life.

I had phoned home before I left Sydney. My mother told me of local sickness and death. My father talked for longer than ever before on the phone and asked me why I was going to Melbourne if it was cold and wet there. The hay was almost saved but he was taking it easy as the doctors had ordered.

I was going to Melbourne to meet Ilse, an old friend whom I'd last seen in Oslo in 1986. That

'Looking Forward in Retrospect' oil on canvas by Iain Campbell.



was the summer my Uncle Pat died, weeks after I'd left Norway and travelled south to Italy. I wrote about him later, about my dream in Munich which told me someone was dead, about his brother Stephen and their lives. Stephen was insulted and angry at being part of a nephew's story and ranted briefly about libel and compensation before he calmed down. I hope; I believe, he eventually realised that the piece was written out of love, nothing more - and nothing less - dangerous.

I think I inherited dreaming from both my parents. Each has anticipated death or near-death in their sleeping hours. Earlier in the year my father dreamt that a cow kicked him: he was awakened by the impact of the hoof on his body. That day he was tending to the cattle and saw - or thought he saw - one animal lift its hoof to kick. He drew back and fell down a steep hill, dislocating his shoulder and setting his unsteady heart awry. A few weeks earlier I had dreamt that my father was writing a letter for me, in a beautiful fluid hand. Instead, I was writing to him as he recovered at home from his fall. Sometimes the phone or letters simply confirm what we already know.

Michael almost cried over two subjects we discussed: Northern Ireland and the seemingly lost aspect of many Aboriginal people around Alice.

"O dear," he said, shaking his head, "what I wouldn't give to see peace in our country."

His eyes are blurred with tears. He had the same compassionate grasp of life as my father and the many truly refined men of their age. He sided with me in an argu-

ment with his son over Aboriginal land rights. Michael saw clearly the parallels I was drawing between the displacement of the native people of Australia and the history of the people of Ireland - and the irony of one set of displaced natives taking the land of another.

Like many Irish people of my father's generation, these Aborigines are trapped between cultures: their own, almost lost or destroyed, another, imposed from outside, to which they cannot relate. They drink to obliterate unbearable realities and because they drink outdoors where they can be seen, the image of the drunken Aborigine becomes another cliché in the limited vocabulary of local white prejudice. Many of the Aboriginal men in Alice reminded me of people I know in Ireland, sitting lonely at bars in small towns, or drunk in their empty fields with no one to go home to.

I thought a few times of my uncle Stephen.

The night before I left Alice I met Michael in the club with Iain Campbell, the man who'd introduced me to him. Iain is head of the art department in the town's TAFE College and is a fine artist. He paints, at times, with a hint of Lowry, but is never less than himself. His stark life-likenesses are a great relief after the imitative school of gumtrees, and the sometimes blinding dots of the town's tourist galleries. Iain is also one on of the loveliest men I have ever met. We drink scotch in honour of his birthplace in Glasgow and toast life, painting, writing and Mahommad coming to the mountain.

I promise to visit Michael when I return to Ireland; we'll go down to the pub and remember Alice Springs

and talk about books.

"Isn't life wonderful," he says, "to be here in Australia at seventy eight and to have plenty of auld drink."

"But," he said, "it's gettin' towards the end, there's not too many years left."

I looked at him and said, in truth, "You won't go for a long time you're young."

"Yes", he said, "young in the mind."

And he wrinkled his forehead with delight.

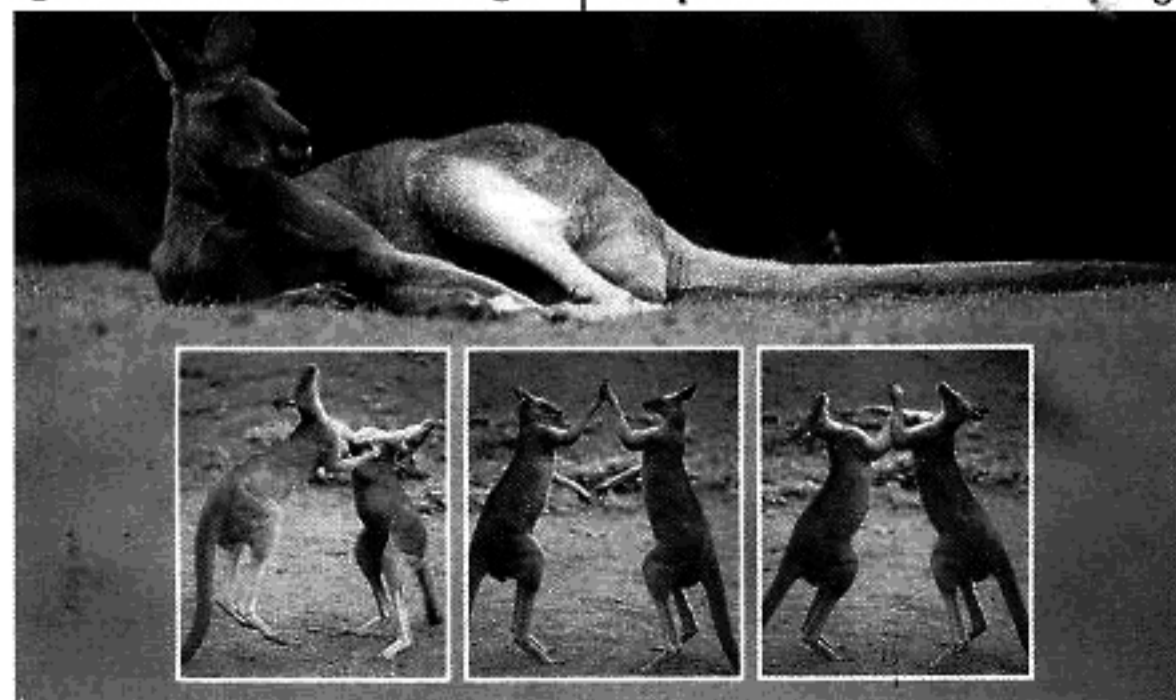
I didn't sleep until about three that morning: we were leaving at six for the fourteen-hour drive back to Adelaide. Earlier I had sat out under the stars and listened to a tape of traditional Aboriginal songs which I'd bought that day. Old men sang a song about a lost boy, elders of the Pitjanjara tribe sang of Ngiyare, the Mountain Devil Lizard and Langka, the Blue Tongue Lizard ancestors. It was the sound of sean-nós from Connemara. I lay on the still grass and watched the sky, the night was loud with the sound of cicadas. My room was full of the scent of smoke again and I couldn't sleep. When I did, I dreamt of Leitrim. I was in a room with my uncle Michael, shaking his hand: some of my cousins were there too but I didn't recognise them all. Michael's wide smile was fresh in my memory when I awoke, rested, after an hour's sleep.

I knew that the dream could only mean death.

In the living room at Stuart Lodge I looked for the last time at the photograph of the artist Albert Nomatjira and his wife Rubina. Outside the morning was still dark and the birds were not yet awake. I put a postcard under the door for Valeska and waited on the edge of the sleeping town.

We had driven a hundred kilometres before the sun began to glimmer. I knew that my uncle Stephen was dead and that the news would be waiting for me in Melbourne, I closed my eyes and tried not to think of anything except the fertile desert all around and the people who have traversed it since the first ancestor sang the first dawn into existence.

Eventually I slept.



A U S T R A L I A