

TABLE OF CONTENTS

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COVER DETAILS

The Glyde River, Arnhem Land
Photo credit: Djon Mundine

FRONT:

David Malangi, Glyde River mouth, bark painting
Courtesy Bulabula Arts

BACK:

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EDITORIAL		iii
FOCUS ON EXPLORATION		
SIMON RYAN	Discovering Myths: The Creation of the Explorer in Journals of Exploration	1
BARBARA BELYEA	Sea of Dreams: La Vérendrye and the Mapping of Desire	15
J.A. WAINRIGHT	Australia North: The Gaze from Above/Down Under in <i>Map of the Human Heart</i>	29
PENNY VAN TOORN	<i>True Country</i> : A Review Essay	39
INTERVIEW		
GERRY TURCOTTE	"The Germ of Document": An Interview with Michael Ondaatje	49
REVIEWS		from 59
<i>Books on Exploration</i>		
BRIAN EDWARDS	<i>Enduring Dreams</i>	
SIMON RYAN	<i>Taming the Great South Land</i>	
BARBARA BELYEA	<i>Unravelling the Franklyn Mystery</i>	
MARVIN GILMAN	<i>Territorial Disputes</i>	
<i>General Reviews</i>		
DOUGLAS BARBOUR	<i>The Sting in the Wattle; The World Faces Johnny Tripod; Red Centre Journal; At the Florida</i>	
MICHAEL HAYES	<i>Mudrooroo</i>	
DENNIS DRUMMOND	<i>Yves Thériault</i>	
LEONIE SHORT	<i>Canadian Health Care and the State</i>	
GREG RATCLIFFE	<i>Mona's Gift</i>	
GERRY TURCOTTE	<i>The English Patient</i>	
REBECCA ALBURY	<i>Challenging Times</i>	
ANNE LEAR	<i>Wilder Shores</i>	
NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS		108

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STILL FROM
MAP OF THE HUMAN HEART



Photograph:
Manifesto Film Sales

PENNY VAN TOORN
A JOURNEY OUT/BACK: EXPLORING
KIM SCOTT'S TRUE COUNTRY

A recurring image in exploration narratives is that of the white man's "first footprints", the marks which annex a blank, hitherto unknown piece of ground into the domain of European knowledge and control. In colonialist discourse, these first footprints empty the land in preparation for its refilling. They erase the long history of Aboriginal occupation, and inaugurate a new "true story" in which European settlement is often troped as a transformation of the land from *tabula rasa* into densely written text.

A set of "first footprints" is one of many possible ways into the textual terrain of Kim Scott's *True Country*:

Dry season: early morning cool; and I left the first footprints in the dew on the lawn. More and more appeared, those footprints increased until there were tracks everywhere, criss-crossing dark green on the silver sheen of the dew. (71)

The footprints here are those of Billy Storey, a school teacher recently arrived at the Aboriginal settlement of Karnama in Australia's far north-west. Even in the late twentieth century, Billy and the other workers and tourists who journey to Karnama see themselves as latter-day explorers who have travelled "out" from a safe, familiar centre to a relatively dangerous, unknown liminal space. Billy's registration of his own "first footprints", and his terse meteorological notes—"Dry season: early morning cool"—cite European codes of exploration and settlement which situate Karnama as a place "out there", a remote outpost of Western civilisation where history began only with the arrival of whites.

But Billy's journey "out" is discovered to be also a journey "back", a rediscovery of his lost Aboriginal identity, history, homeland, and cultural heritage. Billy comes to Karrnama half-consciously searching for the place from which his paternal grandmother was removed as a child. Having been raised in suburban Perth, Billy knows virtually nothing of the history and cultural heritage of his father's side of the family. For Billy, the journey to Karrnama is a quest, only vaguely apprehended at first, to heal the rupture between past and present that occurred as a result of his grandmother's removal from her land and people.

By mapping Billy's journey doubly, reconfiguring it as a move "out/back", *True Country* disrupts the spatial order into which the Karrnama region was integrated at the time of "exploration". Initially, Billy tries to teach the Aboriginal children to orient themselves geographically using compass directions laboriously calculated by the sun, his watch, and a protractor. But Billy's pupil, Deslie, an Aboriginal boy "not of this country" (135) asserts: "'I don't need to make those reckonings. I know this country. I'm here, I'm Deslie.' He pointed to the ground beneath him and rapidly stomped his feet..." (135). It occurs to Billy that if Deslie can claim the place where he stands as his home and basis for identity, perhaps *he* might learn eventually to do the same.

The codes of exploration constitute one of several colonialist genres cited and subversively re-sited in *True Country*. Within the story of Billy's return, "Dry season: early morning cool" is not part of an explorer's systematic, scientific coding of an alien climate, but serves instead as an evocation of a beautiful place Billy is beginning to think of as his own, and of a climate whose nuances are becoming more intimately known to his body and mind. Scott's rewriting of the moment of the "first footprints" exposes the ideological assumptions behind European notions of exploration. These prints are clearly not pressed into previously unmarked earth. The *tabula rasa* over which Billy walks has been created literally overnight by the dew, and by the planting of the lawn at the time the school was established. Obviously, Billy's prints can only be called "the first" because signs left by others have been effaced.

When the lawn fills up with footprints—"tracks everywhere, criss-crossing"—the pattern that emerges is not one of parallel lines of alphabetic writing on a page, but instead resembles two culturally distinct cartographic surfaces: the map which shaped Billy's first impressions of Karrnama, and an Aboriginal painting of Dreaming tracks, communally produced. Like the footprint-covered lawn, *True*

Country is communally generated and culturally hybrid. As well as breaking with static, monolithic models of culture, Scott's text deconstructs unitary concepts of language, voice, medium, and narrative form. *True Country* is a heteroglossic, orally-grounded printed text which articulates a space of overlap between varieties of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal verbal art.

True Country explores the boundaries conventionally separating disparate orders of truth, both within and between different cultures. Scott tests his readers' willingness to follow Billy into a zone where non-Western criteria of verifiability and truth-value prevail. In conventional Western terms, Scott narrates a "true story" in so far as his novel is based on his own experiences teaching at the Kalumburu Benedictine Mission in the Kimberly region. Scott dedicates the book to Robert Unghango and Mary Pandilow, "who let me listen", and whose voices inspired him to try to "get something of what I thought of as the poetry of Aboriginal English on the page".¹ Writing the book, Scott found that

the readily available ways of writing about remote Aboriginal communities did not even get close to allowing me to articulate something of the nature of my experiences. There seemed always to be a taint of some sort of frontier ethic, or an us-and-them mentality.²

Scott's solution is to create a story that resembles the footprint-covered lawn/map/Aboriginal painting, with its story-tracks criss-crossing everywhere. The main narrative line—Billy's autobiographical account of his experiences in Karrnama—intersects with, and becomes inseparable from, a network of other stories that binds the whole community together. Story, voice, and community are inseparably interconnected, and Billy (Mr Storey to his pupils) wants to be

the one who gives meaning, and weaves the unravelling trailing threads of the lives and histories here together so that people can be held up and together by the integrity and sense of patterns. He who sings the world anew so that you know where you are. (169)

Without at all presenting itself as a display of the author's own knowledge, *True Country* draws self-consciously on both Aboriginal and European traditions, thereby breaking down the "us-and-them mentality" covertly fostered by Eurocentric literary forms. Like Conrad in *Heart of Darkness*, or Patrick White in *Voss*, Scott narrates the story of a journey beyond the boundaries of the West's known world. Yet while Conrad's and White's protagonists are destroyed

morally and physically by their respective encounters with peoples designated "other", Kim Scott uses the device of Billy's mixed Aboriginal-European heritage to undo the logically prior practice of making binary categorical distinctions between self and other, black and white.

Like Conrad's Kurtz, Belaney's Grey Owl, Eleanor Dark's Andrew Prentice, and many other characters in colonial history, literature, and film, Kim Scott's Billy Storey crosses a symbolic threshold into otherness: he "goes Native"—but differently. One of the many original and surprising aspects of Scott's story of Billy is that at some point part way through it, we begin to realise that the story-form has changed, has been grafted onto Aboriginal roots as it were. The Eurocentric narrative of the white man who "goes Native" is re-written by Scott in accordance with the structure of an Aboriginal initiation ritual. Billy spends more and more time alone in the country surrounding Karama, where he discovers the huge crocodile that becomes his special totemic animal. He learns the true names of certain fish and other local foods. He crosses the river which marks the boundary of the Karama mission settlement, and rediscovers the long-abandoned old people's camp, where he finds a collection of sacred objects carefully stored in an old hut. Billy's initiation culminates in the moment of his drowning which is also a moment of spiritual rebirth. Attempting to make his way back to the settlement across the suddenly rain-swollen river, Billy falls into the swirling water which "coiled around him, took him, wanted to swallow him" (253). Billy is swallowed and regurgitated into a new state of being by the river which is figured as a snake.

Scott's story of Billy's "going Native" is complicated further by the fact that, biologically, Billy is part-Native. In reclaiming his Aboriginality, Billy reverses a previous cultural crossing into whiteness. Billy's mixed racial identity provides a starting point for Scott's teasing out of some of the most complex and urgent questions pertaining to Aboriginal identity. In the section called "Some Explanation", Scott carefully distinguished between the psycho-social and historico-political considerations that come into play in the formulation of concepts such as "the Aboriginal community".

[Gabriella] "I'm thinking. People been talking to me. There's Aboriginal people everywhere you know. Even like you, paler. We are all different but all the same. Something the same in us all, that's what they say. Not many people live like this here.... Trouble is, even if I want it, I don't feel like all them others, not just because we're Aboriginal...."

[Billy] "No. What about feeling, 'kin', identifying with a subset ... like some people you click with? But what do we share, or have in common? Is it something, a spirituality or a creativity, a propensity to...."

"But then there's not just Aboriginal people in there...."

But. But maybe we gotta be the same so's we can make people remember we belong here. And we got something to tell. Here first. For a long time. This whole big Australian land binds us together. And we fragments of a great....

A Dreamt time. A maybe rented time. A time the fabric of which is torn and rent and now not holding together, like a torn flag fluttering.

Like a magic carpet falling.
But we never had.

"It's like political, isn't it? Make people remember, face up, know...." (166-67)

Scott critically explores the boundaries of the category "Aboriginal culture" by surveying the line between assimilation and appropriation. Traditional Aboriginal cultural practices are perpetually renovated at Karama through appropriate uses of imported knowledge and technology: circumcisions are carried out in hospital; oral stories are recorded on tape and written down in books; hunting and fishing are carried on using guns, nylon lines, outboard motors, and four-wheel drive trucks. It is only wealthy tourists, anthropologists, and visiting white dignitaries who expect Aboriginal culture at Karama to have remained statically traditional.

With the ostensible aim of preserving Aboriginal traditions, officials at the school and community office organise displays of "authentic" tribal dancing. But exactly whose traditions are being preserved on these occasions? Previous school principals, we are told, have earned a promotion out of Karama by arranging impressive displays of dancing for important visitors. Alex, the current principal, is resolved to maintain this particular tradition. Billy tries to signal his allegiance to the Aboriginal community by participating in their dance, yet in the context in which he performs, where the customary line between being and performing the self has become blurred, questions arise concerning the very possibility of authentic cultural practice and identity.

Yet Scott suggests that other, slightly more positive, outcomes may arise out of the construction and exploitation of the category "Aboriginal culture". At times, the Aborigines at Karama appear to be both mimicking and practising their traditional culture. Although the dancing is clearly commodified within a non-Aboriginal semiotic

economy, it serves the Aboriginal community nonetheless as a new context for the transmission of their traditional cultural knowledge. Ironically, the dance fulfils its ostensible purpose, even though it is also clearly harnessed to the aims of self-interested whites. Appropriation, in other words, can be mutual, and the political relation between the framer and the framed depends on the position from which the transaction between them is read.

Scott's dual positioning of Billy, as an insider/outsider to both the Aboriginal and white communities, allows for an extremely astute exploration of the political, social, and psychological complexities of life in a community where power is divided unequally along both racial and cultural lines. On the day of the dance performance, for example, the mixed community customarily divides into two parts: the whites who watch, and the Aborigines who dance for them. Billy occupies a position that allows him to watch the whites watching. Having taken off his shoes and socks to join the (other) Aborigines in the dancing, he feels "ridiculously free" (64) as he looks across at his white professional colleagues sitting uncomfortably in rows of rigid, sweat-inducing plastic chairs, their furrowed brows reflecting the effort needed to maintain the power they assert as observers over the Aboriginal people. Scott's reversal of the customary roles of observer and observed makes for some very funny moments in the narrative. Upon landing at Kamama airstrip, the new school teachers are conveyed ceremoniously to the settlement in the back of a ute, together with their assorted boxes and cases:

Our clothes stuck to our flesh. We tightly gripped the sides of the tray, worried we'd fall as the ute bounced along the track. A number of other vehicles accompanied us, and we rattled in a great cloud of dust and noise. We came through the corridor of coconut palms and, smiling stiffly, regally waved back at those who watched from the shade of the huts....

In one yard a circle of people sat under a big tree, hunched over a game of cards.

What were they saying?

"Who dem gardiya?"

"Teachers."

"Look out, 'm fall off not careful!"

"Wave 'em, look at 'm wave. Think they the pope or what?"
(17-18)

The humour in *True Country* is almost invariably politically strategic. We can tell a lot about the people in this book by the jokes they tell, and

the things they laugh at—or refuse to laugh at. Scott's humour works consistently to subvert colonialist discourses and their associated power structures. "Visitors in Great White Boats", for example, arrive one day on the beach at Kamama. These are wealthy tourists making a modern-day journey of exploration on a luxury cruiser. In as much comfort as money can buy, they travel bravely into the unknown, documenting their travels by taking photographs whenever they possibly can. Having been trucked in from the beach to the mission settlement to see a corroboree, this "cargo of frail humanity" suddenly

revived itself. They remembered they were paying passengers, and they transformed themselves from cargo to consumers.... Such black skin, such bright sun; this would mean problems with film exposure for sure. (139)

The tourists appear to be somewhat dismayed, since they have paid good money to see them, that the Aborigines could not have been considerate enough to be just a little less black so that their snapshots would turn out well. Humorous as it is, Scott's critique of the commodification of Aboriginal cultural products and practices implicitly questions the assumptions behind, and the functions of, the category of "Aboriginal literature".

Unlike the tourists and the anthropologists who come and go from Kamama, Billy is not there to capture Aboriginal people and their culture as objects of white knowledge. Billy engages in equal dialogue with the local people, and is absorbed into the Aboriginal community, unaware that he is related through his grandmother to Walanguth, an old and powerful clever-man who is close to death. As time goes by Billy feels increasingly ashamed and ridiculous in his efforts to remain above and apart from his pupils, and more and more uncomfortable wielding the authority that accrues to him as a disseminator of white knowledge. Billy begins to look toward other modes of learning, and to respect other systems of knowledge. By making seamless transitions between different, sometimes incompatible, orders of truth, Scott tests the extent to which readers are willing to follow Billy's lead, and suspend disbelief in non-European varieties of truth-value. Listening to Fatima tell of the early days at the mission, Billy learns to place as much faith in Aboriginal oral memory as in the officially authorised historical text. He is instructed by his pupils in the outdoor arts of high diving and underwater swimming, and becomes increasingly familiar with the surrounding area through joining the local Aboriginal men in their fishing expeditions. Most importantly, Billy not only writes his own

story, and records other Aboriginal people's stories (not to take away, but for the community to keep), but is also "storied" by the community about which he writes. They see Billy not as telling stories "about us", but "with us": "We might all be writing together, really" (85).

One of the most innovative and engaging aspects of the novel is Scott's stylistic versatility, his strategically playful shifts between different codes. Without seeming dense or over-written, the text abounds in subtle word-play, arresting cadences, and strikingly original turns of image and phrase. Scott moves deftly between different voices, dialects, and registers. Billy Storey's informal standard english alternates with Aboriginal english as it is spoken both in dialogues between identifiable individuals, and in what Scott calls Karama's "collective narration".³

We decided not to change the school hours. Alex [the school principal] pointed out the need to work to the clock. (72)

Alex's legs crossed. One foot swinging swinging, fingers tapping. He a clock, you know, trying to make time his way; this second begins ... Now! Another one ... Now! (96)

Scott's text explicitly addresses, and tries out a number of remedies for, the problem of "white forms, Aboriginal content", which Mudrooroo and others have raised in recent years.⁴ Gabriella, a young woman returned home to Karama from Melbourne for the university holidays

said they gave her Aboriginal literature to read. Her voice inserted quotation marks. She said it was dreaming stories, and they weren't so good to read, not like being told them. Or they were in a language she didn't understand and then in English which made them sound silly, or as if they were only for little children. Or it was history stuff. Or sometimes just like any old story, but with black people. Or off-white people.... You needed to hear the voice.... And you needed other things; like hands waving in space, and lips pointing, and drawings in the sand. (78-79)

Reading *True Country*, we do hear the voice, and can see the bodily gestures of those who speak and listen—or don't listen. Many sections of the novel read like Stephen Muecke's transcriptions of Paddy Roe's stories in *Gularabulu* and *Reading the Country*. Although Scott's text is laid out more conventionally on the page than Roe's and Muecke's, the formal, structural, and tonal qualities of spoken Kimberley Aboriginal english are still conveyed.

... we not there maybe, but we know that mob, we hear things. Gerard makes his chair look too little. He too big that one. Long legs up next to his ears like a grasshopper maybe perched there, ready to hop in. Father Paul, sleeves rolled up over his strong arms. He gripping his cigarette tight, laughing loudest.... Murray fidgeting: he move little bit this way, little bit that way, little bit 'nother way. Then he find a nice comfortable place, and he sit still with his legs apart and his beer belly resting good there. (96)

In rendering Aboriginal speech in the printed text of *True Country*, Scott engages in a transcription project similar to that undertaken in the novel by Billy Storey. One of the main problems Billy faces as a teacher in Karama is that the only books available to the Aboriginal children are in a foreign language—standard english. The children have literally never seen their own language in print. They are slow to learn to read and write partly because, to enter into the world of literacy, they must cross not just one but two bridges—that between oral and written forms, and that between Aboriginal and standard english. In an attempt to overcome this problem, Billy records, transcribes, and reads back to his class a series of oral narratives told by members of the Aboriginal community. Although the children seem impressed with the added range and authority acquired by the utterances of people they know, Billy fears he is fighting a losing battle against the encroachments of American cultural imperialism implemented electronically through videos and satellite TV.

Billy's main source of information about the early history of the mission is Fatima, who was the first baby to be born on the mission grounds. It takes Billy a little time to learn to listen to Fatima, and to recognise that her accounts have an authority that is equal to or greater than that of the official printed history of the mission, which leaves out some of the more oppressive and shameful actions of the missionaries. Scott uses Billy's interviews with Fatima to dismantle the binary opposition between orality and literacy. Billy not only transcribes Fatima's oral narratives, he also reads and paraphrases the printed historical text she cannot easily read, and does not trust. Billy's switch from verbatim reading to paraphrase is vital, for it sets up a dialogic model of reading in which authority is openly shared between text and reader: "We're gunna make a story" (13).

Particularity in the case of subaltern writings that are read by mainstream audiences, the shared activity of "making the story" involves a search for a balance of power. There are moments in *True Country* when readers are enlisted as active co-creators; there are other

moments when we are required simply to shut up and listen. *True Country* does not offer itself as a *tabula rasa*, waiting to be written upon by its readers. Nor does it offer itself as a preconstituted structure of foreign meanings which reviewers must explore, and readers journey through like tourists consuming some exotic literary commodity. As well as providing occasion to consider the forces—economic, political, ideological, and institutional—that affect the position of Aboriginal literature in mainstream culture today, *True Country* suggests that for non-Aboriginal readers of Aboriginal writing, the danger may well be that,

You might see your shadow falling upon this page. And maybe that's all you'll ever see and understand....

You listen to me. (13)

NOTES

- 1 Kim Scott, letter to Penny van Toorn, 4 August, 1994.
- 2 Kim Scott, letter to Penny van Toorn, 4 August, 1994.
- 3 Kim Scott, letter to Penny van Toorn, 4 August, 1994.
- 4 See, for example, Mudrooroo (1985) and van Toorn (1990).

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