

Interlude 4: something of a divide

I hope it is apparent by now that I am not trying to construct a theory, a history, or any other large-scale, coherent formulation about Australia's writers and their books. As a writer myself, I am distrustful of such formulations. I prefer to think that every book, every poem, should be allowed to speak for itself, because writers are only vehicles for their perceptions and creations to enter the world. If a writer says something at variance with what s/he's written, go for the writing every time! Writers' *opinions* are worth no more and no less than anybody else's opinions, and that's not much. Their books, on the other hand ...

In the previous essay, I discussed *The Eye of the Storm*, by Patrick White. I want to move now to something very different – M. Barnard Eldershaw's *Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow* (1947 and 1984; more of those dates later). It could be said, by way of justifying the decision to put these two works together, that both are Sydney books by Sydney writers, but that tells us next to nothing of any value. I'm putting them together because of their differences. White's book is acutely personal and both its virtues and its deficiencies arise from the extremely subjective way of looking at every thing, every happening and every moment which White confers upon himself. To get the best from him you must allow him to be whatever he wants, no matter how that may gall you as reader. Marjorie Barnard and Flora Eldershaw come from another stream in Australian writing, perhaps in world writing. By way of illustrating what I mean, let me offer some lines drawn

from Katherine Susannah Prichard, whose *Coonardoo* has been discussed in this series. The following quotations are from *Child of the Hurricane*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1963.

It was the answer to what I had been seeking: a satisfactory explanation of the wealth and power which control our lives – their origin, development, and how, in the process of social evolution, they could be directed towards the well-being of a majority of the people, so that poverty, disease, prostitution, superstition and war would be eliminated; peoples of the world live in peace, and grow towards a perfecting of their existence on this earth.

Elsewhere in the same book - *Child of the Hurricane*: are you listening, Patrick White? – Katherine Susannah describes a gathering of eighty-five descendants of Grandfather and Grandmother Prichard, causing her to reflect:

I seem to be the only rebel among them. What would he say to me, I wonder, that grandfather whose name will live on the books I have written, and who made his bold venture into the unknown? Would he understand that I am seeking to find as he did, a new and good life, though not only for the members of my own family, but for the families of mankind? A better life than the world has ever known, in which poverty, crime, and war will be nightmares of the past, and the future bring peace and vistas of joyous fulfilment to the men and women of all nations.

We saw earlier in this series how Alan Marshall held similar views about the betterment of mankind, the struggle for decency and equality, and the distress, sometimes disgust, he felt when forced to witness people's behaviour when their dignity had been taken away from them. In *Child of the Hurricane* Prichard tells about her discovery in London in the depression years, that the Salvation Army was prevented from handing out food until the restaurants and hotel dining rooms had closed. This means that those who were starving had to wait until two in the morning before they got any relief (men only, of course).

One night, dining with English friends at the Savoy, I couldn't help thinking of those people on the Embankment. When I spoke of them, my friends did not believe me. They thought I was exaggerating, or what they called my "fertile imagination" was playing tricks with me.

Our table was near a window. I got up and pulled the curtain aside.

"There they are," I said. "You can see for yourselves. And they've been there every night, all through the winter."

She adds a footnote:

When I returned to England three years later, I was told that too many people had been looking down from the Savoy at that wretched crowd on the Embankment. It had been moved further along, in order not to spoil the appetite of distinguished patrons.

Barnard Eldershaw's sympathies, and approach to writing, belong with Prichard, Marshall, and the many others who have written in fellowship with those for whom life was struggle. Barnard Eldershaw would certainly, I think, have agreed with me that fiction was social, if for no other reason than that their book dealt with, described, social life and conditions in the turbulent time from the twenties of the last century to a moment, late in what we now call World War 2, when Sydney is invaded and destroyed, leaving its inhabitants to flee to the countryside, to leave their history behind, and try again.