

How the world failed the League of Nations, then began again

Some thoughts about *Dark Palace* by Frank Moorhouse

Dark Palace begins in Geneva. The story of the League is already well advanced, though the darkness of the title lies ahead. It's 1931; Moorhouse tells us this in the second line. It's not a date he would have featured at the beginning of his two-book undertaking but he's entered the period for which he can expect his readers, the older of them at least, to recognise the significance of dates. I say this even though the Great Depression, which was at its worst in 1931, is hardly mentioned. This reminds me that by the time we get to 1946, when World War 2 is over and the League is all but washed-up, he's made no mention of atom bombs dropped on Japanese cities, indeed virtually no mention of the war in the Pacific at all. His concentration on the vestigial League's skeleton staff in Geneva has been very disciplined, and he's able to do this because for most of *Grand Days* he's taken it for granted, I think, that some sense of the war's events and those leading to it is lurking in the minds of his readers. For instance, before the book has reached its midpoint he starts a chapter with 'Australia, 1936', and I find myself supplying, as many readers will, even must, my own sense of the country and the period he's introducing. Several chapters and a fifth of the book later, he returns us to Europe simply by announcing '1938' and we know from the date alone that we are entering the darkness referred to above. The events chronicled in the book are minor, almost trifling, in comparison with the storms

raging around them, but the details in front of us and the events of the wider world are endlessly connected by Moorhouse; it's part of his skill that he makes the connections by making us make them for ourselves.

Let me give one example of his use of a handful of people to indicate the state of the world. Lester, an Irishman, has taken over the role of Secretary-General, replacing Avenol, who's returned to France, not without losing the trust of those who worked with him. Lester approaches Edith, because of her connection with Ambrose who is very much part of the Molly Club – it surprises her that Lester knows this – and because Bernard Follett, who runs the Molly Club, is a man of considerably increased importance. The false identities, the cross-dressing and so on which once made the club a thing of the night, now resemble everyday life in wartime. Contacts are everything. Bernard's busy. Lester, the League's third and last Secretary General, knowing of Edith's links with the club, is looking for a way to help James Joyce, the Irish writer who is living in Switzerland. Joyce's daughter is in an asylum in France, mentally ill, and he wants her near him. Can this be arranged?

Bernard says he will see what he can do. He makes it clear that nobody will be told what's happening. 'If possible, the girl will simply arrive at his doorstep.' Edith explains that the daughter is violent, and that if she is travelling she will need attendants to handle her. 'Mother of God,' Bernard says, and runs a hand through his hair. 'Is there no end to it all?'

There is. Moorhouse ends the chapter thus:

James Joyce died in Zurich. His daughter stayed in the clinic in La Baule. Switzerland was not invaded. And there in the Palace of Nations they watched the Germans gradually face defeat.

The next chapter is another of those beginning with a date: 1945, this time, and everyone is waiting for Prime Minister Churchill to make an announcement. But the speech, when it comes, is made by Lester to what's left of his staff in the library of the Palace of Nations. Moorhouse does some foreshortening of time and events at this point. No mention is made of Russia's army moving towards Berlin, and what that country's conquest of eastern Germany will mean. Japan and the Pacific aren't mentioned. (Those bombs haven't been dropped yet.) Nonetheless, Lester mentions that he will soon be going to San Francisco to attend a conference on arrangements for what he calls the 'New League'. His optimism reads a little oddly, today. Had he no idea what sort of world, and world organization, was likely to form? I find myself admiring the skills of Frank Moorhouse but not quite knowing how to take what's happening before me. Moorhouse gives the book two endings. The first is bitter-sweet, with a feeling of a period running out while trying to tell itself it isn't, while the other puts us down hard. As stated earlier, the UN has no wish to inherit the League's memories. The UN, beneath its rhetoric, has in all probability decided that the League was a failure and doesn't want to be associated with it, so much so that it's determined to create a new identity without connection with the old. So much for the last

chapter. In the second-last, before the League people are made to feel the shame of their situation, they see themselves as those who carried the flag – held up the world's banner, as Lester puts it – while the rest of the world was fighting. Proud of themselves for having kept something of the world's hopes alive – or that's how they see it – they hold hands and sing.

[Edith] still held Jeanne's hand as she looked around the crowd, but Jeanne's hand seemed cold.

She knew which of the crowd would stay on and which would now go home never to return – go away to start their ordinary lives which had been postponed during the war.

Go to their banal and happy lives.

Her eyes came back to Jeanne. She'd lost Jeanne.

That couldn't be helped.

They let go of each other's hands.

'Going back to Paris, Jeanne?'

'As soon as I can.'

'Good.'

'Go well, Edith.'

'Go well, Jeanne.'

Edith is still expecting the League's resurrection, though I think it's made clear to the reader, three hundred pages earlier, that the world has lost faith in the League. I refer to a speech Edith makes at Sydney University on her return home in 1936. Italy has invaded Ethiopia. Edith explains the steps taken by the League. 'Firstly, it

had to determine whether a state of war existed.’ Edith has made a reputation at the League for being meticulous with procedures but it’s obvious to everybody in her audience that a state of war must have existed: Ethiopia’s been taken over, hasn’t it! Edith moves on to explain the various stages of sanctions against an aggressor nation, and reverse sanctions to assist nations that have been attacked. Her presentation is knowledgeable, even sophisticated, but her audience can’t see it working. Indeed they know it’s failed. The League, in the minds of her audience, is a dead duck. A man suggests this to her, directly; the chairman rules him out of order because it’s his third question. The meeting is about to close, and Edith, knowing this is by way of relieving her, restarts her speech. ‘The League of Nations is a college as much as it is a political instrument. We are all learning,’ she says. People clap, but they’ve seen the world situation more accurately, and more nastily, than she’s presented it. Has she then come home in order to be forced to face the truth?

The answer’s yes. The people at Sydney University see what she doesn’t want to see. I have no doubt they feel she’s trying to sell them the party line and they’re not swallowing it. I would go further and say that this part of the two books – the long section back in Australia, with a copy of D.H.Lawrence’s *Kangaroo* in her bag, to be read as she travels around - is the most problematical of all. Travelling by train to meet her father, on the south coast of New South Wales, she finds she doesn’t like the look of the place. ‘It was grim in its barren repetition.’ ‘The bush *was* grim and the bush was dull to the eye. And dangerous.’ She feels that she’s being

disgustingly disloyal and that the disloyalty is ‘an embarrassing and gaping hole in her heart’. Then she gets off the train and meets her father, who says, as they embrace, both of them weeping freely, ‘I’ve missed you something dreadful, Edith ... something dreadful.’ Edith’s missed her father too, and tells him so. Twelve or thirteen pages later he asks whether she and Robert – her husband; he’s still on the scene, publicly at least – are ready to retire to Jasper’s Brush; he wants to be looked after. Edith sees the problem clearly enough. If she takes a position in Canberra he could join her there. This seems feasible to her father, but he says he’s too old to travel to Geneva. Jasper’s Brush, he says, is a good place to raise kids. He’s sketching in a life she isn’t going to lead. Ambrose has already indicated his willingness to move to Canberra, but he knows as well as Edith how unsuited he would be for the bush capital.

Edith does, however, visit the capital, as she’s told Ambrose she would. It happens in a chapter called ‘To The Unfinished City’.

From Geneva, one of the civilised world’s oldest cities, she’d travelled to the world’s newest, most unfinished and unhewn of cities.

Capital of one of the still uncompleted nations. Although she was beginning to think that all nations were incomplete. Had changes yet to be made. Had to continuously evolve.

But she had come to the world’s most *baffling* city, baffling by its not being there.

She has an appointment, and orders a taxi. It doesn’t come. She makes another call, but still it doesn’t come. She retreats to her

room, calms herself, then walks. A man cycling past, a civil servant such as she may become, if she's offered a job, and accepts, offers her a ride. A 'dink', as it was called in my childhood. She gets on, and, remarkably, they're both going to External Affairs, and she enjoys the ride. Again I think Moorhouse is amusing himself, and he's certainly amusing me! Yet somehow the incompleteness of Canberra is seen less sympathetically than is the League, another work in progress. Canberra is the capital of a nation still forming itself, as the League is forming itself, but Edith succumbs to the feeling of security which Europe – despite the dramas and chaos of its history – manages to suggest to her is available in Switzerland. This, even though Europe is about to tear itself in pieces all over again, having done so quite thoroughly in the war that led to the League being set up.

In raising this point I am adding it to the abandonment by Frank Moorhouse of the theme he raised a hundred pages earlier – the question as to what Edith will do about her father's needs as he declines. That chapter ended on page 280 and that was when her father, though we didn't know it at the time, and received no signal to that effect, dropped out of the book and as far as the reader is ever told, from Edith's life. This problem has arisen before, in the earlier book, when Edith's mother is made aware that she hasn't long to live. She writes to Edith, as does Edith's father, telling her that there's nothing she can do if she comes home, and her work in Geneva is too valuable to be interrupted, so Edith stays where she is. This is sensible, justifiable, and it's what her parents told her to do, but I can't read that section of *Grand Days* without feeling that something more, just a little more, is needed. These doubts, I

find, remain buried until Edith does return home, has an emotional reunion with her father, senses his need for her, then abandons him. Or is the abandonment by the novelist rather than the character? In the earlier of these two essays about Frank Moorhouse I avoided giving a definition for the term 'discontinuous narrative'; I did this because I can't know how Moorhouse would explain his own methods. I can only sense that he operates according to some principle – which isn't mine – of how readers will react to, and use, what he gives them. During my first reading of *Dark Palace*, becoming aware of this problem, I re-read the Australian chapters, thinking that perhaps the author had been stuck for space, and forced to leave out things that might otherwise have gone in. After this re-reading it was clear to me that this was not the reason for dropping Edith's father. Scrapper, the returned serviceman with the ruined face, who persuades an unwilling Edith to give him the 'pleasure' of masturbation with her gloved hand, has more pages devoted to him than does Edith's father. Why? Scrapper's appearance in the novel might be termed gratuitous. Nothing depends on him, and once he's gone nothing of him remains beyond the displeasing feeling that the book has turned an ugly corner, and contains a section, now, and fortunately, behind us that we won't be asked to revisit. What is Scrapper doing in the book, and why isn't Edith's father, an important part of Edith herself, kept before us as his destiny works itself out?

I can't answer these questions, I can't see any answers in the book(s), and I am left wondering why the author approached these things as he did. The League novels are huge in their scope, of course, and not everything can be put in; I notice that when *Dark*

Palace returns to Europe (1938!) things are as if the return to Sydney, the south coast of NSW and even Canberra, the capital that isn't there, had never happened. The world doesn't take much notice of Australia because it isn't forced to. Edith herself, who sometimes senses, in Geneva, that she's reacting in an Australian way, is all the more an internationalist for having returned for a while to her place of origin. She is a world citizen and it's one of her jobs, or perhaps it's the ultimate direction of everything she does, to take the world with her to the new high ground she and the people at the Palace of Nations occupy. If she had ever put it this way to herself she might have seen how unlikely it was that the League would succeed. What they were about was simply too early in human history to be achievable. Too many dark forces had to be worked through before the League's aims were even thinkable.

This becomes clear in one of the finest sections of the two books, wherein a young German called Dieter arrives in Geneva, wanting refuge from his Nazi bosses, and bringing news of his government's plans to wipe out Jews, homosexuals, and gypsies. '*Arbeit macht frei*' is already becoming more than a slogan. Testing's taken place. Extermination can be made to happen. The world doesn't know yet, but the very nature of the war, the moral balance we might say, has changed, and the side hostile to the Germans is picking up the first signals of change. The arrival of Dieter in the book, a not very pleasing young man, alters the characterisation of Germany, which, in the earlier book, was at least to some extent embodied in Herr Stresemann. Not any longer. People drink with Dieter, Ambrose goes to bed with him (!), and his story's out. Edith uses the secret phone number that Anthony Eden gave her, and gets the discovery

through to the British Foreign Office. Moorhouse handles this most convincingly, especially when the officer assigned to probe Edith's account turns out to be an old mate of Ambrose. This comes at the end of the phone calls and it sets a seal of success on what Edith's done, in a very British way that reinforces the affection we have come to feel for Ambrose. Edith and Ambrose are both well-bonded and re-bonded by now, and the pair of books is as much theirs as I imagine Moorhouse intended when he began the story of the League's journey with their meeting.

I've already praised the skill with which young Dieter is used to remind us of the Nazis' worst excesses and bring at least the overtones of their actions into the creation, in our imagination, of things set before us by Moorhouse in his prose. He doesn't have to tell us, show us, everything. We can do most of that for ourselves. Or can we? Will we? Most readers, I think, will use Dieter's presence in the novel to remind themselves of what they already know about Germany's actions in World War 2, meaning that they probably won't revisit or re-examine the reaction of Germans to their defeat in World War 1. What was World War 1 about? Was it a struggle for dominance in Europe? A struggle for dominance between a vast (British) empire and a much lesser German one? However we answer this question, we have to recognise that the League failed because it simply couldn't stop the rivalries of the earlier war breaking out again in a second and finally decisive later war. Events, once war breaks out, run out of control. This means that the League, in trying to manage events and minimise the damages done, is in a reactive position, unable – *pace* Edith's speech on sanctions – to control the forces wielded by great powers while

having few powers of its own. Moorhouse, although presenting us again and again with the thinking of League people, can only leave it up to us to see what the League can and can't do, because he's writing a novel, not a thesis of historical analysis.

This dichotomy, of novel and political/historical analysis, is fundamental to the way we read *Grand Days* and *Dark Palace*. I find it's a conflict in myself because, even though I'm a writer and sometimes a novelist myself, I can't stop myself trying to read the two books in terms of a statement about a certain reasonably recent period of the world's history. I find myself wanting to interrogate the book, asking its author 'Are you saying this? That?' when I know that if I myself were being interrogated I'd be replying, 'I'm telling you a story, or interconnected set of stories, and all my political and historical comment is *incidental* to my story. Follow the story,' I'd say, 'and pick up everything else along the way, as it comes in at the edge of your perceptions ...'

Historical novels are supposed – supposed! – to recreate the past. *Grand Days* and *Dark Palace* may only very loosely be termed historical novels. For all I know, Frank Moorhouse mightn't want that term applied to them at all. He might reasonably say that they are contemporary novels wearing the dress, the costumes, of an earlier period, but only as a device to fix them more firmly in the contemporary mind. I think this is the best way to read the two books. Why do I say this? At once I'm scratching my head. As I search for my answer, I find my mind circling around the character of Edith. She was 39 in the year 1939; this means – if you think about it; Moorhouse doesn't mention it – that she was born with her century. She is, in that sense, an artefact of her times, and as her

century progresses – that awful century whose story we know only too well! – she moves with it, embodying it, or aspects of it, as much as any single person can (unless they are a Stalin, Hitler, Roosevelt or Churchill, names that are synonymous with the various forces that they both wielded and represented). We are getting somewhere near the limits of the human mind, here, because we, as a race, find it hard to understand ourselves, despite the various human sciences we've devised for this very purpose. (Fictions are as good as most, hence people's liking for novels; they're by no means an easy way out of thinking!)

I was speaking of Edith. Should we think of her as an historical person (brought into existence by a novelist), or perhaps as a contemporary figure, imagined by a contemporary novelist, and sent time-travelling back into a period when he, the novelist, hadn't been born or was too young to know what was happening? Is she, perhaps, a modern woman, used to explore a time before her own? A sort of Doctor Who, running between the time she belongs in and the past she's been sent to explore?

I think the books, especially the second one, read more easily if we think along these lines. It need no longer trouble us if sometimes Edith feels a little more like us than she's like *them*. Like many other readers I find Edith a delightful central character, a most successful creation by Moorhouse, convincing, even admirable in her knowledge, foresight and frequent pedantry over procedures. If small things are done correctly, and well, so too will larger things, or that's how Edith makes us feel. She is the heart of the two novels. When Ambrose is with her she springs even more

keenly to life; something about his ambiguity, or adventurousness as a male enlarges her, makes her adventurous too, bigger in mind, in a way that simply doesn't happen when she's with Robert Dole, the journalist she marries. As I said earlier, Robert's work as a journalist might have been used to enrich this novel about the League, but I find myself forced by my own thinking to realise that it takes Edith to bring the League alive for readers and it takes Ambrose, with all his sexual ambivalence to bring Edith to life for us too. As readers, we can't do much for Edith but look at what she's doing, and admire; it takes her love-life with Ambrose, their partnership, to bring her to life for herself; we stand, I think, on the brink of discovering that the two of them, by giving each other the freedom to be selfish, make themselves unselfish each to the other. So that it seems that I was wrong when I questioned at the start of my essay on *Grand Days* Moorhouse's way of starting his journey with these two League workers finding each other on a train. The journey of the two books is *their* journey, and it's the energy of Edith with Ambrose and vice-versa that brings the League to life for us. In this sense the two novels, pleasingly huge, tell the story of an unusual love, one that generates not children but a well-energised viewpoint, not onto the present, leading into the future, but onto a piece of the past which I think Moorhouse feels is inexplicably, perhaps disgracefully ignored. It takes Edith and Ambrose to make us transport our minds over the years of the League, and when, at the end of *Dark Palace* Edith says goodbye to Jeanne – going back to Paris as quickly as she can – it occurs to me that Jeanne's story – at the League; or perhaps after she leaves Geneva, as she is about

to do, on page 633 – Jeanne's story might well have made another book, even another pair of books, if Moorhouse had known as much about the young Parisienne as he was able to make himself know about a young woman from the south coast of New South Wales, Australia, someone born in 1900 with the whole world, and a whole century, in front of her. Earlier in this essay I introduced the slightly unsuitable term 'historical novel'; I say unsuitable because to call a book an historical novel is to suggest that it tells you about some period, whereas, as I hope I have managed to show in these two essays, what Frank Moorhouse has done in *Grand Days* and *Dark Palace* is to repossess a piece of everybody's history, to refurbish and rearrange it precisely, procedurally and aesthetically – the way Edith might have made it presentable – so that we, his readers, can possess it imaginatively, and make it our own.