

**Vol. 79 No. 4073 (5 Mar 1958)**

Date : 12/10/21 4:20 PM

<https://nla.gov.au:443/tarkine/nla.obj-679401736>

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## The Red Page

### THE BIG BOSS VOSS

It seems to be the custom for Patrick White's novels to receive high praise overseas and much more sceptical notices in Australia; and whether we local reviewers are merely envious or subject to the national failing of hitting any head that raises itself above the crowd, or whether by any chance standards of criticism are generally higher here than abroad, is an intriguing question.

One thing is certain: the overseas praise does tend to be excessive; and, like the excessively hostile reviews of the Oxford book of Australian verse, lacking in the fundamental knowledge of the subject which alone can give real authority. Thus, on the jacket of Patrick White's *Voss* (Eyre and Spottiswoode) is printed an extract from the "Sunday Times" review of "The Tree of Man": "This is perhaps the first great Australian novel"; and, despite the useful "perhaps," this is the sort of overstatement which an Australian reviewer is naturally tempted to call to question.

What is the English reviewer's basis for such a verdict? Has he seriously compared "The Tree of Man" with "For the Term of His Natural Life," with "The Escape of Sir William Heans," with "Such Is Life," with "Jonah," with "The Pea Pickers," with "The Fortunes of Richard Mahony," etc.? Has he even read these novels?

This time, fortunately, I have

managed to avoid reading most of the English and American reviews of "Voss," and so am fairly free to look at it detachedly; but I gather from Kylie Tennant's review in the "S. M. Herald" that it received the usual high praise abroad; and I see from this and other less favorable notices that there has also been the usual Australian scepticism. Kylie Tennant said that when White gets mystical she "creeps out the door"; and so, I am afraid, do I. I used to do a fair amount of creeping away from D. H. Lawrence, too.

This may be unkind, or uncultured; but none of my favorite novelists from Petronius to Fielding and Dickens ever bothers his readers with mysticism, or even by going in for too many exquisite subtleties of thought and feeling; they just paint the human comedy; and if William Gosse Hay is subtle and mystical enough, I can, with difficulty, follow him; whereas I really have no idea what Patrick White means by the extraordinary prose-poems he attributes to one of his explorers, Le Mesurier, or even by what appears to be his central "message," spoken by Laura Trevelyan in her mystical delirium, "How important it is to understand the three stages. Of God into man. Man. And man returning into God"—unless it merely means that Leichhardt (or Voss) had to be more humble to save his soul; which hardly needs to be said so obscurely.

Nevertheless, when Patrick White aims so high and writes so excellent a novel in his chosen method, it seems a pity thus to join in the chorus of scepticism; and it ought to be made clear, as indeed most of the reviewers have, that one criticises with respect. It is only an important writer who is worth criticising; and if importance in art can be a simpler thing than this—look at Henry Lawson—there remains no doubt that White's symbolic and intellectual kind of writing has its own force and validity. It could—conceivably—work; and if it did we should have, if not necessarily "perhaps the first great Australian novel," the best in its kind since "The Escape of Sir William Heans." I suppose "Voss" is that, anyhow; but it is not equal to Hay.

Patrick White seems to me here to be not so much writing a novel as painting a set of surrealist pictures. His story is simply a fictional, freely-imagined account of Leichhardt's last journey, when he perished in an attempt to cross the continent; and Leichhardt—whom, to be free of the facts, he calls Voss—is presented in a series of attitudes, sinister, macabre and dramatic, like a scarecrow. The green man in the thunderstorm, for instance:—

A flash of green lightning cut the brown air.

"All sheep must be sacrificed,"

## The Bulletin

shouted the German against the thunder and inhaled until it began to appear he might burst.

Or the "expiring candle" when the expedition is a step nearer disaster:—

Those under his command, including the aboriginal boy, were struck by the incandescence of the man who was leading them. They were in love with that rather gaunt, bearded head, and would compel themselves to ignore the fact that it was a skull with a candle expiring inside.

Or Voss's terrible vision of Laura, his mystical beloved, just before Le Mesurier cuts his throat and the leader himself has his head cut off by the aboriginal boy:—

Then he looked at her and saw that they had cut off her hair, and below the surprising stubble that remained, they had pared the flesh from her face. She was now quite naked. And beautiful. Her eyes were drenching him.

In its mannered style and method the whole novel is, in fact, not unlike those stylised, symbolic paintings of bushrangers and explorers in which Sidney Nolan (whose pen I seem to recognise on the jacket) has attempted to capture the horror of the fanatic in the wilderness; but the art is really more like Dali's than Nolan's, not so naive, more richly painted, more sinister in its light-effects, more dreamlike; and there are entrails . . . mercifully, of horses. I have never really cared for Dali (all the surrealists are too messy), but White's pictures are, in their kind, most vivid.

It is when he has to set these pictures moving, when his explorers have to live and talk and act on the plane of everyday reality, that the novel fails to be convincing. Because everybody is "gathered together at the core of a mystery," because everybody is arranged in order in a mystical and pictorial tableau, there is no real conviction—nothing emotionally moving—in the death of the ornithologist, whom he calls Palfreyman.

And, immediately afterwards, what should be the book's greatest dramatic moment, when three of Voss's companions desert him, is completely flat: not because the writing here is deliberately quiet—that could be very effective—but because none of the characters is alive. They are symbols; pictures; the enlarged shadows of explorers.

As for the central love-affair, conducted at long distance and in visions, between Voss and Laura, that is wholly shadowy; indeed, for all the mystical intensity with which Patrick White

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THE BULLETIN, March 5, 1958

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