

Trans-Tasman Impostures

BRIGID MAGNER
Monash University

Caught in the interstices, writers who move between Australia and New Zealand, whether literally or laterally, often choose unusual ways of being or becoming trans-Tasman. Neither one nationality nor the other, these figures inhabit a zone of proximity and indiscernibility in our shared literary history. Given their often vigorous literary productions, it might well be argued that the constraints placed on them by competing nationalisms can be productive as well as stifling.

Trans-Tasman travel is an under-recognised trend in scholarly accounts of regional literature, perhaps because the movement is so commonplace as to be rendered invisible. In common with other kinds of travel, trans-Tasman movement may lead to significant changes within the individuals involved. Writers who move between Australia and New Zealand can be subject to particular anxieties, made all the more intense for being repressed. Often, this geographical shift provides imaginative inspiration for their subsequent literary output but there is almost always a personal price to be paid for their relocation. The writers considered here, Douglas Stewart, Barry Crump, Dulcie Deamer and Eve Langley, all demonstrate tendencies arising from the pressures of the trans-Tasman condition. In order to compensate for their liminal status as writers working between countries, these figures seem to have performed various impostures, involving a range of elaborate subterfuges.

As a trans-Tasman literary migrant, Douglas Stewart is notable for his thoroughly contradictory responses to the question of national identity. Stewart, known in Australian literary history as a Lindsayite vitalist, was one of the most powerfully conservative forces in Australian verse in the 1940s and 1950s, resisting all manifestations of modernism. This attitude may well have had its origins in the rejection of his poetry by the modernist clique – Charles Brash and the *Landfall* poets – who were asserting a new image of New Zealand nationhood during the 1930s. As a young poet, Stewart was not favoured by this powerful coterie because he had associations with the local Georgians who had taken him up as a protégé. His restlessness and subsequent emigration was, in fact, prompted by his ostracism by this new school.

As a result of this exclusion, Stewart sought employment at the *Bulletin* in 1940 because he believed it was then the 'bright and burning centre of Antipodean literature'. As Lawrence Bourke remarks, Stewart's use of the word 'Antipodean' allows him to glide over what had so impressed him as a young man before his migration: the social and geographical divide between Australia and New Zealand (41). By employing the term 'Antipodean' Stewart was able to avoid any critical discussion of differences between the literatures of the two countries. Evidently, he had decided it was easier to conflate them instead of referring to them individually. This convenient overlapping of Australia and New Zealand revealed itself in his work as editor of the *Bulletin's* 'Red Page' when he actively promoted Australian nationalist values while publishing marginal New Zealand writers with whom he had sympathy. As the *Bulletin's* literary editor from 1940 until 1961, he encouraged what he called 'a sort of national school of writing in both verse and prose'. 'I liked it to be of the Australian soil' he later said, reflecting on his editorial practice (Bourke 45).

In many of his autobiographical commentaries and interviews, Stewart comes across as a man with oscillating identifications. In 1943, the ABC asked him for biographical information and he replied that his nationality was 'British' – perhaps this was an acceptable middle ground for Stewart then, since he was well aware of the indifferent relations between the Australian and New Zealand literary communities. Later, in a TV interview with John Thompson he was asked if he regarded himself as a New Zealander or as an Aussie. In reply he said 'both' and went on to downplay the distinction: 'I never find any difficulty about it. You just transplant yourself from one country to another and if there aren't any plant quarantine regulations, you can do it alright' (114).

When Stewart was awarded the Britannica Australia award for literature, Patrick White wrote to the *Sydney Morning Herald* pointing out that the previous year the Britannica Council had ruled Christina Stead ineligible for the award because she was an expatriate whereas now they were giving it to a New Zealander. In response the *Herald* quoted Stewart as saying: 'I don't agree with the use of expatriate as a smear word. The question of origin shouldn't be raised. The only questions are: is your writing of significance in your country, and is it any good' (Bourke 45). This remark reveals his anxieties about being labeled as one nationality or another, in case it reduce his possible range of allegiances.

So it seems that for most of his adult life, Stewart fabricated an Australian identity while still retaining romantic notions of New Zealand. In correspondence to his friend Alan Mulgan, he spoke wistfully of the place and expressed his disappointment that his work went unrecognised in his homeland, which he said was: 'the land one has most at heart' (Bourke 44). Stewart's public disavowal of his privately cherished origins was enabled by the construction of a new Australian self which offered him more literary latitude. Of course, his masquerade was provoked by the very real pressures which determined the conditions of his existence as a poet and literary editor. As Bourke argues, there were public forces which shaped him this way: nationalism had become socially urgent when he migrated in the 1930s and its importance was reflected in the cultural institutions around him.

Stewart's fluctuating, chameleon-like behaviour characterises the social demeanour of the ambitious migrant. Similar behaviour is displayed by the plagiarist who alternates between disavowal and revelation of his/her crime. A particular case of trans-Tasman plagiarism, involving popular writers Barry Crump and Dal Stivens, raises a number of comparable questions about authenticity, originality and propriety.

Crump and Stivens are popular writers, whose respective styles are both irreverent and demotic in tone. Barry Crump is famous in New Zealand as an icon of the rugged Kiwi 'Man Alone' while Dal Stivens is equally well known for his unmistakably, if not hyperbolically, Australian stories. In the 1960s Barry Crump became New Zealand's best selling male author with his episodic, yarn-spinning which was primarily local in origin, although general models existed in the Australian sketches of Henry Lawson and his successors. Terry Sturm argues that the popularity of the stories resided not only in the myth of maleness they constructed (or reinforced) in the fantasies of city-based male readers but also in the seemingly artless way the stories were told (530-1).

Barry Crump's story 'The Wonderful West Coast Sand Mullet' was originally broadcast on the National Radio Programme in 1965 as a rollicking yarn, of the sort for which he was already famous. Later, this oral piece was published in the *Listener Bedside Book*, a popular anthology. Some years afterwards it was reprinted, in the *Bedside Book No 2*, along with a letter from a South Island reader who had noted its similarity to a story by well known Australian writer Dal Stivens. This reader, M.D. Cranko, pointed out the unfamiliarity of the fish as well as the familiarity of the story which he had read in Stivens's collection *The Gambling Ghost and Other Tales* (1953).

Stivens's story 'Sammy and the Sand Mullet' is written as a yarn told in a pub by old-timers, complete with the requisite exaggerations. The main character is a farmer called Ironbark Bill who lives in the 'too-poor country'. When he moves there he worries about what to do with his pet sand mullet in a landscape where 'frogs often reached old age before learning to swim'. Being an exceptional creature, Sammy the mullet very quickly becomes accustomed to this tough way of life and becomes more and more like a dog in his behaviour, rounding up sheep, barking and learning to scratch himself. But the one thing Ironbark doesn't count on in the too-poor country is a cloudburst which drowns Sammy before he can be rescued by his adoring master. Ludicrous as this may sound, the story has a kind of rhetorical power which Barry Crump must have recognised when he chose to reproduce it as a radio piece.

Despite the different medium, there is no doubt about the similarities between Crump's and Stivens's stories. Crump's version follows the Stivens narrative almost exactly, however he has changed certain features so they are indigenous to New Zealand. Unfortunately, he neglected to change the type of fish which is uncommon in New Zealand, a minor point which tipped off the reader to the yarn's inauthenticity. Crump's story, emerging twelve years after Stivens's original, is set in central Otago, the New Zealand equivalent of Stivens's 'too-poor country' and is told in a pub, like the original story, a funny narrative which is passed between men over

drinks. Crump's ending is equally downbeat but for different reasons. His protagonist agrees to sell the famous mullet to the highest bidder but before he can close the deal, the fish drowns in a puddle. Crump's narrator is more upset about losing money than his favourite pet at the end of the story, in contrast to the overblown tragedy of Stevens's ending.

It is difficult to know how to interpret Crump's liberal borrowing from Stevens. While he never made a secret of the fact that he was heavily influenced by a number of Australian writers, whose work and personal style he emulated, this time he is brazen in his borrowing. Crump's plagiarism of Stevens may be seen as a form of flattery, or perhaps, as literary laziness. The assumption is that Crump recognised the indifference between the literary communities of Australia and New Zealand and decided to use this impasse in his favour, thinking – perhaps rightly – that nobody would notice, or care. Whatever his motivations, the astonishing part is that no-one saw any likeness until many years later.

Naturally, yarns aren't always supposed to be original, indeed part of their appeal is their repetitiveness and predictability; at the same time, there is a widely recognised convention in literary circles which dictates that original sources should be credited once they are published. Moreover, there is a significant difference between an oral appropriation and a textual one; Crump's virtual replication of Stevens's story is a permanent appropriation which is far more difficult to overlook. While this revelation may have raised a few eyebrows in a limited group of readers, nothing more became of the issue perhaps because both writers concerned were dead by the time it was publicly announced. Aside from one short letter there was no other discernible commentary in either New Zealand or Australia. This may be because it occurred in the realm of popular rather than high literary fiction, an area which seems to be less strictly policed in matters of authenticity.

Turning from these creative misrepresentations by Douglas Stewart and Barry Crump, we might now consider two women writers, Dulcie Deamer and Eve Langley, who also struggled to find and retain tenable literary identities in the trans-Tasman interval. Unlike these male writers, who are largely recognised for their work, these women are better known for their colourful personalities.

New Zealand-born Dulcie Deamer is associated not so much with her writing as with her energetic performances as 'Queen of Bohemia' during Sydney's roaring 1920s – 'The Golden Decade'. Deamer never made much of her transition from New Zealand to Australia because her early life was dominated by travel. Her journey was one-way, however. She never returned to New Zealand to live and has, as a consequence, been written out of New Zealand literary history. E.H. McCormick's remark about the 'degenerate classicism of trans-Tasman bohemians' like Dulcie Deamer is one of only a few stray references to Deamer in New Zealand literary histories (163).

Deamer was initiated into the Australian literary scene when she won a short story competition run by the *Bulletin's* affiliated magazine the *Lone Hand*. In hindsight, Deamer claimed not to have been interested in Featherston, the place where she grew up, so she chose to write a stone-age narrative from her imagination. Much to

her surprise, the story won, and forged a connection with Australia which was to continue for the rest of her life. This narrative featured the capture and subjugation of a bride, and was accompanied by some of Norman Lindsay's notorious near-nude illustrations. These caused quite a stir in the parochial New Zealand community Deamer reluctantly inhabited.

Eventually she migrated to Australia after an interlude as a travelling carnival performer and joined the burgeoning Bohemian scene in Sydney. According to Peter Kirkpatrick, Bohemia in the 1920s was 'un-Australian', like Deamer's novels: '[i]t was drawn to the exotic rather than the homespun, and was mostly too pleasure-seeking to give even lip-service to politics' (96). Kirkpatrick claims that as a Bohemian, Dulcie Deamer was caught up with the implications of her own aesthetic creed. In her public role as an artist Deamer constructed herself as a radical identity through costumes, dancing and high-spirited behaviour. Kirkpatrick argues that in any assessment of Deamer's achievement this bodily text of her Bohemianism must be taken into account. Like Oscar Wilde's dandyism, Deamer's lavish performances parodied aspects of her literary identity.

In *Exiles At Home*, Drusilla Modjeska argues that women could only enter that masculine Bohemian culture through their sexuality. If this is to be believed, then Deamer needed to act in a provocative manner to make any impression on the Bohemian order. She used her body as a social script rather than choosing to give herself over sexually as other women had done, to their detriment. Cannily, Deamer recognised that her iconic status as 'Queen' was based on a carefully cultivated impersonality. In her memoir *Queen of Bohemia*, she observes: '[i]f you enjoy playing a game, who the other players are, as people, doesn't matter. They're like masked participants in a carnival round dance. The game's the thing. Before and after it is the tough, down-to-earth business of living. Thank heaven I was born with an aptitude for impersonal *joie de vivre*' (101).

This pretence made her feel 'invulnerable to the buffets of life' (102). Role-playing as 'Queen' Deamer was light years away from her other existence as a writer, scraping a living through newspaper articles and poetry. Her novels, while entertaining, never achieved respectable status or much recognition within the local literary community. This may be due to the fantastic, whimsical nature of the scenarios she invented. Deamer's novel *Holiday* (1940), for example, was set in Greece under the occupation of imperial Rome and dealt with love and reincarnation. According to Drusilla Modjeska, one of the most striking aspects of the novel is the reference to homosexuality and explicit portrayals of sexuality. These classical themes, along with bohemianism and glorification of sexuality, would have placed her firmly outside the mainstream and rendered her exempt from the usual processes of publication and reception (Modjeska 93). Ironically, Deamer regarded her writing as more important than her outrageous public performances, yet it is for these she is most vividly remembered by Australian social history.

Like the work of Dulcie Deamer, Eve Langley's writing had marginal status within the Australian literary establishment, a predicament that drove her to adopt other identities in order to mimic the credibility she desired. Displaying her predilection

for male dress at an early age, Langley and her sister were known as the 'Trousers Women' in Gippsland where they worked as pea-pickers in the 1920s. Given her persistent interest in impersonating the opposite sex, it might seem surprising that she chose to marry and begin a family once she moved to New Zealand. However conventional this behaviour may have appeared, the strains of her increasingly difficult domestic life eventually prompted a resurgence of her fantasies of masculinity, which became more pronounced over time.

Her only critical success, the Prior prize-winning novel *The Pea-pickers*, based on her experiences in Victoria and Gippsland, was written in these straitened domestic circumstances. Later when her life became more unmanageable due to isolation and poverty, she changed her name, by deed poll, to 'Oscar Wilde'. The persona of Oscar Wilde became her primary self while she was living in 'exile' in New Zealand away from her beloved Australia, serving as a buffer against the rejection of most of her subsequent writing by Angus and Robertson.

One of the unpublished works Langley wrote in New Zealand was *Wild Australia*, a characteristically idiosyncratic blend of imaginative fiction and autobiography. The novel, which has three different versions, details a journey made by Langley across the Australian Alps on a horse to join her sister for hop-picking. This ride is one of transformation in the novel – along the way the narratorial persona slips in and out of the guise of Oscar Wilde. In all three manuscripts, Australia is presented as an enabling space for this persecuted literary figure. Langley contrasts Wilde's 'crucifixion' in England with his reincarnation in the Great Southern Land where he enjoys the company of men without style, no affectation and absolutely no pretence at intellect: 'But I was young again and among Australians. And they were good to me. No man falling, doomed and decadent, could have fallen into greater or more heroic hands than those of Australia ... For England had slain me cruelly deep, but Australia gave me back my immortality' (Langley 242-3).

Langley's adoption of the persecuted persona of Wilde has a certain idiosyncratic logic in the context of her impoverished circumstances in New Zealand. In the *Wild Australia* manuscripts, Australia saves Wilde from death at the hands of the British while dreams of her country sustain Langley in her exile. Evidently, she saw Australia as having the power to revive and sustain faltering personalities such as her own. Aorewa McCleod speculates that Langley's work has been overlooked not because of her transvestism but because she deserted her country for a neighbouring one. She argues that Langley is 'fascinating because she constantly refuses definition, is as a consequence unclaimed and hence unpublishable by both Australians and New Zealanders. It is not that she was crazy and changed her name by deed poll to Oscar Wilde. Rather, it's that she left Australia, and worse, stopped writing about Australia' (162-3).

All these figures, to varying extents, reveal the potential perils of trans-Tasman authorship. While the role of author is never an easy one, it seems that the writers moving within Australasia must strike more dramatic poses in order to create and retain reputations. Dulcie Deamer recognised this when she burst onto the Bohemian scene in Sydney, wowing people with her gymnastics but ultimately

drawing attention away from her writing. The stories of Douglas Stewart and Barry Crump show how obfuscation and denial may be useful, if ethically dubious, devices for translating oneself across a significant cultural divide. Clearly, the minor Crump/Stivens plagiarism incident demonstrates the potential for unacknowledged appropriations given the lack of literary discourse between the two countries. Certainly, Deamer and Langley's passion for tropes of reincarnation and personal reinvention may point towards dissatisfaction with their lived existence, caused in large part by their conflicted national subjectivities. Their carnivalesque performances and cross-dressing rituals suggest compensatory possibilities for overcoming oppositional national and gender identities. Collectively, these writers' life stories and fictions represent significant disturbances to complacent myths of trans-Tasman homogeneity and unity; they question our tendency to adopt a curious bias towards that which is in closest proximity to us.

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