

Tomorrow and Tomorrow: Sydney burns, and a future is revealed

What can we make of a long-disregarded novel?

The authors first, and then the title. Marjorie Barnard and Flora Eldershaw were both born in 1897, and met at Sydney University. Both had ambitions to be a writer and they formed a partnership, producing a number of books under the name of M. Barnard Eldershaw. The first of these collaborations was *A House is Built*, published in England in 1929, after sharing the 1928 *Bulletin* prize with *Coonardoo*. The novel considered here was the last to appear under their joint name; it first came out as *Tomorrow and Tomorrow* in an edition published by Georgian House, Melbourne, in 1947, to reappear as a Virago Modern Classic published by The Dial Press, Doubleday & Co, New York, in 1984. This later edition restored a number of cuts enforced by the wartime censor, though why the publishers accepted cuts to a book appearing two years after the end of the war, I cannot say. I have some queries about this book but I'll leave them till later. At this stage I'll mention only that the 1984 edition restores the original name *Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow*, telling us that Macbeth's words were abbreviated in 1947 without the writers' permission. It's my view that the shorter version is the better book title, but must defer to Marjorie Barnard's wishes on this matter.

What is the book about, what are the forces running through it, where do the authors sit in relation to the turbulent events narrated, and why have they constructed such an elaborate framework for

themselves and their readers? Finally, if we think, as I do, that the book is an important contribution to our nation's literature, how do we approach it in order to work out what it leaves us with when, somewhat overwhelmed, we put it down?

That should keep us busy for a while, dear reader, so let us begin. The shape, I think, comes first, for it is an odd one.

It is a book within a book. A man called Knarf (back to front Frank, you may notice) is a writer living four centuries after the events that intrigue him. He has produced a novel describing life in Australia (Sydney mostly), in the twenty years or so before Marjorie Barnard and Flora Eldershaw wrote their book, and the book is also predictive in that Barnard Eldershaw take a stab – well wide of the mark, actually – as to how the war that they and their nation were embroiled in would be brought to an end.

It's now time to bring in the first of my queries. They may appear trifling, but they bear upon the way we are to think about the book. We can't quite come to terms with it until we decide what it's offering and what it's demanding of us. These themes, I'm sure, will reappear as my discussion goes on.

The first of my questions is, when was this book written? The 1984 edition has an introduction by 'Anne Chisholm, London, 1982', telling us that Marjorie Barnard began to write the book in 1942 'at a depressing point both in her [Barnard's] own life and in the course of the war'. The war was certainly at a depressing stage for Australia and its allies in 1942, but both editions of the book –

both! – have, after the final page of text, the dates ‘1940 – 1942’. I am inclined to accept 1940 – 1942 as the period of its writing because the pages of Knarf’s novel which recount the course of World War 2 are short on detail - to say the least - about such things, well known to most of us, as the Normandy invasion, the capture of Berlin by Russian forces, the manner of Hitler’s death, battles in the South Pacific, and most spectacularly, the atomic bombs that flattened Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The book didn’t finally appear until 1947, which means that had Barnard Eldershaw so wished, they could have rewritten the pages dealing with the events of 1944 and 1945. Knarf, being a man of the 24th century, is presumably allowed to get a few things wrong, but not so badly as that! I think we are forced to the conclusion that Marjorie Barnard – or was it the two of them? – didn’t alter her/their account of events after 1942 because they had written the novel they wanted to write. I’ll go further and say that they must have thought that the incorrect ‘facts’ of their account of the later years of war didn’t invalidate their view of what it had all been about.

I said that TTT is a book within a book. The complete book is divided into five parts – Aubade; Morning; Symposium; Afternoon; and Nocturne. The first, third and fifth parts – Aubade, Symposium, Nocturne – are concerned with the events of a single day at the Tenth Commune, somewhere west of the coastal ranges of New South Wales. It is an important day for the Tenth Commune because its members are to vote on a matter of control: it is proposed that ‘a Council of Workers be created to assist the Technical Bureau in the work of government and to represent in its counsels the will of

all unorganised sections of the community.’ Knarf’s son Ren, who believes passionately in this idea, is to read the motion immediately before the voting, which is to be captured by a new process. There will be a two minute silence, and three times during this period of concentration the votometer (!) will collect the thinking of those present and record the number of those thinking positively, those thinking negatively, and those who are indifferent. There is a feeling about this process that those who have allowed it, whoever they may be, are interested only in the mechanism being tested, not in the issue that Ren and a few others feel passionately about.

The vote is taken at four in the afternoon, and the motion is lost because a large majority of those present are indifferent. In the second and fourth parts of the book – Morning, and Afternoon – Knarf reads sections of his book to Ord, an historian who has researched the same period – the one that Barnard Eldershaw are writing about – without getting the grip on it that Knarf has achieved. Knarf’s book, which is the heart of Barnard Eldershaw’s book, is a torrent of passion and political analysis about a society which cannot bring itself under any humanly decent form of control, a society forever subjugated by forces, economic and dictatorially political which weave controlling threads through a society which longs for something more generous but can never popularise the understandings without which it can’t do better for its citizens.

The book – Knarf’s book, our book, the book presented to us as being written four centuries on, but which we know was written in the white heat of a world breaking down from depression into a chaos that could only be simplified, rectified perhaps, by war – the

book contains many, many individuals, and it also contains forces which are discussed as abstractions. Liberty. Competition. Profit. Every second person in Knarf's book is a thinker, but the ideas they toss around always come from somewhere else. Barnard Eldershaw are fond of the word *phantasmagoria*. The world they describe is like a long and awful dream. Any moment of happiness is the prelude to an approaching disaster. Individuals are tiny, while forces are what we today would call global. Central to those parts of Knarf's novel which are read in the section called Morning is the character Harry Munster. Harry dies late in the section called Afternoon, when Sydney is being bombed, but well before his death it is his children and others of their generation who have become the active shapers of their time. Harry is a veteran of World War 1, and he is associated, time and again, with Anzac memorials. This is an interesting clue.

The Australian and New Zealand soldiers of Gallipoli and France are given heroic stature by the book, and this is not so much a matter of conjecture, reckoning or national pride turning into praise, as an outcome of the way the book has been conceived. TTT raises as its central question the idea taken for granted by the various meliorists mentioned in Interlude 4, that is, that the dark and evil influences oppressing humankind can be swept away, or at least brought under decent control. Barnard Eldershaw *fear*, and they fear most of all, when they look closely at the world they live in, that the social improvement desired by people on the Left, such as themselves, will never come, and that every measure taken

to bring it about will be defeated by some unexpected counter-measure from the Right.

Left and Right: the words, the dichotomy, still had meaning when Marjorie Barnard and Flora Eldershaw did their writing. On the right were those who wanted wealth, power and control, and didn't want to share; wanted, rather, to rob, to dominate, to hold the living down and suck blood from their veins. The bodies of those too weak to defend themselves would be used to fertilise the earth ... or so said those on the left who hated those on the right. This is, as you cannot fail to observe, humanity divided against itself, humanity wasting in struggle the energy, and thinking, that might have been used for the benefit of all. So said those on the left.

And where did it get them? Where has it got us, ask Barnard Eldershaw, two women whose novel packs some mighty punches, not least because they have the courage to face the failure of humanity to rise to its challenges. Barnard Eldershaw not only don't support themselves with the stick of optimism, they stare failure in the face and dare to analyse its reasons. From somewhere in these swirling cerebrations they catch, from the corner of their eyes, glimpses of brave but foolish endeavours made by decent men of an earlier time, who thought that if they fought for a better way of life then it would come about. Here's a passage from the Symposium at Knarf's house in the middle of the day, which is also the middle of the book.

He looked at Ren and in his mind measured the distance between the boy and a stone figure, the Brooding Anzac, that had been exhumed seven years ago out of the debris of the old city of Sydney, and that from the first time of seeing

had been an integral part of his imagination. That distance was the *via dolorosa* between a world becalmed and a world in extremis. Must it come to that again before man could take another step in his evolutionary journey? Or was this evolution a circle like the natural circles of night and day, summer and winter, a tilted circle with part of the rim always dipped down towards darkness? Fatalists don't fight.

"What," Oran asked, "would you do with Liberty?"

An exchange develops from this question, a question that is central to the book. Four hundred years from the time of the writers, in the time when Knarf is one of the very few people still writing, that is, considering ... four centuries on, the world is controlled by bureaucratic fiat, and problematic people are swept from sight. It's all very humane, and quite unyielding. Most decisions were made long ago, and now they're carried out. The world of turmoil and struggle, described by Barnard Eldershaw via the machinery of Knarf's book, has been swept away. It took an invasion of Australia from outside forces of the right, and a violently destructive response from the left which destroyed the city of struggle, occasional dignity and beauty, and the confusion of a period of depression and war, before everyone was forced to flee, to put the past behind them, and slowly – the process is not offered by Barnard Eldershaw to the reader – to construct a saner world.

Even in this well-managed future, not everyone is happy. Ren, Knarf's son, is dissatisfied. Restless. Looking for something more ... It seems, to the mind of young Ren, that humanity has traded too much to get security, and that there was once a time – perhaps in the

period that his father and Ord know so much about – when life was led on a wilder, more dangerous and more exciting scale. At once we're forced to place ourselves in relation to Ren's idea. Would we trade uncertainty – which means chaos – for certainty? Or would we be happier in the secured society of the Tenth Commune, that land beyond the ranges where there is forever peace?

Notice that the question has slid away from its original format – what's best for society? – to the more personal form: what would *I* prefer? We, the readers, are being asked to choose a position. It's the day of voting in the Tenth Commune and we, having been privy to Knarf reading his book, know a lot more than the voters in the town square. Living conditions in the 24th century are only lightly sketched in, but soldiers with weapons are present throughout the vote, we notice, and one gains the impression that seniors of the society can make things difficult for anyone who displeases them. Conformity of one sort or another is required. Knarf, spending his life on a novel about another time, is regarded as eccentric, but harmless, as perhaps he is. Perhaps all writers are? My question is perhaps impertinent in the presence of Marjorie Barnard's endeavours, which have a rush of passion about them which I find both admirable and a little disconcerting.

Why disconcerting? Let me return to those questions – What would be best for society? What would *I* prefer? The question in its first form was the question endlessly discussed by political thinkers on both left and right during the period of Knarf's novel, and both sides, left and right, were happy to develop theories and make decisions that might, given the chance, be enforced on others.

Dictatorship of the proletariat was an idea acceptable to many on the left, just as fascism – a society whose orders were given by a few – was popular on the right. My second question – what would I prefer? – could give rise to so many answers in lounge room conversations, or pub conversations, that the forces required to impose the answers could never be assembled. To think in this way – what would I prefer? – was to step outside the needs of a mass society where decisions had to be made. In the ‘Afternoon’ section of Knarf’s book, a man called Sid is important. He’s a Party organiser, he’s linked to other organisers and decision-makers, it’s not clear how much decision-making authority he has in himself and how much he accepts the dictates of people higher than he, but, whether we think of him individually or as part of a decision-making group, he’s the novel’s way of letting loose the fires, the waves of destruction, that bring about the end of Australia’s most populous city.

To re-read the pages where Sydney burns, today, is to be amazed by the passion of the writer(s). Individuals, and there are many of them in this book, are picked up for a page or so, then allowed to slip out of sight. Some of the characters die before our eyes. Trucks, cars, and trains, trains, trains, take people out of the flames to the countryside. There is a sense throughout the book that the countryside, the land, so ancient, linked right back to the earliest inhabitants, and then to the whites who came after them, has healing properties, not only of calm, though that is important, but in itself. Land, soil, natural growth, is almost the only salve that works. This salve, or is it salvation, is needed, not only by readers caught up

in Barnard Eldershaw’s storm, but by the events themselves. One of the most remarkable feats of Barnard Eldershaw in this, their final novel, is that most of the individuals are recognisably human, more or less independent and able to operate their lives in their own ways; that is, they are seen and shown by writers with access to earlier forms of the English humanist novel, while at the same time the whole book, the social analysis, is passionately political, argumentative in the way of Party meetings.

And, let us say, like any memorable argument, the whole thing is barely under control. The writers, one feels, are at full stretch. For me, this is shown in a curious way. Barnard Eldershaw reach out, again and again, for figures of myth and legend. It is as if they can only make sense of the things they are dealing with if they appeal to earlier attempts to focus on repeatable forms of human behaviour. We need a few examples, I think. Let’s start with Harry Munster. Here’s Ord reflecting on what Knarf’s reading to him.

This man, Harry Munster, he’s the eternal homo tragicus, man caught in a trap and knowing it, futile awareness, false dawn of rebellion. There must be many like that before there can be any action, inevitable wastage. The straw that shows how the tide flows has no influence on the tide. Little Man, Everyman. Dust in history. Dust like stars, stars like dust. He does not matter, but if he doesn’t matter, nothing matters. He is Man. Man throwing down a greasy paper in a back lane.

Very late in the book we come across the same style of thinking in the mind of Ren. He’s walking in the dark after his electoral defeat.

He suffered as the young can, but every minute made himself some new toy, called in to his aid every phantom and illusion that man has invented and re-invented a thousand times for the assuagement of his own grief and despair. Driven for the moment out of his own life, or turning wilfully from it, he sought, not in concrete terms, but in their shadowy essence, that Utopia, New Atlantis, Ultima Thule, those Islands of the Blest, that North-West Passage, that fabulous Cathay, and all the other curious destinations of the seafaring imagination from Sinbad to de Quiros. He sought blindly the world beyond the world ...

And one more example, this time as Barnard Eldershaw characterise a world at war by the thinking of someone they call the Poet of Kings Cross.

... when everything the heart treasured was buried under the weight of metal, when every hopeful flower that broke the sod was a candle for a lost generation. And in this maze of life and death, men moved in age-old images, Petrouchka, the defeated who must rise again, the Wandering Jew and the Flying Dutchman, immortal man in search of his death; the Scapegoat, the Thief and the Man on the Cross; the youngest prince who must be the hero whatever befalls, Leda and her swan, Hecate and Cybele ...

Modern readers may not care for this approach, but I think we may make a comparison here with Frederic Manning, whose steady mind didn't cease to operate when his civilisation was in crisis and he was in one of the hottest spots, right in the middle. At the front line, really and truly. Barnard Eldershaw's sympathies are with the left in their slightly later description of a civilisation in chaos, but

they try to understand the doings of the right and try even harder to depict those who have a scattering of feelings but no thought-out political position. Harry Munster may be Everyman, but his wife Ally is a pathetic failure who gives up cooking for her family and eats sweets and snacks instead, putting on weight, of course, and gossiping with Mrs Blan. They have no hope of redeeming themselves. They'll never redeem a single soul. Every time Knarf's book turns to them, they're blundering, getting everything wrong because they can't see a way out.

Can anybody? Yes, I mean it, is there a single soul in the book who can find a way out of the thirties depression, the war that followed, the earlier war when mortal men became Anzacs, adding to the list of people who've lived so intensely that they've lifted themselves above being human to recreate themselves as an unforgettable type? This deification, or sanctification, Barnard Eldershaw are telling us, is available to those who give enough of themselves, and it's an endlessly moving theme of the book, but it's no solution to the world's problem, humanity's problem - how do we find a way to live which gives mankind freedom from want, shelter and all the usual needs, gives them also justice, fairness, equity, and last of all, most important, the flagship of the fleet, so to speak, *dignity*, a basis for a true and proper pride?

Humanity can be most human when it can live like gods upon the earth. How easy this is to say, how hard it is to bring it into being.

In the Aubade, Symposium and Nocturne sections of the book, it appears to have been done. A few are restless, a number would

like a change or two, most are indifferent ... the Tenth Commune will go on as before. The new voting machine, on the other hand, looks like a success and will probably be accepted for further development. It's the creation of a young man called Sfax, so his career looks rosy. Ren? He's broken his ankle at the end, but his father's found him. He'll be taken to hospital, he'll be fixed up, and the Commune authorities will make it clear to him that if they hear much more they'll require his acquiescence, which in their terms means silence. They'll probably suggest that he bury himself in something both stimulating and harmless – like his father. Knarf's book isn't going to swing any minds.

What about Barnard Eldershaw's book? Are we in a position, yet, to say what it's about?

I think we are. I think that *Tomorrow and tomorrow* is a contemplation of the world's problems and the possibility of a solution. Written at a time when the Great War, the First 'World' War, had started up again – some would say it never stopped – the novelists – and again, I wonder if there was only one at work, or were there two? – the novelists are faced with their own despair. They think politically. They handle potential solutions as easily as they handle problems, and none of the solutions can be made to stick. Being people of the political left, they are used to fixing blame on the right, but, being novelists of high capacity, they are aware that humanity has its limits and that there are problems which will re-present themselves no matter who's in power. The left may be no better at solving them than the right. One has only to reflect at this stage to see, to realise, that political solutions to

lasting problems may do no more than put a coat of fashionable varnish on a surface that's unchanged. In a word, can the position of humans on this planet be improved? If not, are we doomed, then, to repeat everything awful – and yes, the good things too – that have happened a thousand times before?

If the answer's yes, the writers and thinkers, all the meliorists of one sort or another, are in despair. What's the point of talking about improvement if you can't make it happen?

Barnard Eldershaw are in fact in despair for most of the book, although their state is disguised from time to time, or hidden. For instance, they write so sympathetically for Harry Munster and his family, Harry with all his struggles and his decency, his deserts – what the world owes him – that we the readers, like the writers, are made angry and we want the sun of fortune to shine on Harry. Thus, when his world is clouded by depression and another war, we look around in anger. We resemble the writers, casting their minds here and there for answers. No answers appear, despite the book taking time to listen to what people are saying at Hyde Park (in Melbourne it would have been the Yarra Bank). No answers exist. Nobody's got them, anywhere in the world. (*Tomorrow and tomorrow* is as much a world book as it's an intensely parochial one.)

War begins, but, surprisingly, it doesn't end with atomic bombs being dropped on Japan. A settlement is put together between the contending powers. As the section called 'Afternoon' wears on, a fleet of ships assembles over the horizon from Sydney, to ensure that the peace that's been agreed upon is kept. The national and

international political situations are not made very clear, however, because the authors have the end of their argument – and yes, the end of their world too – in sight. There’s no national leadership; in fact, the authors have the Australian PM in Melbourne, as if the national parliament had not been transferred out of that city in 1924! Wherever the PM may be, he’s only mentioned once. What matters is happening in Sydney. The Party has been organising for months, and when the international forces land somewhere between Sydney and Newcastle, the Party, the group that used to be the Left’s hard core, takes over. Under their control, Sydney is evacuated, then destroyed. Barnard Eldershaw set this down this with seething energy.

For Sid Warren, and for perhaps a few others, the burning of Sydney was not the blind decision of a lust, it came out of hard reasoning. It was the overthrow of the golden calf. The city was the symbol of greed and profit, every stone of it was tainted; only by its utter overthrow could men free themselves from it, its numbing delights and illusory prizes. It was the logical conclusion of a passionate unified mind. For the moment his power rested on giving the people what they wanted, shaping their chaotic desires, inspiring the toughness to carry them out. Later it would rest on their helplessness. He knew that many must die and many more must suffer, but he believed, with a hard impacted belief, that only so could the tide of history be turned.

Our authors are presenting us with the thinking of a fanatic, compressing the many histories of a great city and the multitudinous memories, meanings and associations that it holds to the over-

simple over-simplification that Sydney is ‘a symbol’ (!) of greed and profit. Any great city can be seen in any number of ways; that is, it is like the aggregations inhabiting it; that is, it is beyond any one classification or description. But Sid, Barnard Eldershaw’s once-communist, now-anarchist, has been brought to be a destroyer, and one feels that as he and his highly organised fellow-destroyers go about their work they are not only destroying a great city but releasing the frustrations of those many thousands who dreamed, who thought and wrote and sang for ever so long about the improvement of the world, the perfecting thereof, that they had hoped, and failed – *failed* – to bring about.

When Knarf, in the 24th century, reads his description of Sydney burning, we see at last why the time he’s writing in, far in the future for Harry Munster and his family, far in the future for all those who had to flee the blazing city, is so controlled. Those who manage the world that’s to come, have learned, at last and after all, how to manage human affairs. They do it by control, and they limit themselves. Everybody’s clothed, and sheltered and fed, and after that they can do what they like, so long as – a warning they cannot fail to be aware of – *so long as* they keep the peace.

For Knarf – Frank back to front; this was a joke, we presume, or was it? Marjorie Barnard had Frank Dalby Davison in mind – for Knarf, what he’s been describing is behind him, it’s the history, the past, that’s led to the present he inhabits. If he thinks it’s something of a trap, he can to some extent release himself by searching for the paths that brought his society to where it is as he reads. That’s

where Knarf is, but where are we, dear readers, and where are Marjorie Barnard and Flora Eldershaw?

They are to be found, I think, quite exhausted, in the last pages of their novel. They are in the 24th century, with Knarf and his son Ren, who has a broken ankle, you may remember. Knarf apologises to his son for missing the vote; he was reading to Ord at the time, he meant to stop in time for the vote, but time slipped away. He wouldn't have made any difference, but he asks forgiveness for his lapse, and his son forgives him. This is easy, I think, because both of them realise by now that the human struggle is endless.

... the desire for the shared life, the brotherhood of man.
Power and Liberty. Strophe and Anti-strophe. The word
liberty is only a handle. The thing itself has had a thousand
manifestations ...

Power has always devoured liberty. Because liberty has
always called power to its aid it has perished. It has armed
itself and fought, only to die of its own violence ...

There is more of this. 'The exhausted world is at pause,' they say, and so of course are they. Ren is reassured by his father's thoughts, and so, we feel are those who wrote them down. Knarf gives his son a drink of spirit (!) from his flask. The boy drinks, and he sleeps. Knarf holds him, his heart ...

... wrung with the most difficult love in the world, the
love of a father for his son. It has no code and no ritual, no
physical release, it must forever stand by and its way is the
way of relinquishment.

The book ends with dawn entering the sky and Knarf observing to himself that, 'This is the beginning' and 'The earth remains.' For my part, I think it is the end of a long line of writing about the world's improvement. The writers – and to this day I don't know if Flora Eldershaw played a part in its writing, or was, perhaps, simply a supportive but spiritually active presence for Marjorie Barnard – the writers poured their most highly sustained energies into the downfall, the ruination, of the world of their time, and one feels that the 24th century world they describe doesn't have much appeal for them. I'll presume to read their minds, and it seems to me that there is a weary acceptance that solutions are never good enough, and struggle is what keeps the spirit healthy. And society at large? It's like a city. You can build it, you can destroy it, but when the thing's there, around you, it's so many things to so many people, it's capable of being understood in so many ways that no one solution to mankind's affairs is tenable for any longer than the span of somebody's, some council's, some parliament's control – that being a euphemism, here, for dictatorship. Power, say Barnard Eldershaw, speaking through Knarf, ruins everything, but it must be brought into everything because it must be controlled. If this is a problem then it's without a solution because it's on-going. Today's solution may be fine, but we mustn't expect it to work tomorrow.

If this is despair, it's also a hard-won realism. I find myself wondering whether Marjorie Barnard and Flora Eldershaw knew, at the beginning, where their book would lead them, and I doubt it. I think that the storm of passion released when Sydney burns, when the desperately frustrated men, with their few supportive women,

finally set the place ablaze, must have taken them by surprise, even if they had planned and to some extent foreseen how they would go about it. They write brilliantly for pages at a time, and yet one feels that they are destroying the thing that's sustained them for so long, and that's the hope of a better, perhaps even a perfected, world. The 24th century? Their hearts aren't there; they died in the flames of Sydney.