

The Englishness of Randolph Stow

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In 1962 Randolph Stow wrote from England: 'I'm pretty sure I couldn't settle in Perth—I'd dry up as a writer if I had nothing but the suburbs to write about' (Letter to mother, 29 Oct 1962). A few months earlier he had waxed lyrical about the English weather:

Bulbs are coming up everywhere, so I suppose it will soon be spring. Today has been beautifully sunny and I must say it's no wonder the English go round saying: 'Lovely day' to everyone they see, because when it is fine in a month like this it does feel pretty wonderful, like a gift from heaven or something. (Letter to mother, 12 March 1962)

These documents are an intimation of Stow's developing attachment to England, and eventual permanent separation from Australia, but they are not the only form of expression of such sentiments. In the same year his poem 'Outrider' gave a further clue to Stow's recent status, with its theme of exile, the hearing of the land as 'grievous music,' and its 'dim low English room, one window on the fields' (40).

At the time of writing these letters Stow had already been living away from Australia for two years. Born in Geraldton in 1935, he had moved to England in 1960, and made that country his base for the next fifty years. Both sides of his family were fifth generation Australians: the Stows came from Hadleigh in Suffolk, arriving in South Australia in 1837; the Sewells on his mother's side emigrated from Essex to Western Australia in 1836. Tellingly, after brief stays in Leeds, London and Scotland, Stow moved to his ancestral places, settling first in rural Suffolk, then finally on the Essex coast. Much has been written of Stow's evocation of landscape in his Australian novels, notably in Anthony Hassall's key work, *Strange Country* (1986). The same receptivity to the different place in which Stow found himself can be read across his many letters back to his family in Australia which are preserved in the National Library of Australia (MS Acc10.195), eventually finding a literary outlet in his final two novels, *The Girl Green as Elderflower* set in Suffolk, and *The Suburbs of Hell* in Essex.

This article focuses on the dynamic between Stow's life, family history, imagination and creative output. Using close study of his letters alongside his novels it adds a layer of understanding of this writer's engagement with 'England,' both as a concept and as reality, complementing the different angles in the 2011 writings on *The Girl Green as Elderflower* by Duckworth and Lynch. Stow's new-found Englishness is manifest in his choice of home in a quintessentially English terrain, as described in affectionate and poetic terms in the letters home that span a period of more than forty years. In his literary works there are more complex layers of influence; his great love of English writers such as Keats and the Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists colours his own writings. In many of Stow's novels the sense of connection with his English ancestry is present, already a powerful theme in his first novel, *A Haunted Land*. He writes a longing for London into the final pages of *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea*, and continuity and renewal lie at the heart of his final two novels.



Figure 1. Ruins of Hadleigh Castle

On arriving in England in 1960 Stow made his way to Hadleigh, once one of the wealthiest towns in England, dominated by the cloth trade (see Craig). It still retains a square with a parish church and a fifteenth-century guildhall. Hadleigh's ruined castle, which dates from the 1360s, is situated at a point above the Thames estuary with sweeping views that extend as far as Kent. At one time home to Anne of Cleves, the castle was destroyed in a landslide in the sixteenth century. It features in John Constable's only oil painting, a romanticised landscape of its melancholy crumbling towers completed in 1829. In a number of ways there are parallels between Constable and Stow, with their shared views of Suffolk as a place with open, sweeping skies and 'eerie illumination' (Hawes 456). Constable, like Stow, often looked backwards for inspiration, and for his 1829 painting he used sketches made on a much earlier visit to Hadleigh in 1814. Indeed the 'circling' that can be seen in Stow's work as discussed by Hassall has been commented on more generally as a particularly English trait. Peter Ackroyd in his work *Albion* describes it thus: 'The English imagination takes the form of a ring or circle. It is endless because it has no beginning and no end; it moves backwards as well as forwards' (Ackroyd xix).

In Hadleigh Stow lodged first at the 'White Lion'; from there he wrote:

I'm in the ancestral village of the Stow family & an amazing place it is to me, full of Tudor & pre-Tudor houses & scarcely changed I should think since T.Q. left (by the way, there is a little boy called Thomas Quinton Stow buried in the churchyard). The country is absolutely lovely, I believe about the prettiest & less changed in England. (Letter to mother, 29 July 1960).

The T.Q. to whom he refers was his ancestor, the Reverend Thomas Quinton Stow (1801–62). Some years later Stow again wrote of this churchyard, referring to its appearance in Thomas Gainsborough's painting of 1748 (Letter to mother, 23 Oct 1984). The sensibilities evoked by

this village and its various historic, pastoral associations thus played a powerful role in the attraction of this area for Stow.



Figure 2. Hadleigh Church

After leaving the White Lion, Stow remained in Hadleigh, moving to 119 High Street, of which he wrote:

I like this place very much and the country around is very lovely, a mass of flowers at the moment. There are some extraordinary relics of the past, Elizabethan houses (this is one of them) & mediaeval churches & gosh knows what-all. (Letter to mother, 8 August 1960)

This early letter shows his fascination with a literary, rural England. Later in the year, still at the same address, Stow wrote of the cold, wet weather, speaking despondently of the east coast at Frinton: ‘the first I’ve seen of the English seaside, and it is quite unspeakably ghastly. The sea is the colour that I think interior decorators call mushroom, there’s no beach, and shingle everywhere . . . It’s bleak, bleak, bleak’ (Letter to mother, 10 Nov 1960).

Despite Stow’s initial impression of the north sea, however, that is where he finally settled, but before then the loveliness of the inland countryside, with its fields of lupins, poppies and white daisies, had such an effect that Suffolk continued to draw him back even after he had left for other places. While living and working at the University of Leeds, for example, he continued to visit Hadleigh,

walking round the country lanes and getting thoroughly lost. It’s such fresh, tangled clean country after Leeds, and so full of fruit and everything it always makes me think of Keats’ Autumn Ode (‘season of mists and mellow fruitfulness’—you know?) with apples lying around the roads and even wild plums in the hedge in one place. I found Coram Farm, the Stow’s old joint, this time. (Letter to mother, 24 Sep 1962)

Although Stow did not at this point settle in the east of England, evidently it made a strong impression, and the memories of this visit to Coram Farm were stored to become part of *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea*. After exploring the USA in 1964 and 1965, Stow’s search for rootedness and belonging led to a gradual reduction in his international travels and a homing in on Suffolk until he established himself there in 1969.

Stow’s migration to East Anglia was, however, not only on account of his search for his ancestral home. He is one of many writers who have been captivated by the unique

atmosphere of the counties of Suffolk and Essex, with their flat expanses, sea and skies, among them Henry James, whose *The Turn of the Screw* is set in a remote country house (Bly) in Essex. Ackroyd, in the aforementioned *Albion*, goes so far as to describe East Anglia as the predominant force in literature in medieval England (Ackroyd 136); one of the reasons was its particular topographical status, which might be described as ‘lowland pastoral’: gently rolling, with undulating river valleys, pockets of ancient woodland, fields and small settlements.



Figure 3. Countryside near Hadleigh © copyright Andrew Hill and licensed for reuse under the Creative Commons Licence

Suffolk has been regarded as a place of ancient and mysterious qualities by a number of novelists. In Rose Tremain’s *Sacred Country* it is a landscape of fields, woods and church spires, from which one can imagine ‘the rest of England spreading out and on beyond’ (Tremain 251), while in Alexander McCall Smith’s *La’s Orchestra Saves the World*, it is an ancient place of ‘villages with names that meant something a long time ago but which were now detached from the things to which they referred—the names of long-forgotten yeoman families, of mounds, of the crops they grew, of the wild flora of those parts’ (McCall Smith 3). M.R. James set several of his ghost stories there, as he felt the ancient landscapes of East Anglia offered particular ghostly resonances: ‘Oh, Whistle, and I’ll Come to You, My Lad’ is set on the east coast in a village surrounded on three sides by sea (similar to Harwich), and ‘A Warning to the Curious’ turns Aldeburgh into Seaburgh, with church bells, marshes, dykes and gorse. Travel writers have also sensed the fey qualities of these eastern counties, captivated by the emptiness: ‘Little fingers of water branched out like jungle reaches into the thick samphire. On a muddy bank stood black-backed gulls. From the sea lavender, a skylark rose high into the sky’ (Carter 41).

In 1965 Stow’s immersion in British culture was strengthened by his meeting with the composer Peter Maxwell Davies (b. 1934), who considered writing a suite around some of the poems in *Outrider*. Stow, however, felt that this collection of poems did not have sufficient

unity for this purpose (Letter to mother, 22 March 1965). Even more interesting is that the two contemporaries discussed an old Suffolk legend of the ‘green children’ as having potential for a musical collaboration (Letter to mother, 5 June 1967); this myth found its place in *The Girl Green as Elderflower* nearly twenty years later. While these early proposals never materialised, their eventual dramatic collaboration was *Eight Songs for a Mad King* (1969). Scored for voice, flute (with piccolo), clarinet, percussion, piano (also harpsichord), violin and cello, this was one of the infamous pieces of the 1960s and has been performed numerous times since then. Stow based his libretto on a variety of English sources, including Christopher Hibbert’s *The Court at Windsor* and notes on King George III’s outbursts made by Fanny Burney, the royal housekeeper. Furthermore, he had access to the King’s surviving miniature mechanical organ, whose eight songs were used by George III as a means of teaching his birds to sing.

The second collaborative work, in 1974, was *Miss Donnithorne’s Maggot*, an opera for mezzo-soprano solo with flute/piccolo/alto flute, clarinet, violin, cello, piano and percussion. Miss Donnithorne’s ‘maggot’ is the humiliation of abandonment by her fiancé which sends her into madness. Stow brought his Australian roots to bear on this piece, writing seven poems based on the real life story of Eliza Emily Donnithorne (1827–86), who lived in Cambridge Hall (also known as Camperdown House), in Newtown, now a suburb of Sydney. The Donnithornes were a wealthy family who emigrated from Twickenham, London in 1836. Although Eliza subsequently returned to England for her schooling, she moved back to Australia in 1846. On her wedding morning in 1848 the naval officer Eliza was to marry failed to arrive and was never seen again. She wore her wedding dress thereafter and sat in her room with the mouldering wedding cake for the next thirty years. Several examples of the influence of this tale on nineteenth-century writings can be discerned, notably in the novels of Dickens (Miss Havisham in *Great Expectations*, 1861) and George Eliot (*Adam Bede*, 1859, in which Hetty is seduced and abandoned by a Captain Arthur Donnithorne). Stow’s own attraction to this tale indicates his growing fascination with stories and their transformations, which reaches fruition in *The Girl Green as Elderflower*.

Miss Donnithorne’s Maggot is a music theatre piece which weaves English elements both into the text and into the music. Snippets from Shakespeare are merged with allusions to the Victorian salon music that the real Miss Donnithorne would have known, and to a lesser extent to Elizabethan dances and military marches. The second song, ‘Green mooned the white lady,’ is a ballad in four rhyming strophes, much distorted in the music, in which we are given a hint of the later significance of the colours green and white to Stow:

Green mooned the white lady of silvered Sydney town
—O, stately as a candle-end, all in her winding-gown;
apple-pale and like a spider’s egg her dainty muslin face
and her moonstones new polished with a moon-clout of lace.

By the time of writing these two musical works Stow was firmly ensconced in East Anglia. In 1967 he had moved to East Bergholt, birthplace of Constable. Stow lived first in the Old Mill House, ‘a very nice place, down a long unfrequented lane, very quiet, with a big old walled garden that I like’ (Letter to mother, 20 July 1967). In 1969 he took a short lease on Fishpond Cottage in the same village, renting it from a local farmer, Hector Chambers:

[T]his is a super place, very pretty. There’s a painting of the farm from the top of the hill by Constable, in which my house is hidden or wasn’t yet built, but

everything is recognisable and quite unchanged. No neighbours, only fields and woods and hills and distant views of churches. It's just as Constable left it.
(Letter to mother, 2 Oct 1969)

(The painting to which Stow refers is the 1811 'Dedham Vale, View to Langham Church, from the Fields just east of Vale Farm, East Bergholt.')

One aspect of Stow's fascination with his Suffolk idyll was its many associations with Constable: as well as the Hadleigh painting mentioned above, he left several works showing East Bergholt and its surroundings (see Daniels, 1992). Stow grew very fond of Fishpond Cottage, wanting to stay there permanently 'in spite of the freezing of the house of winter . . . it's great to have no neighbours and this landscape all round. The birds kick up a tremendous racket all through the summer, and don't even stop when it's dark' (Letter to mother, 21 July 1970). Later that year Stow had to leave the cottage, but by now was describing it as 'very cold, draughty and uncomfortable for about five months of the year' (Letter to mother, 11 Sep 1973); he moved into Dairy Farm Cottage, one of a pair of tiny cottages on Rectory Hill. Pictures of his life here appeared in an earlier Kinross-Wood article in *JASAL*, as shown in the Works Cited.

During the period of the two musical collaborations Stow wrote no fiction, and indeed there was nothing until *Visitants*. His final two novels are both 'ambitious and adventurous' (Hassall 164). The first of these, the otherworldly Suffolk novel, *The Girl Green as Elderflower*, is an extraordinary amalgam of interwoven layers of stories. Stow's Suffolk is a private, secret, historical county, and he drew heavily on English myth and the presence of the past in this work (for further discussion of this collapsing of medieval into modern see Lynch 28). There is a very evident change in language from *Visitants*, which itself was a radical linguistic development from its predecessor, *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea*.

The central figure of *The Girl Green as Elderflower*, Crispin Clare, is appropriately named. He bears the name of a small Suffolk village close to Hadleigh and also that of the English poet, John Clare (1793–1864), born in another east of England county, Cambridgeshire. Crispin is a manifestation of Stow—like his creator he is a reformed smoker with alcohol issues, who has been a 'raw anthropologist' (30) in the Trobriand Islands where he contracted malaria. He lives in a fictionalised version of Stow's cottage in East Bergholt, overlooking 'abandoned fishponds, with their nettle-choked sluices' (3). In 1969 Stow wrote of the farm-labourer style decoration of Fishpond Cottage (Letter to mother, 2 Oct, 1969), and it was at about this time that he began work on the novel, in which Clare's cottage likewise has 'a wallpaper chosen in another age, by a stockman's wife' (7). While Clare's cottage is modelled on Fishpond Cottage, the fictional village of Swainstead is Hadleigh, evident from its description as a substantial village that 'prospered on the trade in woollens' (8)—yet Clare's cottage has been transported to this village, hence East Bergholt and Hadleigh are merged into one in another imagined village. Clare, like Stow, finds that somehow he has ended up staying there, 'tied by threads of old association and new habit' (9). As Stow's ancestors are buried in Hadleigh churchyard, Crispin Clare has generations buried in Swainstead.

The book alternates between Clare's story of recovery and retellings of local legends with a modern twist:

January
Concerning a fantastic sprite

April

Concerning a wild man caught in the sea

May

Concerning a boy and a girl emerging from the earth

June

The seasons order and shape the book. In January Clare looks out on an ‘old unpruned apple tree which had gathered wreaths of snow in its mossy twigs’ (3). In April the same apple tree, ‘agitated by bullfinches, intruded branches of tight flushed buds’ (65). Now the garden is ‘pigeon-moaning’ and ‘crammed with wallflowers’ (67), and causes Clare to reflect that the English countryside is ‘insistently literary’ (72). In May, Clare’s friend Jim-Jacques writes to him from Maine (Stow was there too in 1965), making connections across time and space with a reference to his own apple tree, ‘all in flower’ (105). Clare’s apple is at this time a ‘tethered cloud of blossom’ (107). In May the pigeons are still moaning, the garden blooming with ‘lilac, hawthorn and laburnum’ (107). June is fleeting and ties up loose ends. Now Clare dreams of beanfields and a girl ‘with long straight hair of elder-cream’ and eyes the ‘green of leeks’ (141).

Stow mixes old and new across the novel. The fantastic sprite Malkin appears during a game of Monopoly, calling out her name to the notes of the cuckoo (43), speaking in a Suffolk dialect. She is both a medieval figure and the vanished illegitimate daughter of a local woman, Mrs Burrows, born in Lanaham in Suthfolke (Lavenham in Suffolk). This is an England filled with ghosts, ‘built on echoes, parallels and overlappings’ (Hassall 148), where time is muddled. Minor characters such as John and Roger are manifest in different roles, and move backwards and forwards between an older England and its modern equivalent. A wild man caught in the sea at Orford also transcends generations, being both from the time of King Henry II and enmeshed with the same Suffolk characters we first meet in January.

This interest in myth and history colours much of Stow’s output. In 1962 he poetically described a picnic ‘all in the verdant greenwood among the bracken and the bluebells, expecting to see Ivanhoe or Robin Hood or Sir Guyon appearing at any moment’ (Letter to mother, 20 June 1962). So it is not surprising that for the third of the legends in *The Girl Green as Elderflower* Stow returned to a particular tale: the story of the green children of Woolpit, a village located between Stowmarket and Bury St Edmunds, not far from Lavenham. This legend has appeared in many guises, as discussed in John Clark’s comprehensive article (2006). In essence, in the mid-twelfth century a girl and a boy with green skin, speaking an unknown language, appeared one day in Woolpit. At first they refused food, then accepted green beans. The girl flourished, the boy died. Ralph of Coggeshall, Abbot of a monastery in north Essex, reported this appearance in his 1224 *Chronicon Anglicanum*. In writing his novel Stow drew on several versions of the myth. His specific interest is traceable as far back as 1966, when he drove to Woolpit and met a local resident who gave him her theory about the green children, which she said came from a former local doctor. ‘He thought that they were some kind of outcasts who had had to live in the woods on whatever they could pick up and were suffering from a kind of anaemia that caused their skin to seem green’ (Letter to mother, 31 Oct 1966). His interest in this story is also almost certainly linked to a publication by Kevin Crossley-Holland of that same year, and there was the abortive 1967 opera mentioned earlier.



Figure 4. Elderflower

Green is both the English landscape and a wider symbol of Englishness, echoing across the novel, with the green man (4), a ‘green god’ (68), the ‘dank green’ marsh (68), ‘metallic viridian’ (68) and ‘softest green as silver’ (71). Clare’s beloved Alicia has eyes ‘green as elderflower’ (111). He himself is ‘cabbage-like’ (23), and the yokel John’s hair is ‘like frost-bitten grass’ (27). The heavy use of metaphor, which, according to David Malouf (44) is a very English feature, illuminates the connections that make this such an evocative work. Ultimately green gives way to white, and by June the symbolic elderflower is ‘yellowish white’ (141). Alicia makes more English connections with her remark that Constable too loved elderflower (141): he painted them in blossom in 1835, and is known to have written about the tree (see Rhyne, 1990).

Even the music in the church is green, with Clare hearing Sweelinck’s ‘Onder een linde groen’ drifting from its organ (77); this Flemish version based on an old English song, ‘All in a garden green,’ as shown in Figure 5, from John Playford’s *The English Dancing Master* (1651), a manual containing music and instructions for country dances.

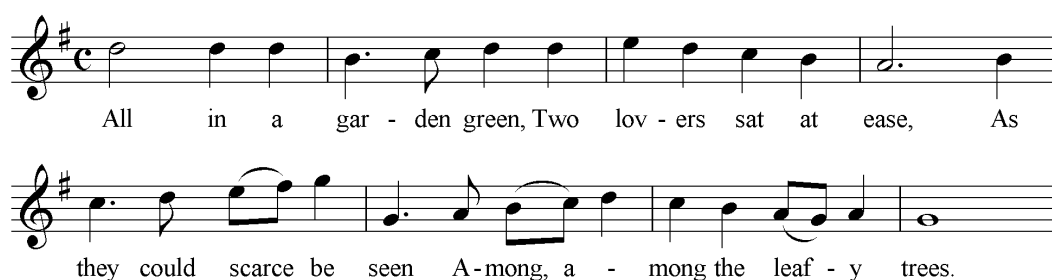


Figure 5. ‘All in a garden green’

In Stow’s final novel, *The Suburbs of Hell* (1983) the small medieval town of Old Tornwich is the setting against which a series of murders with mysterious overtones take place. As with all Stow’s novels, the landscape he knew well played a crucial role in forming the text, and Tornwich is a direct translation of Old Harwich on the Essex coast. Stow had first mooted the idea of living in Harwich in 1979, writing that he had always liked this little seaport, and looked on Harwich as being part of his ‘territory’ (Letter to mother, 23 July 1979). In the same year he was also considering Ipswich (Letter to mother, 24 Sep 1979). A close friend, Dick Foreman, then moved to Harwich, prompting Stow to settle there: ‘[I]t’s nice that

Harwich has the sea on three sides and a view of the Suffolk fields across the Stour-Orwell estuary' (Letter to mother, 21 Aug 1980). The house that Stow eventually purchased was a little terrace in Kings Head Street, 'so historic and full of character,' with 'ever so many little shops and pubs tucked away in corners . . . it's just what I like: old houses and sea and ships all in that little area . . .' (Letter to mother, 28 Oct 1980). The following year he finally moved in, and imposed upon it his penchant for English myths, when his sister sent him a carved green man effigy for his front door.

One of the reasons for this move was Stow's affection for the friendly mix of people in Harwich, including his vendor Charlie, his 'fellow-fisherman, a librarian from the Guildhall library in London, and the vicar,' all of whom he met in the local pub, from which he could 'watch the masts just outside the window swaying against the view of the Suffolk fields across the estuary' (Letter to mother, 19 Dec 1980). Pubs thus feature prominently in *The Suburbs of Hell*, which has several Hogarthian gathering-places: the Speedwell, the Galley and the New Moon. Stow remained very happy with his house among the secret streets of Old Harwich. His earlier disparaging attitude to the east coast had changed, and he often swam in the sea by a small sandy beach behind the church close to his house: 'the water's very refreshing, though not exactly like the Indian Ocean, as the sea on this coast churns up the sand all the time' (Letter to mother, 10 Aug 1981).

Stow worked on the new novel in 1983, finishing it despite the distractions of an excellent spring: 'the sun is pouring in the window of my top room, and birds are chirruping away. . . it's distracting me rather from my book—it suits me best to work while the nights are long and cold and dark, and I had hoped to have it finished, or nearly, by now (Letter to mother, 28 April 1983). In the same letter Stow refers to his own tiny, secret enclosure, where he had planted 'nice gillyflowers (the little wild wallflowers) and daffodils in my few square feet of garden.' As an aside, this love of flowers that permeates Stow's letters and last two novels was remarked on in 1941 by George Orwell as a 'minor English trait' (see Walder 181).

The backdrop for *The Suburbs of Hell* is akin to the Borough of George Crabbe and Benjamin Britten—a fishing port with a tight-knit community of people, all of whom know one another and their everyday patterns of movement. Old Harwich has an atmospheric old town complete with lighthouse, old crane and a variety of old buildings similar to those in Crabbe's Aldeburgh. Harwich, like Hadleigh, has many historic connections and customs, including a flamboyant mayor-making ceremony that dates back to the Middle Ages. There are links with Stow's former home towns of Fremantle and Geraldton; the Western Australian and Essex towns saw huge cargo vessels in a working port, and Harwich's lighthouse out at sea was an English version of Fremantle's lighthouse.



Figure 6. North Mole Lighthouse, Fremantle

Across his life Stow undertook historical and literary research as part of the creative process, and for this novel he read widely around ghost stories. His notes include references in particular to a number of works by Wilkie Collins (1824–89): *The Biter Bit* (an early detective story), *The Haunted Hotel* (a mixture of crime and ghost story) and the unfinished work, *Blind Love*. The combination of mystery, intrigue and crime in Collins's works are present in the dramatic suspense and atmosphere of *The Suburbs of Hell*, which has all the morbid, Gothic hallmarks of a nineteenth-century melodrama. As with many of Collins's works, *The Suburbs of Hell* straddles the border which 'separates the mystery from the detective story' (Ashley 47). The character Linda even reads Wilkie Collins (42), and Stow's command of the discourse of the locals is without question influenced by the Victorian author's careful creation of dialogue to command attention.



Figure 7. Lighthouse at Dovercourt, Harwich

Season and weather are once again important; Stow writes to his sister that the novel was set 'at the wintriest foggiest time, and is trying to be something like a Victorian "tale of terror"' (Letter to Hen, 19 Nov 1983). The place is 'lamplit' (6), with little dark passages and almost music hall scenes in the pubs (9), very much the milieu of the more contemporary 'Yorkshire Ripper,' who had been convicted of serial killings a few years earlier, in 1981. At the same time, the setting has the east coast feel of Britten's music, with bells ringing over the estuary (21), 'fishermen's dinghies' and 'beach-huts' (72). Distinctive English birds are heard: blackbirds and song thrushes, woodpigeons and collared doves, and the 'squawk' of a gull (72). The woods that appear at the end of the novel are clearly those that Stow himself frequented, with sweet chestnuts, green wood-anemone and the sea ever present:

There was a lark, there were two larks, out of sight in a clear sky, and in the sunlight smell of new grass mixed warmly with the cool tang of sea. Blackthorn bushes had stars of white, above yellow stars of celandine. Where the meadows ended, in saltings furred with sea-purslane cut by shining creeks, the water was drowsily blue and lulled a few swans. (159)

Each personality in this small community is clearly delineated. Ex-seaman, divorced Harry Ufford is 47, 'broad-boned, still lean' (4). Greg has a heavy blondish moustache (26) and the alliterative Eddystone Ena is 61, 'bosomed like a bullfinch' (9). Frank De Vere is 34, with eyes of a 'cold, acidic blue' (33). Every character is somewhat shadowy, with missing or deceased partners and holes in their lives. Paul Ramsey is separated from his wife Diana, his brother Greg is unemployed, and Commander Pryke lives 'in a ferment of memories' (59). There are many additional bit parts: Ken Heath, the owner of a taxi firm, Charlie the crane-driver and Bob the grocer.

The main character, Harry Ufford, is (like Crispin Clare) both fiction and biography—an amalgam of Stow's younger self and Charlie, from whom he bought the house in Harwich, who was himself the son of an Aldeburgh fisherman, 'a good owd Suffolk booy' (Letter to mother, 28 Oct 1980). Harry's house is Charlie's house: a special place full of English artefacts—horse-brasses, model ships and on the wall prints by Constable and Turner. Stow had an excellent ear for languages, and had begun his researches into the Suffolk dialect by working in the local pub some ten years earlier (Letter to mother, 20 Aug 1973). Thus Harry speaks in a distinctive local dialect, the particular words that Stow creates meticulously preserved across the novel, for example:

whass	what's
hooman	human
redooce	reduce
goo	go
knoo	know
hoom	home
stoodent	student

The Suburbs of Hell was shortlisted for East Anglian book of the year in 1984, the prizegiving event aptly held in a literary Suffolk venue, the Angel hotel in Bury St Edmunds, where Dickens's Mr Pickwick stayed. Its title reflects the frisson of boredom of the 'suburbs' referred to by Stow in the letter that opened this article. Given that Stow wrote no further fiction after this point, maybe his move to Harwich had, ironically, returned him to the very atmosphere he wished to escape on leaving Australia. Instead, his exploration of Suffolk and Essex occupied much of his time. He revisited old familiar places like Orford and Aldeburgh, and made journeys to places unknown to him, such as the ancient woodland of Staverton Thicks, which Stow found 'certainly very jungly, but not so full of neolithic atmosphere as I'd expected' (Letter to mother, 20 July 1982), or the woods at Wrabness, 'so beautiful just now, great snow-drifts of wood-anemones among the trees, and primroses and celandine too' (Letter to mother, 25 April 1984). Often these adventures took place with local friends such as Catherine Broom-Lynne and Aubrey Davis, with whom he 'did the Essex marshes, which is interesting country, I've always thought—the first English landscape I knew. Just now it's all green and white with the flowers of hawthorn and now parsley, and elderflower just beginning' (Letter to mother, n.d. 1982). When his sister Helen's children came to visit in 1994 he took them to East Bergholt and Hadleigh, engendering the comment that the footpaths between these places were like their own songlines (Letter to Hen, 8 Dec 1994). Even in the latter years of his life, when he had long since ceased to write fiction, Stow continued to research local history and folklore.

As he was able to draw upon and evoke the Australian landscape in his early novels, so too did Stow recreate himself in a rural part of England brimming with archetypal English sights such as ancient oaks and hayfields. Stow's writing takes on a different hue under the misty skies of England, drawing together the past and the natural landscape 'in a mutual embrace' (Ackroyd 449). He was able to render an English idyll with a painterly atmosphere reminiscent of Constable, while at the same time tapping into the country's more eerie aspect, 'the English sense of being haunted by place and by a specific history associated with it' (Ackroyd 376). He came to love and know the countryside, writing its gritty coast into *The Suburbs of Hell*, its greenness and its flowers, 'a mass of cow-parsley. . . buttercups and red campion,' into *The Girl Green as Elderflower*, where everywhere 'the insistent note of the countryside was white embowered in green' (107).

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