

NATIVE BORN – Songs of Neil Murray

I'm currently reviewing two books for The Age on WEH Stanner, the Australian anthropologist who spent time with traditional Aboriginal people in northern Australia in the 1930s and 1950s. Writing in The Monthly, Robert Manne said he thought Stanner was the the most interesting writer on Aboriginal society Australia has ever seen. I don't agree. I think Neil is.

To explain why would take a lot of time, but basically Stanner wrote from behind a mask of objectivity, one which I don't think is real. You want to know what it was like for a young whitefeller to live with, and alongside, traditional Aboriginal people over a substantial period of time, read "Sing for me Countryman", Neil's autobiographical novel about his time with the Warumpi Band. There are whole registers of thought and feeling in that book which Stanner's writing doesn't possess because he doesn't reveal himself in the story. Neil does. He writes with candour and precision, vaulting political correctness. He's honest about blackfellers, he's honest about whitefellers. He's honest.

I'm conscious of the absurdity of what I'm about to say. If there was any basis for my belief in the culture in which I live, I'd be speaking to a thousand people at the Melbourne Writers' Festival. Nonetheless, if a time capsule was about to be fired 50 years into the future, And I was invited to place a bet of \$100 on the non-indigenous Australian artist from our time who will be seen as worthy of serious interest in 2059, I'd put my money on Neil. When he departs this mortal coil, Neil will leave a body of work that, if it were likened to a house, will have three entrances - his books, his poems, his songs.

Even if most Australians don't yet know it, "Sing for me Countryman" is an Australian classic. Then there are his poems published in a collection under the well-deserved title of "One Man Tribe". His poems are so clear, so precise. In their way, they are as hard as gems and they will endure when many more fanciful constructions have been blown away. Let's face it – very little literature survives the time in which it is written.

Then there are the songs. What can I do but list some personal favourites? – High On A Hill, Tom Wills Would, Lights of Hay, Melbourne Town, Myall Creek, Over the Moon, Sing Your Destiny, Far Away....Neil has long complained that people pigeon-hole his work. They do. How can most Australians come to terms with a man who travelled to the centre of their country and found himself all but alone? Neil is the red-haired boy of highland Scottish descent who grew up on a salt-corrupted farm at Lake Bolac in western Victoria, who loved the land but wanted to better know the land, who drove north to Papunya and met people with the knowledge he craved. Neil speaks an Aboriginal language, has Aboriginal family. He has written a song, My Island Home, which Shane Howard said is to our time what Waltzing Matilda was to an earlier Australi. And he has returned to Lake Bolac, the place he is from in western Victoria, because Aboriginality is about the place you're from.

If these is one verse from his lyrics, I'd quote, it's from "Meet Me in Bedourie":

“You might find me in the front bar
Telling tourists lies
I’ll be wearing an old sombrero
To shade my eyes.
I won’t mention any names
Of those I fought with in my youth
If you meet me in Bedourie
Don’t hurt me with the truth.”

I reckon Leonard Cohen would approve of the playful subtlety in that, particularly as it relates to the role of the story-teller.

If there is one line from any of his songs, I would quote it is from “Where My People Go, the song he wrote in 2005 while walking a traditional Aboriginal route with Aboriginal people for five days from Warrnambool to Lake Bolac. The line goes as follows:

“Just a dot on a great trackless plain, thinking I was home.”

It’s all there – the lonely epic that has been Neil Murray’s journey could be a metaphor for our nation in its quest to feel at home in this strange land which, once again, in the wake of last weekend’s fires, suddenly seems hostile to us. What else do I see in this line? The author, the singer, the man in the middle of the picture is “a dot on a great trackless plain” – the ruthless suppression of ego, his own and other people’s, is another part of Neil’s creed.

But that’s enough of talking about Neil.

In launching *Native Born*, I would particularly like to congratulate the publisher, One Day Hill. In backing an artist like Neil in these highly uncertain economic times, One Day Hill has again shown the large belief which drives it.

Martin Flanagan

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