

Questions of scale: a term in Geneva, starting in 1926

Frank Moorhouse gives us a look over the shoulder of a young woman working for the League of Nations.

Grand Days begins on a train. Edith Campbell Berry is travelling to Geneva to take up a modest position in the headquarters of the League of Nations, the hope of the world after 1918. She shares lunch on the train, the rest of the trip, and many later days and nights with Ambrose Westwood, a doctor, a British Major, and a somewhat more senior employee of the League. Two thumpingly thick books later, they share the misery of rejection as the League is replaced by the United Nations, on American soil this time, the League's achievements virtually ignored by the new creation. Edith Campbell Berry has put two decades of her life, her highly developed working methods and diplomatic skills, into an organization that the world has chosen to forget, but Frank Moorhouse has brought it to life again in *Grand Days*⁽¹⁾ and *Dark Palace*⁽²⁾, two books that summate his long-term fascination with conferences. It might be said that Moorhouse specialises in bringing together the public and the personal, and it seems to me that his greatest strengths and his greatest limitations as a writer join at this very point where public and private encounter each other.

Take the first chapter (they're not numbered) of *Grand Days*. Believing, as we do after reading the jacket blurb, that the book's subject is the League of Nations, we have to ask why the opening is concentrated, not on the state of the world, but on two people

encountering each other and recognising an attraction? The chapter ends with a kiss and the firmness of an erection; what is this the start of, in the fortunes of the world? In the endless rearrangements of life which will one day be sifted through and written down as history?

I have no simple answers to these questions, and this must therefore be the starting point, and probably the ending point too, for my consideration of the League of Nations books. I recall that I was a little surprised, on my first reading, that *Grand Days* began as it did, and, rereading several years later, having been to the end of the journey with *Dark Palace*, I was even more surprised that the opening of the double-book should be given over to two people who could at best be regarded as 'representative' of the League. As you see, I still believed that the League was the subject, the focus, of Moorhouse's writing.

As, of course, it is, and yet Moorhouse's methods are so noticeable that one feels that his way of going about things is as much his subject as the matters that are the focus of these methods. I refer mainly, I think, to what people call his 'discontinuous narrative method', something which he has used in earlier projects (*Grand Days* appeared when he was fifty-five). I've not read an explanation of this method and am loath to take on the task, beyond saying that it appears, to this writer, to be a means for the author to dislodge the weight of God-like knowledge and responsibility which was once expected of narrators, and novelists in particular, in

favour of offering a series of cameo-observations which the reader must put together for him/herself. It is as if the writer leaves to the reader the work of building an interpretative structure from the evidentiary materials supplied. Moorhouse uses this method with great skill in *Forty-Seventeen*⁽³⁾, where the reader is put in the position of interpreting the narrator's life from the late years of schooling to somewhere in mid-life and mid-career. I don't think the discontinuous narrative method is as severely tested by *Forty-Seventeen* as it is by the two League of Nations novels for which the method, I think, has had to be somewhat adjusted. In the earlier book, breaks are inserted wherever needed, whereas the League novels are broken into chapters, many of which have to accommodate a variety of content, so that the shaping hand of the God-novelist can be sensed from time to time. One wonders sometimes, particularly in the second of the novels, whether the author may, perhaps, have allocated blocks of material – incidents, characters, scenes – to certain chapters in a process of preliminary allocation, followed by the business of shuffling, juggling, fitting in. I don't make that suggestion as a criticism, since big books require a good deal of organization, management, if they are to work, but I noticed, as my recent re-reading passed the halfway mark of the second book, that the chapters had a remarkably even distribution of weight, as if they were structural elements of something like a bridge, designed by an engineer who intended each part to carry a share of the total load, and with no part allowed to carry more than its share.

Another noticeable feature of Moorhouse's writing is that it is post-Freudian. I don't think any of us are yet in the position to evaluate what European civilisation lost and gained by adopting a Freudian viewpoint on human behaviour, but Moorhouse's writings suggest, to me, that Freudian emphasis on motivation and the unconscious surfacing in unexpected times and places is either taken for granted as one of the many thought-offerings available – and one which is as likely to be rejected as accepted – or it has been allowed to recede into the recent past, not necessarily rejected, but no longer vitally important. In this respect the subject matter of *Grand Days* is a guide, in matters both public and private. Again and again, in the League novels, Moorhouse's characters, especially but by no means exclusively Edith Campbell Berry, are forced to consider procedures. The League is a new institution, it is dealing with new challenges in new ways, and its methods of working – with the diplomats and politicians of its member states – have to be considered in all their aspects and implications. This is a matter that requires the formulation of new rules and procedures, not a practice without formalities:

She believed in the formal occasion, where all the rules were known to all. The casual was too demanding, the rules too ambiguous for relaxed pleasure. The casual required blatant behaviour to ensure that understanding had occurred. The formal allowed subtlety to play within its firm boundaries.

The first word in that quote reminds us of another development since *Forty-Seventeen*; the central figure of the League novels is a woman. This suits Frank Moorhouse uncommonly well, despite

the Hemingwayesque features of the central male in *Forty-Seventeen*; placing a young woman at the heart of the books gives marvellous scope for two complementary sides of his writing: the endless exploration, the satisfying of curiosity, which gives his work much of its impetus, and the definition, labelling, categorisation of modes of operation and diplomatic necessities. Edith, like Bartou and Sir Eric Drummond, her immediate superiors, is forever examining Latin tags or other summarisations of ways of seeing things. They are forever in search of useful ways of thinking, and this is one of the ways by which Moorhouse puts us in a position, suitable for us and suitable for him, whereby we can see, or at least try to see, the work of the League, in all its immense complexity, through the eyes of a handful of those who work for it. I referred earlier to my surprise that the opening chapter, in presenting us with Edith and Ambrose, appeared to think that it was also introducing us to the League. To this moment I am not entirely comfortable with this but I have to find that Frank Moorhouse is consistent in his use of Edith (especially) and Ambrose as both participants and commentators, analysts also, of the League. The League, however it may have been described at the time by people of many nations, was a creation of the best minds that worked for it, and this meant that essentially it was always a work in progress, something that was being brought into being at every moment of its existence and eventual decay. Edith, Bartou, Sir Eric, Herr Stresemann, the pre-Nazi German envoy, and all the rest of the characters, both fictional and drawn-from-life, are not only actors on the League's various stages, but creators of the League because creators of the

tools of thought it uses. This is something Moorhouse develops in our understanding of the League through his examination of it via a long chain of chapters; what he is giving us is not a history of the League, with dramas, failures and achievements, so much as a meditation on the nature of the League via the minds of those who thought most and most deeply about it. This excludes the various dictators and despots around the world for whom the League was simply a nuisance, and concentrates on those most committed to seeing the League succeed.

But, of course, it failed, unable to override the rampant nationalisms of the period. To us, today, World War 2 seems an inevitable follow-up to the unfinished business of World War 1. The forces let loose in 1914 hadn't been contained, the League couldn't restrain them, they broke out again, worse the second time, if possible, and when World War 2 ended with the dropping of the most awful weapon ever devised, Europe's dominance of the world had ended. Hence the transfer of the UN across the Atlantic. It is perhaps asking too much of Edith Campbell Berry, Ambrose and the rest of the League-loyalists to see this far into the rhythms and delimiting forces of their time; their job was the very difficult but slightly simpler task of keeping the League alive in some of its functions at least until the second great conflict had ended.

We do feel, I think, when *Dark Palace* reaches its end that a chapter in the world's history has been brought to a sad but inevitable conclusion and I think this is a triumph on Moorhouse's part. I find my way of looking at the world has been changed by the experience of reading these two novels. I want the world to be able to manage, to control, itself; I want turbulent countries to be

kept in restraint by their neighbours; I want national policies, all too often the policies of madmen, made subject to the advancement of humankind in general. Globalisation has advanced considerably since the years between 1926 and 1946, the period of these books. In ordering these years, in reminding us of all the work done in the decades he's covered, in making us feel for the many people working for the League – and reminding us of others resisting it – Frank Moorhouse has done us a noble service. We are wiser for having worked through his thousand or so pages; we're better informed, we've got a base for thinking about the efforts of peacekeepers today and in years to come. There is a saying that all that is required for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing; we might reasonably reply that if good people are to triumph then they should be well-informed about the things Moorhouse treats in these novels. Something of this feeling that humanity has taken some steps forward over the decades covered by the novels derives from the altered power balance achieved by the book – by Edith! – in its latter half. As indicated above, Edith is junior to Ambrose in the early chapters of *Grand Days*, but by the later chapters of *Dark Palace* they make jokes about her employing him, and the jokes are true. Edith has a job and Ambrose is dependent on her, so much so that it's actually quite hard to recall, as the second book wears on, that in her early days at the League she did some silly things. She was impulsive, hadn't learned the limits of her powers and capacities, and hadn't yet learned that anyone wanting to shape events has to wait for, and recognise, those moments when opportunity presents itself. The later Edith, the *Dark Palace* Edith, has learned these things well. One can't put the second book down without realising

that Edith has developed mightily since the opening chapter of the first, and, one realises on reflection, that this development has come about because she's realised that the closest possible attention to the forms, the working methods, the procedures in all their minutest detail, is what creates a successful organization, and that the lives of individuals – their happiness, their sense of themselves, their fulfilment – depend on the lives of the organizations of which they are a part much more than they do on the inner workings of their own psyches. If you have a problem, we might extrapolate from the character of Edith, don't introspect or analyse too far: change your way of working to make yourself more productive. To put it another way, to change yourself you must change the organization of which you are a part.

I imagine that in thinking along these lines I am getting a little closer to the reasons why Frank Moorhouse has decided to open *Grand Days* with Edith and Ambrose meeting one another, disconcerting as I find this way of starting. I am forced to the conclusion that I put society and individual in a different balance in my thinking than Frank Moorhouse does, and since I am writing about his work, I must respect his way of seeing. It comes naturally to me to look at society first, and locate individuals within it, whereas the writer of these novels conceives Edith and Ambrose as both fields of force and also vantage points for looking at, for thinking about, the League.

This brings me to the question of Edith's marriage. As *Grand Days* wears on, the name Robert Dole crops up more and more; he is a journalist and he's interested in Edith. Later, of course, he marries

her, and later again they separate, but before any of this can happen Ambrose has to be moved out of the way.

The trigger for this is Edith's realisation that her lover is sending messages to the British Foreign Office about happenings at the League. Edith's loyalty to the League's ideals make this intolerable, even from her lover. Moorhouse's account of this shock to her system, and what she then goes on to do about it, move the personal lives of Edith and Ambrose onto the plane where the League itself takes its actions. Edith puts her problem to Under Secretary General Bartou, who moves it, with admirable skills of analysis and diplomacy, back to Edith. She searches Ambrose's flat and finds what she finds. She tells Bartou. Ambrose is demoted to lesser activities of the League – building maintenance, furniture and cleaning. Bartou recruits Edith as his personal assistant. She is on the way up. Bartou comes out very strongly as an intelligence and a character in this section of the book. He has been a Swiss diplomat and he tells Edith that he has a very great curiosity about the English and their empire. She, on the other hand, comes from a part of that empire, which means that her family's origins lead back to the same formative influences that have produced Ambrose. It cannot be easy for her, Bartou says, to turn against him.

Your soul came from the same place but it has been altered.
Altered by the sun and by the pioneering and by the distance
in under 150 years. I am interested in what happens to the
national soul when it's transplanted.

It's worth saying that the two books are full of such moments, when whatever's happening in the foreground of the narrative squeezes, forces, some such observation from one of the League's people.

I've already referred to the League as a work in progress; it's in such reflections, observations made on the run, that we can see the League's inner life, see it working itself out according to whatever's happening. I think we can say that Moorhouse creates the League as it creates itself: this is a marvellous achievement. The League is not only an organization, it's an organism, alive and struggling to remain so, whatever the world throws in its direction. Edith's loyalty to the League is great; it's the ideal of her life, and she works so hard to embody its aims and the perfections it aspires to that she, largely unaware of what's happening, shifts away from her own Australianness. In the year that *Grand Days* was published, it was entered for the Miles Franklin Prize, but rejected by the judges as not being sufficiently to do with Australian life. Scornful as I may be of the prize-culture in our literature, I was at the time and remain today quite amazed at the judges' reading of *Grand Days*; I can think of no other book so aware of national characteristics and their place in the struggle for human improvement. Edith's life in the twenty years she spends with the League is one long test of the usefulness and the limits of national characteristics. After Bartou makes the remark, quoted above, about Australians as transfigured British, the two of them have a long conversation, he offers her a job with him, and she, in her turn, asks him if he would have made the offer if she hadn't 'exposed' Ambrose Westwood.

He thought about it. 'This matter has brought you into my focus. I like the way you handled it. There was no "clean" way of handling it. You rolled up your sleeves and did the job. I imagine that's an Australian characteristic. And a Swiss characteristic also.'

Edith points out to Monsieur Bartou that he is ‘seemingly still on the soil of your own country but legally in a diplomatic nether region.’ This is something he understands very well. ‘I can never be Swiss again in the same way.’ Working for the international, or supra-national, organization is something new in human experience. The waters are uncharted; this is why the Latin tags and various legalisms from here and there are brought out from time to time and examined. There must be some relics from the past that give guidance? This is why the character Edith, or certainly the later Edith, can be used as a window on the life and the thinking of the League. Edith’s development perhaps justifies that exposure at the very start of the first of the two books as being representative of more than herself.

Which brings us to Ambrose, the Molly Club he frequents, his disgrace, his replacement in Edith’s heart by the journalist Robert Dole, and by the failure of that marriage and the return of Ambrose to the inner sanctum of Edith’s affections. This is a process that spans many pages and dominates the later part of *Grand Days* and the first half of *Dark Palace*. As I made clear at the start of this essay I have difficulty in finding a way to link the personal lives of Edith, Ambrose, Robert, with the broader narrative of the League. In an attempt to quantify the size of my problem, I turn to the pages (lists) headed ‘Who is Who in this Book’. At once we discover a remarkable thing. Most of the characters, personalities, are real people, identified with names, nationalities, responsibilities and the like, and therefore historically verifiable, but – *but* – the weight of the narrative is borne by the people Moorhouse has made up. The

book is, as he himself says in a note at the front of *Grand Days*, ‘a work of the imagination’.

Does this, then, or does it not, give Moorhouse the choice of characters – the sorts of people they are, and the way they are shown – for his novels? Having given himself the responsibility of showing, and frequently quoting, his historical figures, may he not choose his own foreground people, against whom the historical figures are set? Put this way, the question has to be answered in the affirmative. He does.

Do I, then, find anything wrong in his choice? Of Edith? Of Ambrose? Of Robert Dole? Of other League people, such as Josephine, whom Edith uses shamelessly when it suits her, and Caroline (a novelist whose writings about the League, read by her in a self-indulgent setting, caused me to smile; I sensed that Moorhouse was in playful mood when writing these parts)? This question is not answered so easily. I am least comfortable with Robert Dole, so will begin with him.

Dole is not a foundation of the books, as Ambrose is. Dole wasn’t there at the beginning. He turns up much later as a minor character, but we notice his name occurring with a certain regularity and it is evident that his importance is on the rise. He is a journalist, and well-informed. Presumably he has sources here and there around the world; the knowledge of these people, their perceptions and suspicions, could be of interest to the reader and of value to Edith in her work, but Robert Dole isn’t used in this way. Let me clarify the line of thought that I am taking here. At a certain stage of the first of the two League novels, Edith’s affections and attention

shift from the disgraced Ambrose, whose loyalty to the League was wanting, to a knowledgeable and competent journalist whose viewpoints and contacts might easily be used to enrich the book. Robert could have been used by his creator to provide news and views of the League and its activities from virtually anywhere in the world. He might bring to Edith's and the reader's attention any number of things not visible to someone with a Geneva base. Robert Dole offers the possibility of a wider understanding of the League than we have had so far. Used well, his character and occupation could have provided a base for the books' deeper examination of the League, but Moorhouse doesn't take this opportunity which he himself has created. Edith's love for him dwindles, he's away from their Geneva home for long periods, he's dislikeable when he returns, but he refuses to see himself as not possessing his marital rights (!) and, to be frank, this reader wonders why Edith, practical and determined as she is, doesn't have the lock changed on her apartment so he can't break in on her with Ambrose, as he does one night. This unpleasant scene is so obviously and easily avoidable that we are forced to consider that the author wanted it to happen and therefore made sure that no steps were taken to prevent it. Then, as it seems to the reader that Robert is about to disappear from the scene, he suggests to Edith that they have a child. She decides against this course, this life-changing decision, but not without considering it, and it occurs to this reader that the whole business of Robert's presence in the book might be a device to present the possibility of motherhood to Edith, so that she can reject it – decide against it – more decisively than by simply going

ahead with her by now revitalised relationship with Ambrose. In this sense I think that Robert Dole is not so much a character in his own right, a force in the book with capacities and mobilities of its own, so much as a representation of an aspect of Edith that needs to be dramatised in order to be rejected. Robert, in my view, is not a path with a validity of its own, but rather he is the path not taken by Edith. He's there in the book to show us what Edith chose not to do, even though – for she did marry him, didn't she – she was attracted to it. That other path, that collection of meanings represented by Robert, needed, apparently, to be shown, to be seen by the reader and by Edith, so that her return to Ambrose and their mutual paths, is both understood by and credible to the reader.

One has only to open the book anywhere and compare a scene where Edith and Ambrose are together with an Edith/Robert scene to realise how much better suited Edith is to Ambrose. Their minds meet ever so much more easily, they dress and undress each other with a tenderness that is a pleasure to consider, and it is a tenderness that the reader remembers when Robert, returning from wherever it is he's been in the ever-troubled world, wants to speak scornfully of the man in Edith's apartment – Ambrose. The reader swings automatically behind Ambrose and also behind Edith's choice of him over Robert. This is done so convincingly that the writing pushes aside the opportunity mentioned earlier on about the novelistic possibilities of using Robert's worldwide contacts as a way of adding to the author's League of Nations theme. With Robert dismissed, and motherhood abandoned, Edith has fewer choices; she's committed to the League until the end, and when the

end comes, on page 657 of *Dark Palace*, she and Ambrose wonder what they will do tomorrow.

Tomorrow? Ambrose talks about Haydn's *Farewell Symphony*, one of those cornerstones of European thought, where the players leave the stage, one by one, until, not only is there no music, there are no musicians either. He hums a few bars. What will they do tomorrow? Tomorrow, Ambrose says, they will find a place in this new world. Edith, as ever, is stronger than he.

She took a deep breath. 'No. We will *make* ourselves a place.'

And so the second book ends. Ambrose and Edith, whose coming together initiated the first book, have seen it through, and, shattered as they may be, they are still, while holding each other, talking about tomorrow. Tomorrow, of course, must look after itself, but the reader doesn't feel the desperate hope of Edith that *something* can be discovered, resurrected, or whatever for them to do. Characters live in the imaginations of their readers. When books end, readers put them back on the shelves, while the characters, those drawn with sufficient verve and vitality by their creators, live on for a time in the minds of those who've read about them. Edith Campbell Berry is a character who'll live in our minds for a long time, but only for what she's done in the pages Frank Moorhouse has written for us. I don't find myself thinking of future steps and stages in her life to come. For me, she dies when the League dies. Her period ends when the League ends. She added a few bricks to the wall which we call world government, and this was an honorable thing to do, but, her moment of being somewhere near the spotlight having passed, she slips into the darkness which history's lights can't, or

don't bother to illumine. This may seem to bring this discussion of *Grand Days* and *Dark Palace* to an end, but there are still a number of things I want to look at, and will do so after we take a look at the work of that other, and equally political, Frank who gave us *Power Without Glory* and *Legends From Benson's Valley*.

- (1) *Grand Days*, Frank Moorhouse, Pan MacMillan, Sydney, 1993
- (2) *Dark Palace*, Frank Moorhouse, Random House, Sydney, 2000
- (3) *Forty-Seventeen*, Frank Moorhouse, Penguin Books, Melbourne, 1988