

Writing Tasmania's "Different Soul"

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Abstract: The narrator of Christopher Koch's 1958 novel *The Boys in the Island* claims for Tasmania "a different soul", distinct from that of the Australian mainland to the north, in the same breath in which he claims for the island "a different weather". Observations of the distinctiveness of island geography and weather – and of the quality of the light – are recurrent in narratives set not only in Tasmania, but also on those islands to which Tasmania itself acts as a 'mainland'. This paper surveys a range of texts, including Koch's *The Boys in the Island*, Joanna Murray-Smith's *Truce*, and my own *The Alphabet of Light and Dark*, in which a Tasmanian island functions both as a setting for the protagonist's idealized childhood and as a metaphor for the protagonist's "true self". It explores the representation of islands in these texts, examining how a specific tradition of writing about Tasmania intersects with a broader tradition of writing about islands.

Keywords: Australia, distinctiveness, islands, mainland, Tasmania

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Introduction

"Tasmania is an island of hills, a fragment separated from the parent continent by a wide stretch of sea. It is different from the hot Australian mainland; it has a different weather and a different soul" (Koch, 1958: 8).

For as long as Tasmania (formerly Van Diemen's Land) has been written about, it has been defined in terms of what it is not, depicted always in opposition to the mainland of continental Australia. Writers have tended to seize first upon the obviously different climatic conditions of the northerly mainland and the southerly island. On occasion, the island has done well out of the climate comparison, as in Marcus Clarke's *His Natural Life*, where continental Australia is beset with the "torment" of a "parching hot wind", while a "cool south breeze ripples gently the blue waters" of a river in Van Diemen's Land (1970: 230). But, more often, the island's weather has been the less desirable. "[S]leet like minced glass", in Hal Porter's unminced prose, rattles down on a "freezing" Van Diemen's Land, which is also an "ugly trinket suspended at the world's discredited rump" (1961: 9). Christopher Koch, in his debut novel *The Boys in the Island*, claims for the island a "different soul" in the same breath in which he notes its "different weather" (1958: 8). He reiterates this equation between topography, climate and identity in his essay "A Tasmanian Tone", arguing that "island people are a little different from those belonging to a continent" (1987: 111), and concluding that:

“... the essence in landscape and climate will always impose itself on the human spirit, and especially the writer’s spirit, more finally and insidiously than anything else” (Koch, 1987: 118).

There is a knot of concepts here: both islandness and climate are said to produce difference, and this difference is said to be produced in Tasmanian people, especially writers, and – it follows – in Tasmanian writing. In surveying selected fictional and non-fictional writing about Tasmania, this paper attempts to unravel that knot.

The Island and the “Different” Individual

In *The Boys in the Island* (written in 1958; substantially revised in 1974) Koch crafts a protagonist who is frequently conflated, body and soul, with the geographical island. The individual as island is, as Pete Hay notes, “a robust and tenaciously familiar metaphor and literary trope” (2006: 21), while Rod Edmond and Vanessa Smith describe a “suggestive congruence between islands and individuals”, arguing that it is an island’s “obstinate separateness” which makes it so readily available for the “territorial expression of both the ego and the body” (2003: 4). In *The Boys in the Island*, Francis Cullen is an especially good example of the way this well-known trope is deployed in fiction set in Tasmania. Socially isolated, Francis is incapable of connecting with his parents, teachers or peers. He even feels himself to be excluded from the inner sanctum of a group of imaginary friends, “the Lads”, whom he conjures as playmates for himself in early childhood. Similarly, he never becomes a full member of the tribe of flesh-and-blood island boys who are united by the common purpose of escaping the 1940s Tasmania of their youth, and searching for a mythical Otherworld they believe to be located on the mainland. Francis is different, and so is Koch’s Tasmania, as is made explicit in the early pages of *The Boys in the Island*. Here, the narrative, usually closely focalized through Francis, pulls back to offer a wide shot of the setting, describing the island with its different weather and different soul, “... knowing as it does the sharp breath of south, facing the Antarctic” (1958: 8).

Difference in this novel, however, does not imply a value judgement in which Tasmania, or Francis, are found wanting. The island is tenderly drawn as a haven of natural beauty compared with the mainland city into which Francis makes a foray. And Francis is drawn as a sensitive soul, with a capacity for metaphysical thought and deep feeling superior to that of his peers. Difference bends towards distinctiveness, and distinctiveness towards desirability. In Koch’s writing, Tasmania’s desirable difference is underscored by descriptions of a certain quality of light, occurring in Tasmania and lacking on the mainland. The pages of *The Boys in the Island* are drenched in the ambivalent light of dawns and dusks. The first and last scenes are set during beautiful, melancholic dusks: “not daytime or night-time, it was both” (1958: 1). However, when Francis first encounters the mainland city of Melbourne, it is in a darkness as comprehensive as the panic that immediately invades him. The light by which he sees the city is a “virulent yellow light” which leaks from the windows of trams, “like the burning blood of the city itself”. When dawn comes the next day, it is a “dim grey light, despair’s own colour” (1958: 142). In “A Tasmanian Tone”, the topography of the island, the coolness of its weather and the quality

of its light are figured as desirable. So, too, is the writing style Koch believes to be engendered by such a place, one combining “wistfulness, spareness and a glassy clearness: the tonality of the landscape itself, with its cool-temperate light and its stark, sharp-edged lines” (1987: 109). The Tasmania rendered by Koch in his early fiction is read by Cranston as an “ersatz England” (2007: 222), and by Polack as “a place to leave once adolescence is over” (2000: 222). Indeed, Koch’s early protagonists are eager to leave their island birthplace behind, and in *The Doubleman*, in particular, Koch relentlessly defines Tasmanian features by way of their European counterparts. Boys walk to school through “London fogs” (1985: 32), seas are “Hebridean” (1985: 33), or on warm days, “Mediterranean” (1985: 88). In “A Tasmanian Tone”, Koch himself recognizes this tendency of his as “a colonial habit of mind: always seeking other landscapes in our own” (1987: 106). Nevertheless, Koch’s writing takes an exuberant pleasure in the particularities of Tasmanian landscapes, and revels even in the chilly frisson of its Gothic elements. His Tasmania is a vastly more desirable destination than the one we find depicted in the words of expatriate Tasmanian Peter Conrad.

Conrad begins his prickly memoir, *Down Home*, by locating the primary fault of his island birthplace: it is not the mainland. For him, the island’s very islandness produces an embarrassing insularity in its people: “On the island, everyman is – or wants to be – an island” (1988: 112), and in relation to the mainland to the north, Tasmania exists as “an appendix, an afterthought” (1988: 4). It is a cold, gloomy, blustery, lachrymose place “omitted” (1988: 4) by the red, scorching, metallic Australian landscape. Until the very closing pages of the book, Conrad refuses to entertain that Tasmania’s landscape – or atmosphere, or communities – could be honestly perceived as anything other than bitterly desolate. He offers a critique of writers, artists, photographers who represent the island in a (literally) glowing light, arguing that “[i]t’s not that these observers couldn’t see the actual irreducible Tasmania”, but that they decided not to see it, and to produce “capricious substitutions” that transcend and circumvent “reality” (1988: 180). Conrad describes how, in a series of unsigned photographs, he happens upon “the untreated truth of Tasmania”:

At last I found an image of the desolation I had always felt there, baring the dust and mire beneath the streets, the ragged bush beyond the buildings . . . that white sullen wintry sky like the film on a cataract-occluded eye. Here was a Tasmania I recognised, without the cloyed, varnished composition of those paintings. In an ancient landscape, with the menace of bad weather on the mountain, a tentative society proposes itself (Conrad, 1988: 181).

Here, again, weather, islandness and the quality of light are knit together. However, for Conrad, the true light of Tasmania is not glowing, but “sullen” and “wintry”. By the end of this book-length “pathology of origins-embarrassment” (Bellette, 1988: 3), Conrad finds that he might just be able to forgive Tasmania for its mountainous landscape, for its cold weather, and for its not-being mainland Australia. After all, he seems to suggest, Tasmania is only the most godforsaken corner of a godforsaken continent, itself forever blighted by the fact that it is not Europe.

That Tasmanians are distinct from Australians and that Tasmanian writing is distinctive from Australian writing – and that this distinctiveness is substantially generated by geography and climate – are not uncontested ideas. Expatriate Tasmanian Denis Altman is among those unconvinced by what he calls “the myth of Tasmanian exceptionalism” (1997: 20). Tasmanians, Altman writes, “like to believe that the combination of geography and a convict past have made them somehow different” (1997: 22) adding that it is the island state’s writers that are the creators of this mythology. He, however, posits Tasmania’s smallness, lack of cultural diversity and its population’s reliance on nostalgia as the principle ingredients of this myth of exceptionalism. Fiona Polack makes an important point when she argues that it is the “desire for difference” (2000: 218) that drives investment in the idea of the uniqueness of writing about Tasmania.

Taking Tasmanian Difference Offshore

In the late 1950s, when *The Boys in the Island* was first published, isolation and marginalization were themes that were unproblematically available to writers writing about Tasmania. But, since then, and since *The Boys in the Island* was substantially revised in the 1970s – and even since *Down Home* was published in 1988 – there has been a shift in both internal and external perceptions of Tasmania. Tourism promotions and boutique food marketing are among those phenomena that have spun Tasmania from a backwater into a destination. Now, the island is connected politically, through policies of regional inclusion, and physically, through a subsidized sea link that joins it to the national highway. The edge of Tasmania’s isolation and marginalization has been softened, and its islandness harnessed for promotional purposes. The response of some writers has been simply to shift their narratives of the distinctive individual to Tasmania’s own offshore islands. As Cranston points out: ‘the “island” of Tasmania is geographically divided and diverse . . . an archipelago state’ (2007: 221). Conrad saw Tasmania as doubly isolated: “We were an offshore island off the shore of an offshore continent, victims of a twofold alienation” (1988: 3).

Now, writers with a desire for difference are seeking insulation in the treble removal of setting their works on Tasmania’s offshore islands (islands off an island off an island), making Tasmania itself a mainland. Interestingly, the same tropes that have been at play for decades in writing about Tasmanian distinctiveness are now beginning to be grafted onto writing about the distinctiveness of Tasmania’s offshore islands. Island settings, and protagonists closely tied to island settings, continue to be constructed by way of reference to phenomena such as distinctive geography, climate and a certain quality of light.

A striking example of this transfer of imagery appears in my own novel *The Alphabet of Light and Dark*, set almost entirely on Bruny Island, an island only narrowly separated from the southeast coast of the Tasmanian ‘mainland’ by the D’Entrecasteaux Channel. The novel’s central character Essie is, as a child, profoundly isolated by her elective muteness. As a child and as an adult, Essie is an isolated individual represented by, and strongly connected to, the island of her childhood. In the early pages, Essie sits on her grandfather’s yacht observing the contours of the island, meditating that “*I am an island*

too..." and recognizing that her silence is a "blue moat" surrounding her (Wood, 2003: 5). Claims for the distinctiveness of the island are also made early, with the (unrealistic) observation that:

"... on this side of the channel, the light is different. Late afternoon sun touches on a single face of the few homesteads alongside the road, making them blush. It brushes an antique copper wash over the eucalypts and the pastures spotted with black and white cows" (Wood, 2003: 25).

That Tasmania has a certain quality of light, distinct from that of mainland Australia, might be conceived of as a fact, as a measurable outcome of different latitudes. However, the same proposition cannot be made for a difference in light quality between mainland Tasmania and Bruny Island. Perhaps, then, there is more to the insistent linkage between Tasmanian islands and light quality than can be explained by biophysical "fact". Like *The Boys in the Island*, *The Alphabet of Light and Dark* begins at the close of day. Its very first sentence is: "Almost dusk, fish-catching time" (Wood, 2003: 1). I suspect this recurrent insistence on a glowing, liminal Tasmanian light might lend weight to Altman's assertion that nostalgia is a crucial ingredient of his "myth of Tasmanian exceptionalism". But I also wonder whether it might point the way to a consideration of the ways in which a specific tradition of writing about Tasmania intersects with a much broader tradition of writing about islands in general.

The Island in Time

"[E]specially predominant" in writing about islands, notes Polack, is not only the notion of the island as a "mirror for the contained and bounded self", but also the notion of the island as a "convenient freeze frame for history". Islands are "places out of time" (Edmond & Smith, 2003: 8), whether they are seen to be advantaged or disadvantaged by being situated outside the main-time of mainlands. They are possibly even "ahistorical" (Cranston, 2007: 226).

Tasmania remains, in most figurations, behind the times. In Conrad's *Down Home*, Tasmania is disadvantaged by its discontinuity with main-time and depicted as a "[site] of cultural stagnation" (Edmond & Smith, 2003: 8). When leaving the island for mainland Australia, Conrad writes, "you cross an invisible border, into another age" (1988: 225). The current government-generated tourism label, Pure Tasmania, corroborates the idea of Tasmania's existence out of time, although it recasts the characteristic in a favourable light. Heritage buildings, history, and ancient natural settings are all emphasized as important ingredients of the brand (and illustrating the Pure Tasmania text, on the website, are coastal landscapes, steam trains, and alluringly set dining tables, all shot in golden late-afternoon light). Dusk is in itself a between time, occurring at the cusp of day and night, as well as providing a visual representation for a more general temporal liminality. Tasmania, in many representations, exists somewhere between the present and the past.

In Joanna Murray-Smith's 1994 novel *Truce*, it is not Tasmania itself that is out of time, but one of Tasmania's offshore islands. The setting of the novel is called simply 'The Island'; but is closely based on Erith Island, which is part of the Kent Group, a cluster of six islands, the main three being Deal, Erith and Dover Islands. Located in Bass Strait between the southern coast of the Australian mainland and the northern tip of Tasmania's Flinders Island, the Kent Group is now a Marine Protected Area and terrestrial National Park, visited by recreational sailors and inhabited only by the few people who maintain the natural and heritage of the islands, including the lighthouse on Deal Island. Murray-Smith's father, the writer Stephen Murray-Smith, began in the early 1960s to take his family, friends and colleagues to Erith Island for holidays. The group, which incorporated artists and intellectuals, became known as "the Erith mob", and Murray-Smith recalls her childhood expeditions to the island as intellectually, socially and creatively formative. As with Francis in *The Boys in the Island*, the protagonist of *Truce*, Georgia Manifold, is islanded by her difference from those around her. The young Georgia positions her family within a topographical image of marginalization when she says of her parents:

"I sense that their understanding is a lonely one. They don't belong to the Main World. They sit on the edges of it" (Murray-Smith, 1994: 8).

The island, too, is an inheritance from her parents. Her father, she says, found it in a yachting manual. In her first description of the island, Georgia calls its shape "prehistoric" (1994: 25), placing the island outside of the time she occupies in her regular life in the city of Melbourne. It exists, for her, "beyond the deadlines and hard edges of mainland life" (1994: 25).

The Island and Childhood

Island time in *Truce*, *The Boys in the Island*, *The Alphabet of Light and Dark* and *Down Home* is sutured to childhood time. For the central characters of each novel, and for the narrating self of *Down Home*, the island exists out of time because returning to the island equates to an opportunity to return to a personal past. This is a past that has not entirely ceased to exist, since it appears to linger within the self. In *The Boys in the Island*, the island is not only the setting for childhood; the island itself is a child, as we see in Koch's description of mainland Australia as the "parent continent" (1974: 6). Murray-Smith begins a chapter with the bold claim that "[t]he island is my childhood" (1994: 27). She has elsewhere recounted how Erith Island constituted the "visual world" that she knew best "inside that delicate archive of childhood" (Murray-Smith, 2006: 5). She also makes explicit the link between childhood time and a nostalgic cast of light when she says:

"[w]hen I think of those days, I think of a particular dreamy late afternoon light, a reflection not so much of the light itself, perhaps, as of the freedom and happiness of the end of a child's day" (Murray-Smith, 2006: 2).

A return to the landscape of childhood is, of course, staged in countless works of fiction; Burke's idea, quoted in Conrad, that "landscapes [make] infants of us again, because we

revert in our feelings about them to our earliest memories" (1988: 215) can apply equally to island, desert, farmland, mountain or city. But when the childhood landscape happens to be an island, "a perfect model for the would-be autonomous self" (Bongie, 1998: 21), a particularly resonant narrative note is struck.

As Woods argues, although specifically referring to tropical islands in his examples, the island has for centuries provided fiction writers with a metaphoric site upon which castaways undergo the process of regressing "to a temporarily infantile/savage condition from which to grow up anew" (1995: 128). Beer, too, charts this pattern, observing that the "triumph of most island fiction" is for the reconstructed individual to leave the island behind, no matter how profoundly it has, for the duration of the fiction, been "figured as body, house, theatre, self" (Beer, 2003: 42).

The central characters of *The Boys in the Island*, *Truce* and *The Alphabet of Light and Dark* are not castaways to their respective islands, but homecomers. Francis, Georgia and Essie each return to the island of their formative childhood years, which also functions as a locus of the true self, to reconstruct themselves so that they might proceed, finally, into adult life. When the adolescent Francis leaves the island/self behind and travels to the mainland, he is immediately beset by a "panic of the soul" (1958: 142). His disturbance is only deepened by the experiences that follow, and when his friends' drunken antics culminate in a fatal car crash, Francis is returned to Tasmania, to the island, in a final chapter tellingly titled "The Lost Child". Convalescing after a serious concussion, lying in his childhood bed, Francis dreams of, and smells, his childhood: "a pleasant smell, flat and clean, like paper" (1958: 196). Returned now to the locus of his authentic self, restored within himself, Francis is able to contemplate his future. Georgia, attempting to chart the way forward in her romantic life and to recover from the death of her father, seeks her mother's advice and is told, simply, "Go to The Island" (1994: 143). On the island, she reconfigures the events leading up to the death of her father: the event definitively marking for her the end of childhood. Essie, similarly, returns to Bruny Island to retell for herself the personal and historical narratives that underpin her identity. In each of these works of fiction, "the island space offers a refuge; it favours the exploration of a forgotten or buried authenticity, a return to who one really is" (Rousseau, *quoted in* Bongie, 1998: 21). Even Conrad, at the conclusion of his questing return to the island, acknowledges Tasmania as the "landscape inside me", the place that "set the terms of my life" (1988: 232).

Conclusion

In addition to similarities in their treatment of island settings, *The Boys in the Island*, *Truce* and *The Alphabet of Light and Dark* have in common that they are debut novels and that they semi-autobiographical. I have wondered whether it is the case that islands appear, to debut novelists, as somehow manageable; as capable of being "contained in the mind" (Koch, 1987: 111). Perhaps an island, like an Agatha Christie train or a countryside manor, seems to provide a new writer with a neatly demarcated space suitable for the limited cast and unified setting such that it feels safe to tackle in an apprentice work of fiction.

But I have more recently been tempted into the idea that the figure of the island is not only useful for the representation of the emergent self, but also for the construction of the emergent writer. Writers are often viewed (by themselves as much as by others) as somehow set apart. Writing is usually a lone activity, and a highly individualistic one. The writer is generally an isolated figure, whose very development depends on isolation: “a good many writers have had isolated childhoods”, observes Margaret Atwood (2002: 8). Prevalent in discourse about the role of the writer is the notion that the act of writing requires both the literal isolation that provides quiet time to write, and the emotional and social detachment that allows for keen observation. The constructed figures of the island and the writer have in common that they encapsulate the characteristics of detachment, individualism, distinctiveness, and isolation. And these are notions that persist, despite broad cultural moves towards greater recognition of the connectedness of writing, and of islands.

When Christopher Koch wrote his essay “A Tasmanian Tone”, he posed the question “Is there a Tasmanian literature?” (1987: 108). His answer was that although “few novelists and poets have yet written about Tasmania at all, and fewer still who were native born”, there is yet a “regional tone in writing set in Tasmania” (1987: 108). In the intervening decades, Tasmania has grown in its reputation as a place for writers, and for writing. It has proved an irresistible setting for writers both “native born”, as Koch would say, and from elsewhere. In recent years, Tasmania has been seen as punching above its weight on the Australian literary scene. Koch, in his essays and his fiction, was one of the first to configure Tasmania’s islandness as desirably distinctive, rather than depressingly different.

Desirable distinctiveness is surely a quality all emergent writers seek for themselves as they attempt to secure a place within a national literature. And so, I suspect that writers like Koch, Murray-Smith and myself write about the islands of our childhoods not only because those islands are the places that are uniquely accessible within our own “delicate archive[s] of childhood” (Murray-Smith, 2002: 5), but also because islands in general, and Tasmanian islands in particular, are well-positioned within the literary tradition to allow emergent writers to make their claims for individuality and distinctiveness.

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