

## *Tirra Lirra by the River*

Writers belong to their time. Jessica Anderson was born in 1916, and *Tirra Lirra by the River* was published in 1978. If we wish to furnish the years between, we'll need a world war or two, a depression, a terrifying nuclear bomb, and we mustn't forget a couple of waves of the women's movement, altering the consciousness of somewhat more than half the human race. One way to see this change is to examine the claims made by activists demanding a different interaction of males and females, and a related and somewhat more cooling way to look at it is to ask how far, if at all, the clamour, the public disturbance, actually changed women's lives. *Tirra Lirra* is something of a case study in this respect. It begins by bringing Nora Porteous, a woman in her seventies, home to the house where she was brought up, a Queenslander on stumps, with fourteen steps to get to the living quarters, and Brisbane around her, the city she couldn't wait to get away from. At the beginning of the book she's back, and at the end of the book she's still there; she's been unwell, she's spent a lot of time sleeping, she's had visits from the doctor and some neighbours who feel she needs to be looked after. She has this need, yet she's tougher than they know, and there's an awful lot of remembering, and evaluating, going on as she recovers her strength. Travel's wearied her, and there's also the invisible stress of readjustment. The book is a journey too, backwards and forwards in the life she's had, which she's in the business of assessing. There have been ups and downs, a terrible marriage, a

few weeks of happiness in a shipboard romance, a ghastly abortion, a certain satisfaction with her dressmaking skills ... there's a whole life to be weighed up, once it's been recalled, and, in the eyes, the judgement, of the women's movement, Nora has been the classic female victim of the patriarchal times, and yet ...

And yet!

Jessica Anderson has a second theme to develop, and, like Helen Garner in *The Children's Bach*, she uses the poet Tennyson to introduce it.

From underneath his helmet flowed  
His coal-black curls as on he rode,  
As he rode down to Camelot.  
From the bank and from the river,  
He flashed into the crystal mirror,  
'Tirra lirra' by the river  
Sang Sir Lancelot.

The young Nora is crazy about poetry:

... I was – am – a person of undisciplined mind, and in spite of the passion I had for poetry, I could seldom hold more than a few consecutive lines in my head. The poetry in my head was like a jumble of broken jewellery. Couplets, fragments, bits of bright alliteration, and some dark assonance. These, like Sir Lancelot's helmet and his helmet feather, burned like one burning flame together.

She goes straight on to tell us about a night when she was walking home after visiting her friend Olive Partridge. Something causes her to put down her music case, and she lies on the ground, having unbuttoned her bodice to release her breasts. The moon shines down on her, highlighting her breasts, and, she says, she fell into a prolonged trance, from which she was woken by the approach of a horse, 'a big bay, walking slowly and pulling grass with thievish and desperate-looking jerks of the head'. Nora jumps up, adjusts her clothing and goes home. Something about her nature has been revealed to her. Years later, back at home in that high-stumped Queensland house, she thinks what her London friends Lisa and Hilda would have said if she'd told them.

'Of course, Nora, you were looking for a lover.'

And Hilda. 'But of course! As girls did in those days, without even knowing it.'

Nora accepts this as true enough, but only in a limited way.

And I would probably have said, yes, of course, because in these times, when sexuality is so very fashionable, it is easy to believe that it underlies all our actions. But really, though I am quite aware of the sexual nature of the incident, I don't believe I was looking for a lover. Or not only for a lover. I believe I was also trying to match that region of my mind, Camelot.

So Camelot is more than a place of story, it's part of her mind, and she becomes aware of this when still quite young.

... I was a backward and innocent girl, living in a backward and unworldly place. And consider, too, that the very

repression of sex, though it produced so much that was warped and ugly and cruel, let loose for some natures, briefly, a luminosity, a glow, that I expect is unimaginable now, and that for those natures, it was possible to love and value that glow far beyond the fire that was its origin.

Even to set down, as simply as possible, this alternative path of thought which is shown us early in the book, is to make me aware of the risks involved in assessing *Tirra Lirra by the River* in any formulaic way. Jessica Anderson is affected by her historical time, and our interpretation of its movements is relevant in forming a reaction to her book, but there is at all times another side to what she's telling us. Her method of writing, I think, contains a warning. Don't accept the formulaic, doctrinaire interpretation as anything but a first response, useful perhaps, but limited, even wretchedly so if it persists in ignoring the other levels that are available to the sympathetic reader.

So, having given ourselves this warning, let us look for another way of reading this book which, I notice, my edition (Picador/Pan Macmillan, Sydney, 1978) refers to as a novel, whereas I would classify it as a novella, something I do because the term 'novella' is a diminutive form of the word 'novel' and this normally implies that the writer has performed the difficult trick of making something which is apparently small imply an unexpected range, scope or size. This certainly applies to *Tirra Lirra*.

Another way of reading. How else can we look at the book?

It's essentially the story of one woman, and she tells it herself, yet we notice that she pushes things out of her mind if she doesn't care to look at them. We're told this in terms of things being

invisible on the far side of a moon. If she can't see them then she doesn't think about them, though occasionally the moon spins of itself to remind her of something. With a narrative method working along these lines we can hardly expect much analysis. The knights of Camelot were no more or less thoughtful, or introspective, than anyone else of their period. There's a rare assertion early in the book's second half and the way we come to it is indicative, in my view, of how Nora's, and Jessica Anderson's, mind works.

I had lost my distaste for London. The Georgian terraces that had formerly seemed repellently chilly I now saw as formal and peaceful. I never lived in one of them. It was always my luck to find accommodation in houses of a later date, usually Victorian. But these too were spacious and solid. I never once lived in an ill-proportioned room.

Lucky Nora! She should have tried modern Melbourne! Or she might have wondered about her underlying certainty that she will leave London one day to return to Sydney. Instead she buys curtains and a Persian rug for her new quarters, and then, impulsively, she makes a decision to go into business for herself. A brass plate will be needed, her friends tell her, so she puts one up:

NORA PORTEOUS – DRESSMAKER

The confidence of capital letters speaks loudly in this quiet book. In the very next line Nora says something about herself:

'I have come a long roundabout way,' I remarked to David,  
'to find out who I am.'

*Tirra Lirra by the River* is then a journey of discovery. Jessica Anderson allows her central figure to speak for herself, to find

her own way through the various experiences that return to her mind now that she's back in Brisbane, with most of her life behind her. It's as if the writer is listening to her character's wandering thoughts and sometimes disjointed utterances, reaching out with skilled, or do I mean well-trained, fingers to grasp the important threads as they appear, and assist them in finding the shapes they need. Skilful as she is as a shaper of narrative, it's not easy to catch her at her work. The whole thing moves unobtrusively, with flashes of irritation as a minor character – Jack or Betty Cust, for instance, or Lyn Wilmot – cuts across her train of thought. Nora doesn't want, or expect, her thinking to be diverted, although she has some skill in hiding this, as in fact she hides a good deal of what's happening inside her. This – to revert to my earlier line of thought, about feminism or ignorance-of-feminism as giving us a way to interpret the book – shows in the numerous occasions when something within her comes to the surface, usually surprising Nora, finding her unready:

I no longer thought of Sir Lancelot. The war, and the boys under the camphor laurels, had obliterated him. But perhaps not quite. At intervals all through my life, sometimes at very long intervals, there has flashed on my inner vision the step of a horse, the nod of a plume, and at those times I have been filled for a moment with a strange chaotic grief.

It's tempting to think of Sir Lancelot as a motif impelling the book along, but it doesn't seem to work that way. He's more of a reminder, I think, of levels of the mind that are not in use but may surprise us at any time by causing us to do something, or see things in a surprising way, thus pushing Nora's story – and ours too, by

implication – in some new direction. Schematic descriptions of the ways in which the mind works – the subconscious sending bubbles to the surface, and that sort of thing – have no appeal to Jessica Anderson. In fact, scanning the surface of her prose in an attempt to discern her methods of writing, I would say that she is hardly an analyst at all, but operates on the assumption that whatever’s important will make itself visible at some suitable occasion, so long as writer and readers are ready at all times for whatever comes. A disturbance in the lower, out of sight realms of the psyche usually means, within the world of this book, that something unexpected is about to be introduced. In the previous quotation, for instance, Jessica Anderson tells us about Nora’s ‘strange chaotic grief’. In the very next line she goes on to tell us how, one morning when she was at the Custs’ shop – this was before she went away – she ‘wept and wept’. Why, she asks, and at once tells us that she can’t remember. What she does remember, a few lines later, is someone practising the piano in a room upstairs – ‘the vacuous up-and-down march of piano scales played with boredom’. Nothing develops from this at the time, but a hundred pages later Jack Cust’s brother Arch re-enters the narrative as the one who was not only practising the piano but doing so in a way that he knew would attract the attention of young Nora, visiting the house beneath him. Arch was, as an immature lad of thirteen, developing the habits of the girl-chaser that he was to become, though he married eventually a girl of eighteen, when he was thirty nine, and, Nora tells us, they lived happily ever after. Arch now lives far to the north of Jack and Betty Cust – and the returned Nora Porteous – but he sends

his brother a case of pawpaws once in a while, and Nora takes delight in eating one of them ... all of which might appear to be of no consequence except that Nora is alive to these little connections between parts of herself she knows about and parts she doesn’t, and is aware, too, that these unexpected connections are clues, perhaps, to other connections, invisible ones, to the characters of those who act on them without thinking. *Tirra Lirra by the River* is a book of recall, or perhaps I could say a book constructed using recall, a rather arbitrary, unpredictable building method, but one that’s uncommonly effective because it’s so true to life. Most of us can point to aspects of our lives that we feel we can explain quite well because we have sufficient understanding, but for every one of these there are others where we don’t really know why things turned out as they did. Nora Porteous is not the sort of person who knows why things turned out as they did. She represses; she denies. Her understandings only arrive in flashes. Much of the time she makes little attempt to control events, so that when she does, it becomes doubly significant.

After the failure of her marriage, she gets on a ship to England. On board the ship, she has an affair. This lasts for the six weeks of the voyage, then Nora tells her lover that when the ship arrives there will be no further contact. No meetings, no messages. The affair will end with the journey, as if it had all taken place out of time, and would be destroyed when clock and calendar resume their sway. When the ship docks, the man’s wife is there to greet him. Jessica Anderson offers no description of the wife, and indeed, she goes further than that: she never tells the reader the name of

the man Nora is making love with, happily, and walking the decks with, talking. This is as close as her life comes to Camelot – or is it? Camelot is there as a reminder of the dimension it exists in, but the dimension is never offered up for the judgement, or even the consideration of the reader. It exists, and after that, no more is said. One feels that to try to analyse Camelot, even to find out a little more about it, would be disrespectful. It's as if we are not intended to know too much, but rather, it's our lot to find our way between the things we can know, and either avoid, or yield to, all the other influences as they crowd in.

For us, Nora's shipboard lover has no name. For his wife and his five children, he's another quantity altogether, but readers are only allowed to know him as Nora knew him, happily, anonymously, briefly.

A little later, on shore, Nora discovers that she's pregnant. She has an abortion, and it's a horrible experience, not that she allows her feelings to show before her friend Olive, who helped to arrange it. The doctor is disgusting and he hasn't done the job as well as he might, because Nora bleeds for days. When the bleeding stops, she makes a decision, or perhaps it's already been made. '... never again did I have sexual contact, of any kind, with anyone.' Again, and as usual, there's no analysis of this, no reasoning offered; a fact, stated as baldly as possible, is allowed to speak for itself.

Commonsense would tell us that many women would have acted differently. Commonsense is not invoked by Jessica Anderson. This is what happened to Nora, this is what Nora did. This was the outcome ...

It's a very confident technique for telling a story. For recalling a life. It puts the reader firmly on the receiving end, and quite negates, in my view, any post-modern ideas about the reader having ownership of the text. Where, exactly, is the energy in the text? I think it's in the associations brought to mind by things as they're mentioned.

The reader is being tutored in a way of considering a life.

Late in the book, Nora has a bad night. She wakes from a dream, sweating, and changes her sheets. Betty Cust visits her in the morning, and the two women, one of them dressed for church, the other walking about when her doctor would prefer her to stay in bed, explore the garden. Nora has already decided that she will live in a couple of back rooms, one of them an enclosed verandah, which were the rooms where her sister Grace lived the last part of her life. Betty Cust mentions Grace, and Nora's mind looks for ways to evade the comparison, but it's underway in the reader's mind, and can't be stopped. The two of them talk about Grace, and compost, and her opinionated views on gardening. Grace is closing in! Nora discovers that Grace has slept on what Nora regards as the back verandah, and this leads her to ask Betty if she thinks Grace was happy. No, says Betty, and a moment later she says it again. Grace is closer! The exchange between Nora and Betty Cust has drawn remarkably close in a few simple lines. Why wasn't Grace happy? Betty says she doesn't know. Did Grace know why she wasn't happy? Betty says, 'She once said she did.' The reader feels with Nora in the words that follow.

'What did she say?'

'That for the whole of her life, she had tried to have faith, and that for the whole of her life she had only opinions.'

This is the heart of the scene and the reader knows it. Nora admits to being touched by what she's learned of her sister. She changes the subject, and a moment later she announces that she must go inside. Betty, looking for something positive to end the meeting, hopes Nora will resume her sewing.

'Oh I know you can't do that fine work any more. But you're so clever and artistic, you can't give up your lovely sewing.'

This looks like an unproblematical conclusion, but it's used with skill; Jessica Anderson's footwork is very, very neat. There is a line space, and then:

But she is wrong. Although I am growing stronger every day, and although my hands, blessed by sunshine and Doctor Rainbow's care, are more pliant than for years, I shall never sew again.

We must presume that she doesn't, just as she once decided not to let a man close to her again. Her decisions, once made, are final. She is showing us, as is her creator, the processes by which the elderly prune things from their lives once they realise they're not needed any more, or perhaps once they're known to be beyond renewal. At such times a cut-off has to be made in order to make way for those things which can and will be allowed to continue. Nora moves on to talk of the letters she writes, and receives. Olive Partridge, a successful novelist, and based in or near the London Nora has left, says she intends to visit Brisbane to see her mother; she further proposes to visit Nora, 'if you wish me to'.

I take down her last novel and look at her photograph on the back of the jacket. How fine she looks, how stately and authoritative. No doubt I shall still annoy her. 'Yes, do come,' I reply. 'We shall sit and quarrel under the mango tree.'

Then she thinks of Lisa and Hilda, and Fred, who lived with them in London:

I find myself thinking that we were all great-story-tellers at number six. Yes, all of us, meeting in passages or assembling in each other's quarters or in the square, were busily collating, and presenting to ourselves and the other three, the truthful fictions of our lives.

'Truthful fictions'; the book has only two pages to go when she gives us this. Nora's in Brisbane, her friends on the other side of the world. She will see Olive when Olive comes to visit her mother. What else has she to do? Is there any resolution to be found? Yes and no. I began by suggesting that Nora's story is a case study in the abuse, or at the very least the misuse, the downgrading of women. The doctor who performs Nora's abortion is such a classic example of a woman-hating professional – a professional woman-hater? – that one can see no hope for any improvement in her circumstances, because if he is representative – and clearly he is – then the society that produced him is in desperate need of redemption. It needs the cleansing which the women's movement is about to give it. Yet this is not Nora's life's work, and neither is it Jessica Anderson's. None of us ever lives in a world that's as it should be. We must find our own ways of getting through the turmoil. For someone as elderly as Nora, this means revisiting the meaningful moments of her life and

asking what they mean to her, and what they once meant, and why the two meanings don't necessarily coincide. I've already referred to the way Jessica Anderson moves her prose about, here and there. Her mental processes, quirky as they may be, are in control of its movements. Look at the last page. She thinks of her father, as he was when she was young. His face returns to the face she now knows him by, the face in a photograph. Within a line or two, she's in a 'choking chaos of grief'. Grief; we've encountered it a number of times in the book. Like Camelot, it's always there. Camelot! Between father's photo and that choking chaos of grief, there's a moment when Nora's memory's invaded by 'that old chimera, the step of a horse, the nod of a plume.' Sir Lancelot is near, for one last and final time. She's already been walking, looking for the river, the river of her city, Brisbane, which both is, and isn't, the river by which the knight called 'Tirra Lirra!' She couldn't find the river because houses have been built over the old points of access. It's still there, of course, but the river she once knew isn't there any more because it's in her mind, and always was.

What's left? The memory of the black dress which, we presume, was being put over her head so she would wear it at her father's funeral, a memory which runs straight into the nod of a plume, and the plumed heads of the horses at her father's burial. A voice says that the funeral was a fine ceremony and, to the surprise of this reader, she ends her book with what I think is an entirely new thought, one of those stepping-off points she's introduced many times in order to get us thus far:

I think it consoled me, a little. I think ceremony always has,  
a little.

I've already said that I am unprepared for this last thought. I'll go further and say that ceremonial behaviour means following an order that's already laid down, and has therefore a pre-existing condition in the minds of those who participate in it. That is, a ceremony is moving because it follows an agreed sequence of things that must happen. This, to me, has been the opposite way of working from that of Jessica Anderson's narrative, which has arbitrariness as one of its principal virtues. In that sense, the last move she makes in the book is the largest and most arbitrary of all. This seems quaintly but pleasantly appropriate, to me, but I wonder if that's how it affects you, dear reader?

By way of concluding this essay I would like to say that *Tirra Lirra by the River* has been almost the hardest to write about of the many books I've dealt with. As I said at the outset, it's wide open to a systematic, feminist interpretation, but Nora didn't live that way and one feels that, whatever ideas Jessica Anderson may have absorbed at various points of her life she would never have allowed them to do more than influence her along the way. She strikes me as being too far-sighted to let any one system manage her thinking for her, and every one of those sideways steps, each and every recall of Sir Lancelot and his horse and the plumage they shared, is a reminder of the flowers and fields, the variety, that lie outside any system of thought.