

## The post-colonial explorer: Rodney Hall's *The second bridegroom*

The land itself is a land in the mind. We make up the idea of it as we go. The explorers are our poets.

Rodney Hall<sup>1</sup>,

In a number of his novels Rodney Hall has engaged in a re-examination of Australian history through an interrogation of alternative experiences of the process of discovery and settlement. In particular he finds in the myths and facts of nineteenth century exploration, with their constant reiteration of the gulf which separated desire from fulfilment, an adequate representation of the difficulty faced by post-colonial societies in feeling at ease in their new homeland. At the point at which Hall's explorer figures seem about to engage with the land it inevitably slips from their grasp, taunting them with their inability to know it properly or overwrite it with their own version of 'home'. Hall's fiction brings a post-colonial sensibility to bear on the story of the discovery and exploration of Australia. By doing so, he continues the exploration of his homeland and the task of completing the tantalisingly unfinished maps of its spiritual terrain.

Hall's three novels commonly referred to as the Yandilli Trilogy. *Captivity Captive* (1988), *The Second Bridegroom* (1991) and *The Grisly Wife* (1993) are only loosely connected in terms of plot and characters, but they are united by a shared sense of place and recurrent themes.<sup>2</sup> One of these unifying themes is the extent to which the last discovered habitable continent has been resistant to the assimilation of imported modes of seeing and thinking. All three novels make extensive use of tropes derived from exploration.

*The second bridegroom* opens in the mid-1830s, as a boatload of convicts arrive at the scene of a proposed new coastal settlement. The unnamed central character, who is narrating the action in the form of a journal, has recently been transported for forgery, and after a brief stay in Sydney has been selected to join this new venture.

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<sup>1</sup> Rodney Hall, *Kisses of the enemy*, (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1988), p. 334.

<sup>2</sup> Rodney Hall, *Captivity captive*, (Melbourne, McPhee Gribble, 1988); *The second bridegroom*, (Melbourne, McPhee Gribble, 1991); *The grisly wife*, (Chippendale, Macmillan, 1993).

As the narrator reveals more of himself, we learn that he is a young man with some education who has previously worked as a printer, and is a native of what he describes as the oldest English colony, The Isle of Man.

The form of the novel itself is mimetic, and indeed parodic, of an explorer's journal. Hall has structured the text so that the allusions to journals of exploration are unmistakable, and serve to underline that this is a journal which points to a new form of 'exploration' of the Australian landscape. The journal incorporates a series of inversions of the conventions expected of the genre of the exploration journal, to the point where the narrator's concluding boast, referring to his time in the Australian bush, is that 'in my life up there I discovered nothing' (194). He is an explorer who is not concerned with discovery of a sort which prizes significant landmarks or the charting and acquisition of land for economic benefit, but rather he is acutely interested in discovering the spiritual essence of the land and the landscapes he encounters.

The narrator arrives in New South Wales as part of a colonial power prepared to take whatever action is necessary in order to indulge its appetite for profit.

We lived for the future. Any piracy, any theft, any evil would be made all right by the future: isn't this the truth of our colonial philosophy?... From the Governor down to his scullery maid we became Australians, a race with one foot in the air, caught stepping forward.(17)

The narrator shares the sense of opportunity, and in phrases recalling those used by Australian explorers, he describes the site of the chosen settlement as 'an untouched place' (3), and how the participants in this venture 'knew we had arrived at a new beginning' (8). It is apparently a *tabula rasa* which offers hope for a new future because it offers a past 'never tainted by our sort of knowing' (18).

With the benefit of hindsight, however, the narrator is able to see that the land is far from a blank slate. He understands that it is replete with signs which resist interpretation because they require a different sort of knowing, a knowing which eludes those who came to occupy the land in the cause of the growing empire. Whereas the settlers look gleefully to the future, the narrator understands that the land demands they deal with its past.

Even the trees are strange to us and the animals are those useless freaks the whole world hears of... Instead of taking us forward, what we see takes us back to the beginning of time. (17)

The narrator also realises that the new arrivals are tied to their own past, that they bring with them the taint of their particular brand of corrupted 'knowing'. Rather than being free to create a new life in this Edenic setting, most of the arrivals come in bondage with the intention that they recreate the social, economic and political circumstances of the old world. They bring into the apparently unsullied wilderness the knowledge of 'human livestock' (20) kept in chains; of men bought and sold into servitude; and of a colonialism which condones cruelty in order to expand its reach.

The narrator accepts that he too has played a part in the process by which this new place will be corrupted. In the night before the landing he believes he has killed another convict, Gabriel Dean. Certain that he will be executed for his crime, he escapes into the forest as the landing party comes ashore at the site of the new settlement. In doing so he carries into the wilderness his own 'sickness of the conscience' (10).

From the moment of his escape the narrator evolves into a new kind of Australian explorer. He is the first non-Aboriginal person to walk through this place, and he does so with the instincts and the curiosity of a conventional explorer. The particular circumstances under which he encounters the land, however, and his history as a native of an island familiar with colonial occupation, create a very different type of exploration. He is not the detached and objective observer of scientific, zoological and anthropological phenomena, attempting to describe, survey and map the land; neither is he the expander of empire seeking to leave the requisite marks of ownership on the landscape; nor the incipient landowner assessing the material value of the land and its products; nor the fledgling hero, shaping a journey which will endear him forever to an expectant public. He is thrown into his situation as somebody attempting to escape from civilisation rather than expand it, and in the process he undertakes a new type of exploration. Rather than constructing what he sees in a manner which imposes alien conceptions of order and knowledge, he attempts to explore the land truly by seeking to understand the unseen meanings which lie behind the initially puzzling surfaces.

It is clear from the start that the narrator is ill equipped to be an explorer of the usual type. He announces when introducing himself that 'I am near-sighted' and 'a man who sees no details at a distance' (3). This near-sightedness is clearly at odds with what Simon Ryan has described as 'exploration methodology's heavy reliance on sight'.<sup>3</sup> The acquisitive gaze of the explorer was the principal means by which space was brought within the realm of the discovered, and the processes of mensuration and appropriation commenced. The narrator's inability to observe what he encounters inhibits his capacity to travel and therefore to 'explore' objects and places, and it serves as a metaphor for the failure of explorers to really see and understand the land they discovered. As the narrator moves through vistas which seem to offer no change or sense of progress he wonders if he has really 'travelled' at all.

You know how it is in a forest: ...the nearby trees sweep past you, a bow wave arcing around on either side, while behind them an outer band of trees moves your way... Both the near band of wheeling forest and the outer band counter-wheeling slowed down. When I stopped they stopped. I was a beaten man. They were trees in a land never used. (30)

The narrator's failure to see the new land is not only a result of his near-sightedness. When he first encounters the group of Aboriginal men with whom he will keep company, he literally does not see them. This is not solely because his eyesight fails him, but also because to this newcomer figures such as these silent hunters 'had not yet been imagined' (28). Explorers notoriously judged their discoveries by the inadequate yardsticks of that which they knew to exist elsewhere, and therefore imagined might be possible in the new place. As a result, they were often incapable of recognizing features or worth in a new land because they did not anticipate what might await discovery. Hall's narrator must learn to 'see' again with an imagination tempered by his new environment before he will begin to know the place.

Hall further deconstructs the claim that space can be acquired simply by possessing it visually, by employing various tropes derived from the development of new forms of ocular aids and means of obtaining visual records. The Yandilli Trilogy features a succession of magnifying lens, spectacles, daguerreotypes, engraving machines and fixed lens cameras, which help the new inhabitants to visually possess and record their surroundings. As Paul Carter has noted, fixing visual images of the land 'was

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<sup>3</sup> Simon Ryan, *The cartographic eye: how explorers saw Australia*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 87.

not only a means of recording space but of manipulating it. Scaling down horizons to the width of a page, it enabled one to model reality, to plan invasions'.<sup>4</sup> By using modern lithographic and printing technology to mass produce images in accordance with established European aesthetic traditions and in support of their empire expanding texts, explorers furthered the appropriation of the land by making it visually desirable and therefore ready for ownership. But as the Yandilli Trilogy makes clear, these aids to seeing and recording the land produce an improved view or a fixed image of carefully framed landscapes without adding to the settler's capacity to comprehend the true nature of the land.

Forced by his near-sightedness to dispense with the priority of visually possessing the land, the narrator finds he can also forgo another of the explorer's primary tasks; that of interpreting and describing discoveries within the framework of imported knowledge. By rendering discovered places in terms which utilised prevailing standards of scientific measurement and aesthetic values, explorers ensured that their texts were accessible to governments and the reading public. The narrator, however, declares that 'I had arrived at a place where all my knowledge was useless' (37), and thereby abandons the explorer's claim to assess the places through which he travels from the privileged position of an educated, civilising - and by implication, superior - agent. Whereas the nineteenth century scientific mind sought to assimilate discoveries by classifying them within existing hierarchies of knowledge, the narrator chooses to discard these imported constructs.

I promised not to try reading the messages I heard and smelled and touched, tasted and saw. I would respect them as having no use. None of them would be the same tomorrow. Nor were they the same yesterday. Each moment is the present: it sounds and smells and tastes only of itself. (21-22)

He realises that 'I must accept what the world sent me' (25).

Not only does the narrator choose to empty himself of his prior knowledge, but he peels away the explorers' pretence of 'knowing' the discovered land through the forms of scientific and aesthetic appropriation of space upon which their craft was based, such as collecting specimens.

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<sup>4</sup> Paul Carter, 'Inside journeys', in Paul Foss (ed), *Islands in the stream*, (Leichardt, Pluto Press, 1988), p. 47.

Such curious creatures we are, to be so fascinated by discovery, to have such a passion for things we can collect as items of strange behaviour. (40)

As he travels across the land with his Aboriginal companions he conspicuously fails to indulge in the any of the explorer's pastimes of collecting or recording data. His journal is devoid of detail of a geographic or cartographic nature, and he contests whether 'discovery' of the type required in the cause of imperial expansion is even possible.

I dare say you will be curious to hear what I did out there during that tribal journey... The answer is nothing... The knack was admitting that there can be no such thing as the discovery of a land. Does this surprise you? Granted we hear tales pitched at having us believe that there is nothing in the world so interesting, from big discoveries by Marco Polo and James Cook and company, down to little places called Somebody's Folly. (191)

In particular, the narrator denounces two of the explorer's most potent weapons of appropriation, the name and the map, both of which are a means of laying claim to land which is 'unknown' because it lacks these vital elements of description and mensuration by which supporters of empire ascribe meaning to the spaces they occupy.

But what do discoverers do? They put names to landmarks unknown to them and not named by anybody they ever heard of. But do we imagine the Cape of Good Hope came into being just to be called that Name? We might as well talk about the discoverers of ignorance.

All that happens is that words and numbers are written down. The chart is a big blank except for a squiggle of coast here and a river mouth there: a scatter of names on a clean expanse of ignorance. (191-192)

In assigning names which have no foundation in the prior history of the places to which they are haphazardly applied, and in creating maps which sketch narrow paths across continental spaces, explorers were not so much asserting their dominion over a space as revealing their ignorance of it. The narrator challenges the explorer's right to name places based on insufficient knowledge, and also suggests that the imported language which gives rise to those names is an irredeemably inadequate means of expressing any understanding of a foreign space.

Botany Bay, for example, was discovered by Cook because no other Englishman landed there before him in time to call it Dog Inlet. True

enough. But what did he do when he chose the name? The place knew nothing of Botany Bay. (192)

Tropes derived from language, and in particular the construction of names, are used in *The second bridegroom* to suggest both the narrator's sense of isolation, and the difficulty any settler must face in creating a home in a new land. The narrator is distinguished from other convicts because he possesses language skills. He proudly declares that 'I am a word man' (18). But whereas the power over language is usually seen as a liberating force and a means by which discoveries are made known, the narrator believes that his imported language signifies ongoing bondage to an alien system of knowledge.

... Mr Atholl knew he and I were shackled to the same bond of words, words to be broken out of before the new kingdom could find its airy regions among the clutter of old misfitting uses. (19)

Images of incarceration and enclosure are central to the novel, and as in the case above they are frequently linked to language as a means of suggesting the narrator's continued bondage to his inherited culture. He is aware that he is imprisoned by his language to the knowledge of the old world, just as the manacle which remains on his wrist symbolises his ongoing subjection to English law. The narrator's father has been imprisoned and executed by the English and he is portrayed in his son's journal as the victim of a foreign law which is encoded in a language which he cannot comprehend.

My father spoke no word of English in my hearing ever. Manx was his language and he stood by his own folk... As for the English, how should poor father even know the law when he had no word of their rules in his head? (59)

The narrator is taught English by his mother, but it is this very accomplishment which will in turn render him a convict after he is found guilty of forgery. It is, he claims, a crime which resulted from his 'love of English' (26); but it is his identity as a foreigner, revealed through his native language, which leads to his arrest:

A professor came to question me on my knowledge of the Manx language, which I was proud to prove I spoke. And then I was charged, as a foreigner in England, with theft of a national treasure. (101)

The narrator is therefore sensitive to the role of language in identifying a people and the space they occupy. Having been part of a territory which experienced invasion by the English, whose tyranny was represented by their language, he now finds himself part of an English colonising force carrying those 'alien words of English' (37) into yet another foreign environment. This sensitivity to the inappropriateness of English to this new environment means that he is reluctant to do what any good explorer should: provide names. Naming was the practice by which explorers brought new places and species into being. A name created their identity and provided a signifier whereby they were differentiated from similar discoveries.

The narrator, however, believes that applying names of English derivation will efface those elements which makes each discovery unique by denying them the name which is already theirs according to the language of their own land.

If my names for these marvels do not convince you, this is not to say that the marvels are not there - simply that English has nothing to know them by... And don't you see? If once we give things our own names we would have to begin destroying them. (69)

When he reluctantly provides a name to his companions he is aware that the word he uses is an intrusion on a space which knows no English.

I even caught myself giving them a general name: Men. Well... this was cleaner than clumsy dodges with roundabout words, which would lead to an even greater plague of English spreading in a world which English has no right to. (41)

Despite the importance of language to the narrator, in the time he spends with the Men he learns nothing of their language and they learn nothing of his. As a result he is again taken prisoner, this time because his inability to speak their language makes him a fetish object to the Aboriginals.

The fact that we had no speech in common warranted my greatness, you see, and their need to serve me. If I had been able to make myself plain how could they fail to see me as a man like themselves...

The Men kept me as their King. (76)

The narrator realises that his inability to speak the native language not only isolates him from the Men, but also separates him from an understanding of their land. The native language is intrinsic to an environment which remains foreign to the narrator.

I realised that what I had taken for murmurous foliage was the speech of these creatures. Talk flew among them, alighting on one and a moment later on another, till it took up a rhythm. The pulse of the sea drifted into their mouths and out again as chanting. (27)

The narrator's separation from language and his ensuing isolation is further emphasised when he begins to lose his grasp of English. In one incident he attempts to call out to his old Master.

My mouth opened and I shouted.

No shout came; only a gasp of something stale.

I swallowed to get my voice back... Disuse robbed me of power. (54)

He realises that having lost the power over English and not having learnt the Aboriginal language, he now belongs to neither group. In doing so he becomes an exemplar of the explorer and of the post-colonial condition, isolated from both his imported culture and his new world. His inability to communicate leaves him 'marooned' and 'untouchable' (55).

Hall introduces a further inversion of the explorer-as-author genre, in that his narrator's journal specifically sets out to deconstruct the narratives of the imposition of the order and the benefits of empire which were central to the explorers' journals. For although the narrator has been convicted of the crime of forgery by the English courts, it is forgery by the English which he in turn sees being perpetrated in the colony, as the settlers attempt to bring their own sense of order to what they see as an intrinsically disordered place.

But what happens if again we draw back from the detail and take more of the wild land into our view?... Your vision widens to reach a hamlet perched on the shore, an outpost of stone and shingles like any little English port (forgery), its church a smaller copy of the very church you were baptized in (forgery), the citizens on the street respectable in full skirts and frock coats (forgery). But spare a moment to see past the fashions, the fences and straight roads, to see marooned folk lost and longing for the comfort of their bosky county home and hedgerows and Sunday rambles... Is this order? (102-03)

Hall is further challenging the explorer's right to impose any form of Eurocentric notion of order upon discovered spaces. Even as the narrator has become

increasingly familiar with the apparently chaotic place he now inhabits, he has continued to recall nostalgically the highly organized landscapes of his former island home.

Let me show you my notion of perfect order. There it is, a tiny island...

There has been time for everything. Order rules. Fields are ploughed in furrows straight as combs. Orchards are planted in rows... You see how perfect it is, and how complete. (134-135)

What the narrator encounters in this new land, however, is something quite different, where the 'civilising' hand of European man is unknown, and which disrupts his preconceived notions of the scale, colour, distance and variety he expects in a landscape. 'How' he asks, 'could I be expected to imagine what I found here'. (138)

Initially the narrator realises he has entered a realm where 'the rational world of my upbringing [did] battle against the allure of a thing without form' (14); but he soon learns to accept this 'hub of chaos' (36) and then embrace it as a form of order which simply differs from the one which he has inherited. He admires his Aboriginal companions for their 'perfect chaos' (41), and he comes to see 'with joy how disordered they were' (68). He realises the colonists' idea of order is simply another alien construction by which they attempt to possess a newly encountered environment.

I began to see what order is. Order is a way of trapping anything wild, tricking us into the game of thinking we understand. When you come down to it, the need for order is the mark of a coward. (41-42)

The explorers and settlers of inland Australia saw the forces of commerce, agriculture and science as a means of making the wilderness productive. Little did it occur to them that the incursion of imported concepts of order and productivity might destroy a pre-existing and productive order of a type they could not recognise. The narrator, however, differs from conventional explorers in that he learns to recognise the finely tuned balance which exists in the apparently chaotic wilderness. He stops to wonder, as he watches an eagle gliding above, whether the impact of his presence alone might be enough to destroy this new form of order.

Did I spoil his chaos? Was I a miracle in a world which could admit no miracles without losing its sense of being whole - or was I the invader who upsets an organized plan of food growth and food taking without understanding it? (80)

While the narrator is learning to recognise the order in the 'chaos' of his environment, the settlement from which he escaped is beginning to impose another form of order upon the land. The first mark his former master, Mr Atholl, makes upon the landscape is to 'put up a fence because he feared his herds might cheat him of power by running away' (19). Fences and roads serve throughout the novel as symbols of the settlers' desire to possess and regulate the land for their exclusive use. Whereas explorers frequently used their journals to express their delight at the anticipation of the advent of civilisation, the narrator is appalled when he first encounters the fences and roads which have been constructed by the settlers:

Well, from the crest of the ridge the sight was blinding and so strange I could make no sense of it... The natural aspect of the place was wiped out. The soil gaped with lacerations. Alien to itself, the land lay wounded. (43)

The narrator sees that the fences and roads are not only physical incursions on the land which alter forever its shape and use, but they are also a means of mapping the landscape in more fundamental ways, by marking those areas which have been civilised from those which remain primitive and undisciplined.

The fence marked a boundary across changed land. Grass inside the fence, though it might look like grass outside, was not at all the same: that grass was Property, as this was Nature. Trees had been cleared from the paddock. And the soil, yielding a lusher crop, was being fertilized by cattle. (86)

The narrator is aware that enclosing property not only protects pasture and livestock, but also serves to ensure exclusive access to the land. He believes that whereas his Aboriginal companions have 'refined the notion of brotherhood' (73), the building of fences by the settlers indicates they have very different values.

What is society at bottom? Must there be fences - some people inside and others outside? The closer a family grows, does this mean that anyone who is not kin will be all the more unwelcome and kept out? (73)

In the narrator's responses to the appearance of roads, fences, buildings, crops and farm animals, Hall is working another inversion of the conventions of the explorer's journal, a mainstay of which was the turning of the exploratory eye upon the Aboriginals. The ethnographic gaze in *The second bridegroom* is reversed. The narrator increasingly identifies with his Aboriginal companions, and begins to see the signs of

trespass, through their eyes. It is with this new sight that he views the settlers and their productions and assesses their impact upon the landscape.

Please do not imagine I have forgotten what civilization is. I saw the road clearly as a road. The buildings as buildings. But I also saw, with the sight of Men, the horror of it, the plunder, the final emptiness. (43-44)

The lack of a common language is, however, only one indication of a deeper separation of cultures between the narrator and his companions. The realisation of the extent of his isolation comes in an incident in which a young Aboriginal girl strays across the path of the Men, and in doing so breaches a law of the group. The narrator realises in that moment that all communities have their fences:

She was caught facing us. In a manner of speaking she had fetched up against a sort of fence too - a fence no eye could see. She was one of the tribe, so already she knew what was to come. (88)

She is slain with spears before the stunned narrator. He accepts the incident as 'part of the chaos and true to it' (105), but it is now obvious that he will always be a stranger to the ways of the Men.

To me she was innocent. But to her own people she was not. Right until that moment I could be proud of having fitted myself into their world. (104)

By the close of his own 'explorations' and the creation of his journal the narrator realises that the notion of discovery has no real meaning, and that it is only another fleeting moment in the ongoing process by which the land creates itself. Not even the most celebrated of explorers can claim to have discovered the land.

As for James Cook being rowed ashore by sailors with hats and striped vests. You can see them in your mind's eye... You can watch the great man leap out - success makes him young and springy - wading ashore to print the sand with the first boot mark ever made here. Well, aren't a hundred other eyes also watching? Don't the ocean wash away the imprint?

Nevertheless the first boot, being the first boot, you argue, must have been important.

Did it not take aeons for this place to be created, I reply, is it not as old as the stars? So what about a boot mark in the sand now? (193)

*The second bridegroom* is the journal of the explorer that colonial Australia never had; the explorer who tried to see the layered meanings beneath the surface of an alien environment, and who struggled to understand the land as it existed beyond those features which could be 'discovered' or possessed in the cause of the empire. The novel invites being read as an allegory of the post-colonial condition, of the suspension of belonging that occurs as the settler society strives to come to terms with the forms of seeing and expression demanded by their new land. By constructing the narrator as an explorer figure Hall points the way to the scale and nature of the challenge involved, as the land awaits the discovery of the meanings which lie beneath its geographic and topographic features.