|  |
| --- |
| **Ideas and Society Program:** **Bendigo Writers Festival – Session 3****The Reef – Professor Robert Manne interviewing Iain McCalman** |
|  |
| **Promo Introduction – Narrator** |
| A reef is not just a place, not just a collection of corals, not just a scientific phenomenon, it is a subjective experience, something that comes out of an engagement between a human and the place. Something that's part of the mind and the heart as much as it is the physical object. As a historian I find it so strange that while we know a lot about the natural history of this beautiful place, the seas, the cave, the Reef itself, we still know so very little about the human history of the Reef. In this series I'm going to be travelling the length and breadth of the Great Barrier Reef to explore how humans, past and present have shaped this marvellous Australian icon and how we as a nation have been shaped by it.  |
| **Boy** |
| Well Cook lucked out didn't he? |
| **Girl** |
| If he had of landed on that other side, the story may have been different? |
| **Boy** |
| You bet it was. |
| **Narrator** |
| It's a history found in some of the remotest places on earth. |
| **Boy** |
| He would have died on that strip of rock with the rest of the Chinese labourers. |
| **Narrator** |
| What we've been imagining is a myth. The man who created that myth for the Great Barrier Reef was Ted Banfield. And it's one that never fails to surprise and shock. This 14 year old boy has been abandoned and he's in a place like he's never seen before, it is utterly vast. What we've been imagining is a myth. The man who created that myth for the Great Barrier Reef was Ted Banfield. They see among the crowd of aborigines on the shore a wild looking, copper coloured man. At once they recognise him as a white man. And it's a history we almost never had, we nearly lost it to someone who wanted to mine it for oil and gas and it was only three concerned citizens who mobilised to save it at that point. They are ill qualified to fight this, they said in effect, "Bugger that". These were men and women, the Australians and the foreigners, the saints and the sinners who've shaped our ideas and our feelings about the greatest marine environment this planet has ever known. |
| **Professor Robert Manne** |
| It's my great pleasure to be involved in this session. Just case some of you don't know about Iain McCalman who is an extremely distinguished Australian academic I'll read of his career.He was born in Nyasaland in 1947, schooled in Zimbabwe, did his higher education in Australia, his second last book *Darwin's Amada* won three prizes, it was the basis of the TV series *Darwin's Brave New World.*  He is a Fellow of three learned academies, a former president of the Australian Academy of the Humanities, Director of the Humanities Research Centre ANU from 1995 to 2002, and won the inaugural Vice Chancellor's prize at ANU for Teaching Excellence, which I think you can see the teaching impulse in the short promotion for The Reef that we've just seen. Former Federation Fellow and currently Research Professor in History at the University of Sydney, Co-Director of the Sydney Environment Institute and an Officer of the Order of Australia, a very distinguished career.Just before I start Iain, maybe you could say a little bit about the films that you've made as part of this teaching impulse that you have because they may be of interest to people in the audience. |
| **Iain McCalman** |
| Yes thanks Robert. I hold the view that we've entered a visual age, an age of visual culture and especially younger people often don't get their ideas from books as much as they do from films or web sites and so on. So I've been trying to match, when writing a book, trying to match those kinds of products and so Darwin's Amada we did three museum exhibitions of it and we did a web site for the ABC and then we also did that TV series. And for The Reef there is at the moment somebody trying to get up an international film series, but I've made a web site which is especially pitched at students and school students and university students but at anybody. It's just lower case the-reef.com.au and it contains three films that I made that are part of the book, a lot of interviews from indigenous people such as the one you just saw a glimpse of and a lot of information about The Reef that I think could be useful for people when they're doing projects and that kind of thing. I'm proud to say it won a kind of 'Oscar' of web sites which is called a 'Webby', it won a Webby out of 12,000 international entries so. Anyway I'd be delighted if you send kids or yourselves or anyone else to it, those people who don't feel they can wade their way through my book. Thanks very much Robert. |
| **Robert Manne** |
| So I'm going to try and introduce as much as I can this book by the questions I ask. I just want to say something about my own reaction to the book first. And it begins with an admission, I agreed to conduct this conversation as invited by Rosemary Thorenson to do so before I'd read *The Reef* and as it happens my gamble paid off. The book I'm about to discuss with its author Iain McCalman is truly wonderful and I wouldn't say that if I didn't mean it. On the surface it's a straightforward book, twelve vivid stories told in chronological order of European encounters with the environs and indigenous peoples of the Great Barrier Reef beginning with the great explorer Captain Cook, concluding with the great marine biologist Charlie Veron. But just beneath the surface in my reading, it is in reality a very complex book, using these stories to show the changing ways in which the Reef has entered and impacted upon the Australian and world public, whose end result I think, is a portrait of the many dimensions of the Reef that now exist in what I would call 'our collective imagination'. Each new story builds upon the last, adding a dimension to the earlier portrait modifying but not negating what has come before, and I'm going to take a liberty, I don't know what Iain will think about this: The Reef is constructed in my view a little like a coral reef, layer upon layer. Iain traces our imaginative picture of the Great Barrier Reef through three phases that he calls: Terror, Nurture, Wonder. Although in fact I think he also records a more recent fourth which I would call Deepening Apprehension About Its Future. So if I can begin at the beginning Iain, tell us how you fell in love with The Great Barrier Reef? |
| **Iain McCalman** |
| It's kind of horror story actually. I was persuaded by the BBC and Discovery Channel to go on what I thought was a kind of film exploration of the reef and I was to be an expert to talk about the history. As it turned out it was really a kind of 'Big Brother at Sea', one of these reality TV's where the whole purpose of it was to give us an appalling time and frighten us and cause us to leave the ship and all these kinds of things. But it was conducted in the replica of the Endeavour under 18th Century conditions as far as was possible at that time and we were Able Seamen climbing 174 ft. up without a safety harness and on and on. But the fact of the matter is we sailed in Cook's wake if you like, in a wooden ship which doesn't disturb the sea nearly as much as a diesel screw and it was an absolutely ravishing experience. I mean I have, other than my own Lake Nasser and Malawi I've never come across a place of such extraordinary beauty and complexity. It's not really just a reef it's a country, I don't know how many of you realise that the reef, taken in its area is bigger than England and Ireland put together. Its bigger than Japan, it is one of the most extraordinary phenomenon on earth, it’s the only living thing that astronauts can see when they look out on the little blue oval that is our planet. So I fell in love with it and it was also whilst I was on there were indigenous people on board and I got to hear their stories about what the reef had meant to them and how their losses of their own country had altered their lives in the most unendurable way really. And the final thing was that I encountered on Lizard Island, a young biologist who introduced me for the first time to seeing coral that had been bleached – just skeletons like those white crosses on The Somme – these white skeletons. And I had really not taken seriously the idea that this massive place could be possibly vulnerable, and I remember feeling, I mean I was actually quite weepy after I heard that story and I took a little swim in the water at Lizard Island and it was so unbelievably beautiful and I kind of vowed at that point to do something about it. It took me about ten years to get around to it, so that's how it happened. |
| **Robert Manne** |
| And I want to ask you now about the writing of the book. You're a very admired scholarly historian, former head of the Academy of the Humanities and anyone reading this book, particularly historians (which I once sort of was, still am in a way), would recognise how much scholarly work there has gone into it. On the other hand it's obviously written in order to give pleasure to general readers as most scholarly books don't and I'm asking now in a way as an insider to the trade, how difficult did you find that combination of scholarship and readability, writerliness? |
| **Iain McCalman** |
| It is really difficult, I think I've still got an L Plate there. But it was about ten or twelve years ago I had a kind of epiphany and decided I was not going to continue my career writing for my own peers, that it was just completely pointless. I mean they shared my views anyway, that really what I should try to do is to reach to the general public and I mean I really hadn't done it before that and you get so used to using the language of your own peers and you don't realise how, in fact limited your communication powers are. So I'm still learning, but the last three books have been trade books and they call them, written for a general public and it's hard, I think it's hard. Especially when you're dealing with really complex science and I'm not even a scientist, to try and convey those things in a way that doesn't bore people or put them off and just the tedium of that kind of thing. So yeah, it's a challenge. |
| **Robert Manne** |
| And I promise the audience here and those who haven't read the book it's extraordinarily readable. I had the pleasure I read it in the South Island of New Zealand which is one of the most beautiful places on earth. Not overrun by tourists even and it was a perfect place to read it and the book gave me incredible pleasure. There's another question that occurred to me again and it's a slightly insiders question, you've condensed your book about the reef to twelve stories, more characters but twelve stories. Many of which involve three or four main protagonists. How difficult was the sifting process? It looks as if it's all natural but in fact you must have had to make very difficult decisions about what to include, what to exclude? Could you say a little bit about that? |
| **Iain McCalman** |
| Yes it's absolutely true. I had to; there's a lot of people on the cutting room floor, you know that just, in the end I wanted to, you're right I wanted to tell a story that, although it's made up of individual sections is a story that I feel connects and I use these three categories Robert is right, there is a fourth one, a shadow of a fourth one over it. But the three categories were in the beginning the reef was about terror, I mean Captain Cook hated it beyond description and almost everybody for half a century or more thought of the reef as hellish. Cook called it "An insane labyrinth, full of savages, full of coral, full of deadly creatures", and so on. And then I wanted to look at the people for whom the reef was a nurture, had always been something that nurtured them and they it, and that was the indigenous people. It's hard to get at their stories because they didn't write them down expect through some extraordinary, and I think little known stories about castaways, a woman and a man who lived with him for very long periods of time and in effect became indigenous. So that's how I picked these people. I did leave one person out because I could not write her story without utter revulsion.  |
| **Robert Manne** |
| Can you say? |
| **Iain McCalman** |
| Yes, I'm not going to say who it was… |
| **Robert Manne** |
| Oh… |
| **Iain McCalman** |
| … but it was a German naturalist an early German naturalist who I thought was very bold and brave person to be doing these things at this time, but I discovered that she had paid somebody to shoot an aboriginal person and skin them and send them back to Germany. I couldn't write that story, that story is for someone else to write. (Laughter).  |
| **Robert Manne** |
| Well let's begin to go through the book and get you to talk, not too long or we won't get to the end… |
| **Iain McCalman** |
| No no no… |
| **Robert Manne** |
| …about some of the characters that emerge and their relationship to the Reef. The book begins with two great explorers, the greatest probably James Cook but also Mathew Flinders, but their relationship to the Reef is very different I think and in a way the man who begins it seems to think of it not merely as a terror, Mathew Flinders. Could you say a little bit about the contrast between how these two explorers reacted to and felt about the Reef? |
| **Iain McCalman** |
| The thing we have to imagine ourselves is, imagine Cook's predicament is that he didn't know the Reef existed and so Flinders did and Cook actually sailed for 800 kilometres within the Reef without realising it existed. Because it was out of sight. It's like a big fish trap the Reef, on the Southern entrance it's more than 200 kilometres wide so you can sail, you bump into islands and things but, then it contracts, it contracts and he didn't really discover it until he hit it. And then they managed to save the boat but, for him it was a desperate case of survival. And then getting out of the Reef. I mean this boat can barely, I've sailed it, you can't manoeuver it, you know it can only sail about 90 degrees into the wind and it's extremely cumbersome and the Reef is a minefield. How Cook sailed through it without any charts is just a miracle of sailing. But Flinders was different, he was a young man, really ambitious, I think both a passionately literary person as well as a scientist. Whereas Cook was a very self-taught guy and he wanted to beat Cook in a sense. He wanted to do a better job than Cook of doing this and also going much more systematically through the Reef. So in a sense he has an advantage and in doing this and he also has the advantage of Cook's charts, but his charts are magnificent and it is true that Cook never really realised how big the Reef was. You know, really only thought of the Reef as from Cooktown onwards, when he'd bumped into it. Whereas Flinders is the first person to encompass the whole idea and to coin the word Barrier Reef.  |
| **Robert Manne** |
| And then Great Barrier Reef. |
| **Iain McCalman** |
| And then Great Barrier Reef, yeah. So that was their difference really.  |
| **Robert Manne** |
| And I want now to look at another contrast of two women who were shipwrecked, Eliza Fraser and Barbara Thompson. Now I know a little bit about Eliza Fraser, I to be honest had never heard of Barbara Thompson and my reading is, and if you could comment on this 1) Eliza Fraser has had an enormous impact on collective myth to do with Australia and to do with the Reef and to do with indigenous people. Barbara Thompson's story to me was much more interesting and yet it somehow failed to capture imagination. Could you tell us why Eliza Fraser plays such a role in our mythology and the story of Barbara Thompson and why it didn't enter popular mythology? |
| **Iain McCalman** |
| Well it's a sad comparison really because Eliza Fraser spent five weeks with indigenous people and she had a rough time, not because they treated her badly but because they lived in very rough circumstances and she had to share that. But in the end what happened was that she was a sensation and she found her story, her story became more and more embellished and it was a story about the brutality of the indigenous people, the fact that they murdered her, they tortured her; the implication was they sexually violated her. That story was then taken to Britain where a, in effect a kind of hack journalist… |
| **Robert Manne** |
| An incredible story. |
| **Iain McCalman** |
| … yeah, a hack journalist then turned it into a real rip snorter and that's the one that has lived on. And we've taken that one up because of it seemed to be, because it's salacious in a way because of the sex element but also because it's a story of the brutality of the indigenous people. Barbara Thompson, or as she was known by the people of the Torres Strait who looked after her Gioma, she was young she was only 13 when she was ship wrecked. |
| **Robert Manne** |
| Tell the audience roughly the years of Barbara Thompson. |
| **Iain McCalman** |
| Yeah, so Barbara Thompson's not that long after, not that long. She's really in the 1830's, 1820's – 1830's. She's ship wrecked, she spends five years with the people in the Torres Strait and again nearly loses her language, lives as a Torres Strait Islander. Is treated very well and never ever denies that. She's treated extremely well, she was treated like a pet in a way and spared from extra hard work, given an island to herself and so on. And so when the story of her rescue, she was rescued and taken back to Sydney, it just sunk without a trace, I mean no one wanted to know a good news story. |
| **Robert Manne** |
| And she was questioned at detail by a very talented ethnographer. |
| **Iain McCalman** |
| Yes, that's the extraordinary thing about her, it was a very, very talented and sympathetic person who spent; was on board the boat, he was the ships artist and he asked her in detail about the life, so there were thirty manuscript volumes about, and with the most incredible drawings as well. And that has just disappeared. And so what has stood is the five week sojourn, that has been made into films and been made into operas and it's been huge painting series. Gioma, no-one knows about her but there is plenty to tell. |
| **Robert Manne** |
| Just something I hadn't planned to ask but I am now curious. And what's happened to these thirty volumes? |
| **Iain McCalman** |
| Well they're still there in the Mitchell Library. |
| **Robert Manne** |
| Have scholars worked much on them? |
| **Iain McCalman** |
| Well ten years ago, maybe a bit more than that, probably more like twenty years ago a talented anthropologist took extracts from them and wrote this book, but here again it was an academic book. Most of our academic books have what two hundred readers, if you're lucky, so it was never read, it's a terrific book. |
| **Robert Manne** |
| So you actually introduced the story to the public? |
| **Iain McCalman** |
| In the popular sense yes, in the popular sense. I also did go to the manuscripts because they're much richer than the extracts but that book of extracts is very, very good and very carefully annotated. A great piece. |
| **Robert Manne** |
| Someone here might be interested in following it up, including me. Another contrast if I could, there's one chapter which is about two men who lived amongst the indigenous people, an Englishman James Morrell and a Frenchmen Narcisse Pelletier. Rather than tell the whole story, the bit that I'd like you to talk about which fascinated me was, how difficult both of them in quite different ways found it when they returned to what is called 'civilisation', after their experiences and the alienation in a way, both seemed to have in the world that they now inhabited having lived in one world and come back to another, can you say a little bit about both? |
| **Iain McCalman** |
| Yes I'll just say very quickly. They had both spent, curiously both spent seventeen years with indigenous people. Morrell was slightly older, so it probably had less impact on him, he was already in his twenties whereas Narcisse Pelletier was fourteen, so was much more transformative. And Morrell did go back voluntarily, Morrell was experiencing, he was in the middle of the great wave of pastoralism in the area, it's really an area of the Barrier Reef, I'm just trying to think how to describe exactly where it is. It's in the Southern end of the Reef and is now very much cane country. But he went back voluntarily and he was more or less welcomed and spent, went back and lived I think for about two years; two and a half years as a white man who was returned. But it was a terrible experience for him, he was treated by the whites as an emissary or a secret spy of the aborigines and by the aborigines as someone who had let them down. I mean he came and said "I will stop these people from shooting you and taking away your land, I will try". So he had a very sad, and I think as a result died after only two and a half years. But Pelletier's story is much, much sadder. I mean Pelletier was a really assimilated indigenous person, very, very much admired in his tribe and almost certainly married with children and he was seen in 1875 by a beche-de-mer, a group of white people collecting beche-de-mer, and captured, they rescued him at gun point and then he was actually manacled. He tried to escape four times and after a long period of time he was taken back to France where his family were, but his family found him repulsive, I mean he had scarifications on his chest, he had an elongated ear with the ear lobe. He was to them a savage. The first thing they did was to have him taken into a Catholic Church and have him exorcised. So he was miserable and they made him a lighthouse keeper and he just stared out to sea thinking about the sand beach where he'd come from, his home, his people. And so in effect he died of a broken heart, he had almost no friends, so I think it's a really sad story. It's almost like the first stolen child in an odd kind of way. |
| **Robert Manne** |
| Also, as you're talking if there's a film maker in Australia it would be a wonderful film.  |
| **Iain McCalman** |
| Yes, I think it would |
| **Robert Manne** |
| A Werner Herzog type of film, it's a haunting story. |
| **Iain McCalman** |
| It's a haunting story and it's been very little known because he spoke to a medical man when he first went back, he was taken into hospital to see if he, how he was, and he told his story and his story is very, very interesting about the indigenous life, the maritime life of a young man. But it was in French and so it wasn't translated into English until 2009, so it hasn't spread into Australia really. |
| **Robert Manne** |
| I'd love to go on further but we must move on. Then I want you to talk about the two 19th Century scientists who deal with Dukes and William Kent. I must say again, Dukes is a very attractive figure, William Kent's story is fascinating. Perhaps a little about their scientific contribution because both seems very important but also I can't resist asking you to tell a little bit about the pre-history of William Kent, which again I have never heard this story and it's fascinating. |
| **Iain McCalman** |
| So yeah, William Kent, Dukes and fortunately I've got a student now at last writing a PhD on Dukes. Because he was the first person, he was a very sympathetic geologist who came out here with a British survey ship… |
| **Robert Manne** |
| Quite early? |
| **Iain McCalman** |
| …yes in the 1840's, and he actually really liked indigenous people and tried to learn language and had very good relationships with them and with other people in the Torres Strait and in effect he has three sources of fame. He was the first scientist to really understand what the Great Barrier Reef was and to have some sense of how it came into being, so his science is extraordinary, but he was the first person that I know of to really love the environment, he fell in love with the beauty of the Reef and wrote about it in the most moving way. And thirdly, who had this very strong sympathy for the indigenous people as an ethnographer, he's too is completely forgotten and part of what I want my student to do is to explain to me why this man was so forgotten. He was a contemporary of Darwin and Huxley and all those people, friends of theirs, who also came out here, so what happened to this man? |
| **Robert Manne** |
| And he wrote a good book? |
| **Iain McCalman** |
| Oh yes, very good book, very good book. Very positive book, it's the only one of the survey voyages that has never been published because it's all about how good the indigenous people were. |
| **Robert Manne** |
| A theme is beginning to emerge. |
| **Iain McCalman** |
| You know, honestly I had no sense of this when I began the book but at the end of it I just… William Kent is a bizarre story. |
| **Robert Manne** |
| Late 19th Century? |
| **Iain McCalman** |
| Yeah, late 19th Century. He had a very, very difficult, unpleasant father, who in effect persecuted his mother and also gave her syphilis which was passed down to William Kent in a way, congenitally and his younger sister. Sorry an older sister and the two kids first tried to run away, they had a step mother brought who was the governess, who openly dealt while the mother was there. They tried to run away when they were eleven and twelve, it's a story that gets into Dickens' last novel and they were brought back. And today we would say they were children who had been tormented, psychologically and utterly tormented. Anyway, in 1860 when he was just about fourteen and his sister was fifteen, one night they secretly went out and took away their three and a half year old half-brother and cut his throat. And they were never, the sister who adored her brother confessed and took the whole wrap and kept quiet so that he could have a scientific career. Anyway, to cut a long story short and the relevance to the Reef is that, he was a very tormented man and he was never caught, his sister spent twenty-two years in prison and when she did come out, they all came out to Australia. I think that they had a reconciliation and the sister became a nurse here, which eventually, I just have to tell you this. When she was one hundred, received a letter of congratulation from the Queen, at the same time she was in Madam Tussauds wax works as the worst murderess… (Laughter). Anyway the thing about him is that he fell in love with the Reef. The Reef was his redemption in a way and he produced the most magnificent book because he was a photographer, so is the first photographer of the Reef, first really intense science of the Reef and he did paintings of these glorious fish, coloured fish and the sea creatures that are all there in plates at the back. They're chromolithographs, and so that's why he enters into the story, but he is a man I think, who is redeemed by this. |
| **Robert Manne** |
| A redemption story. |
| **Iain McCalman** |
| Yes. |
| **Robert Manne** |
| And you also as a minor footnote as we academics say, he seems to have created the idea of cultured pearls. |
| **Iain McCalman** |
| Yes he did. |
| **Robert Manne** |
| Worked out how you could do it. |
| **Iain McCalman** |
| Yeah, he worked out how it did. I think his formula was eventually stolen actually, and went to the Japanese but he had worked it out and there is detail to show that. Yeah. |
| **Robert Manne** |
| Again, my ignorance, I didn't know this but the great scientist of coral reef formation is unexpectedly Charles Darwin and partly I'd like you to say something about where his theories now stand, but before that you tell again a fascinating story of the son of a Harvard Professor of Zoology, the son is Alex Agassiz, I didn't know how to pronounce it. The son is Alex, the father Louis was a Creationist at the time of Darwin and much maligned particularly by the German Haeckel, and his son Alex in a way seems to spend his life on this quixotic mission to prove Darwin wrong in order to, as it were clear his father's name. |
| **Iain McCalman** |
| Vindicate his father. |
| **Robert Manne** |
| The mockery that Haeckel not Darwin had visited upon him. Again, there are two parts of the question, firstly the story of Agassiz and secondly where Darwin's theory now stands as a standard in the science? |
| **Iain McCalman** |
| So Darwin's Theory of Coral Reefs was his first contribution as a scientist. He wrote it long before he wrote The Origin of Species, in fact he wrote it on board ship when he was out here in the Southern Hemisphere in 1835 when he was travelling to New Zealand from Australia he drafted it. And it was his most deductive, I mean it's a brilliant deduction you can't believe it. But normally he's very, very careful about his research, but he got this idea. Anyway the idea did prevail for quite a long time and what happened really was that Agassiz decided he was going to go round to all the coral reefs of the world, (he was a millionaire made a lot of money in mining) and he went round the world in this mission to try and prove Darwin wrong and it revived the whole controversy of evolution again. So the fights that went on at the time of The Origin of Species were being refought over The Barrier Reef, so it's another area where the, this is when the Reef comes into global comprehension by the scientists of the world. |
| **Robert Manne** |
| What was the issue in fact? The anti-Darwinists, what were they trying to say? |
| **Iain McCalman** |
| They were trying to say… Darwin's theory is simply this: because the little creatures that create the limestone that makes reefs, have to have light they've got little plants in them that achieve photosynthesis and if they don't have light they can't create the oxygen that gives them the energy to build against the great forces of the sea. So Darwin says, "How on earth can they have done it, I mean these reefs are going down, down to the depths of the ocean, how on earth could they have done it, there's no light there?" And he realises that there must have been subsidence, very slow subsidence of the ocean floor so that these little creatures were always seeing light as they went down and then they died of course, but there were always some on top of them, so that the whole of the Barrier Reef down below is as a dead piece of rock in effect, limestone with a living crust always there. An absolutely ingenious idea and they refuted it, they were saying, "No it had to be volcanoes that were coming up, or the falling of animals you know hundreds of limestone animals were building little mountains underneath." So that's what the controversy was, it's very, very hard to prove. It wasn't proven because you have to drill, drill right down to find out if this really was coral all the way down. If it was coral all the way down Darwin's right. If it's not coral then he's wrong. And it wasn't until they were doing atomic, the Americans were doing atomic explosions and things in the South Pacific and then drilling down to see the results that they actually proved that Darwin was right. |
| **Robert Manne** |
| But still the work in this quixotic campaign to vindicate his father, that work still mattered? |
| **Iain McCalman** |
| It did, yes it actually produced an ecology, of the first really ecological study of a coral reef and a coral island. It came out of this and that was in Murray Island in the Torres Strait in 1913. Yeah. |
| **Robert Manne** |
| So we're moving now in our coral building to the 20th Century and from science in a way to the imaginative vision of the Great Barrier Reef and one aspect of that is the Paradise Island the tropical island, and you tell again a wonderful story of Ted Banfield, Dunk Island, Confessions of a Beachcomber. Could you tell us a bit about what you think Banfield added to this collective quality of the Great Barrier Reef? |
| **Iain McCalman** |
| Yes, Banfield is the first person to tell us that the Great Barrier Reef and environments of coral reefs was a paradise, not a piece of hellish terror. He really is the first person and that's when he publishes the Confessions of a Beachcomber is 1908, so it's pretty late. But that book was read all around the world and Banfield's books were read all round the world. He was a journalist in Townsville who had a bit of a mental and physical breakdown and the doctor gave him three months to live and he decided, 'Damn it, I'm going to go and live out of the rat race." And so they went to Dunk Island with one indigenous person who really is very important in introducing them to, and in fact in allowing them to live by fishing and so on. But anyway they went to this island and Banfield's physique just completely changed, he became incredibly healthy and this exponent of how really healthy it was to swim in coral waters and to live on fish and to live in this beautiful environment. And those books I think, were the equivalent in America of Theroux writing about Walden and it's the beginning of the time when we start to look at nature and these wild places, as places that can restore our soul and our physiques and so on and we're still there aren't we? But Banfield is so crucial in that story. |
| **Robert Manne** |
| And yet it's slightly a more complex story than a man… partly he goes there because he's feeling a failure in other ways and partly there's a sort of alternative vision of tropical paradise which is the kind of Island Viceroy where he creates an avenue of trees on a hill… |
| **Iain McCalman** |
| Yes, he has rather grandiose visions of himself as receiving the governor and that's right, he did. |
| **Robert Manne** |
| Was the book a literary success? |
| **Iain McCalman** |
| Yes it was, it was. It's slightly overwritten, I mean to read it now and his wife Bertha who is a wonderful down to earth woman is kind of sustaining him in his foibles as always, said, "For God's sake I wish he wasn't so flowery. Why doesn't he just write it as it is?" But… |
| **Robert Manne** |
| She also caused him to become resilient after the great storms at the end of the First World War that blew Dunk Island away. |
| **Iain McCalman** |
| I mean Dunk Island is now blown away almost every five years, but in 1918 they had the first really of what are now these successively, more and more intense, cyclones that are now damaging these places and they just completely wrecked the island and they just wanted to give up. They were in their sixties and Banfield had another almost breakdown but his wife Bertha one day found this little piece of wood that had been torn and was budding again. She said, "Come over here Ted and look at this," and he looked at it and they decided to stay on and see nature rebuild the island. It's very, very moving actually. |
| **Robert Manne** |
| And another aspect of it that interested me a lot is that he seems to have deepened his relationship with the indigenous people that worked amongst him. |
| **Iain McCalman** |
| Absolutely, absolutely, in fact depended on them that's the untold story of Banfield, because Banfield is recognised as an early environmentalist, as someone who really came to understand the environment both of the sea and the coral and the forest. But it was taught to him by the indigenous people. |
| **Robert Manne** |
| There's again, something I have to read when I get the time. My favourite essay of any Australian of all time is an essay by William Stanner called Durmugam, which is a long essay about an aboriginal man, unromanticised, deeply respectful, incredible empathy for a different world that Stanner shows. And there was a passage on the chapter on Banfield where he's writing about… remind me… of the aboriginal man that had… |
| **Iain McCalman** |
| Tom |
| **Robert Manne** |
| … which reminded me of Stanner in that sense of the celebration and seeing a world that is not ours but hopefully to be respected and having capacities we don't have and so on. |
| **Iain McCalman** |
| I'll just tell you one story that arises out of that. Tom showed Ted Banfield an incredible gallery of aboriginal art that was hidden in the rocks, he calls it several galleries, and he describes them in a lot of detail and Ted used to take people to do them, but they're lost again. Because the island has been smashed up by these cyclones and there is nobody who knows where this gallery is anymore in that it's all overgrown. |
| **Robert Manne** |
| Anyhow, it is a wonderful chapter. If we can now, as we're trying to build the picture of the Reef, we get to the period after the Second World War and the dark time. Joh Belke Petersen and the Queensland Government where the Reef is seen as an opportunity for oil and mining and again, I think one of the really great figures in our history recent history is Judith Wright the poet. She's played an extraordinarily important role both in environmentalism and in indigenous questions, a wonderful book, *Cry of the Dead,* which she wrote about her family and their experiences as pastoralists a haunting book. |
| **Iain McCalman** |
| In the Armadale region. |
| **Robert Manne** |
| But again, you didn't know this, there is a partnership that's mentioned in your promo of three, an artist and ecologist Len Fox, |
| **Iain McCalman** |
| Len Webb. |
| **Robert Manne** |
| Len Webb, sorry and Judith Wright. |
| **Iain McCalman** |
| I find this so inspirational because apart from anything else, I've always decried the gulf between the sciences and the arts. I just think we have to work together if we're going to solve environmental problems, but here you have this extraordinary alliance between this bloke John Busst who was a dropout painter a bohemian painter. |
| **Robert Manne** |
| A Montsalvat kind of? |
| **Iain McCalman** |
| Yeah a Montsalvat, ex-Montsalvat guy and Judith Wright the poet and Len Webb who was a scientist of forests of the forests and they became very, very close friends and it was these three who orchestrated the fight against Joh Bjelke-Petersen and the government and of course also the oil interests. I mean 80% of the Reef had been given over to oil mining, it had been listed for oil exploration, drilling and mining – 80% of the Reef. And one of his ministers, the Minister for Environment when he was accosted by the fact that there's been a terrible oil spill and the birds and everything were dying, he said, "There's nothing wrong with oil, it's a protein the fish can feed on it perfectly well."  |
| **Robert Manne** |
| A friend of humanity like… |
| **Iain McCalman** |
| Yeah, that's right. Anyway, that 'Save the Reef' campaign did save the Reef. A direct consequence of it was that the Reef became a National Reserve and then listed by the World Heritage Commission and that issue is now back on the table and the whole fight that they thought they had won is having to be refought now with this Adani, this enormous Galilee Coal Mine. Do you know that that coal mine will produce enough CO2 from that coal mine to make it the 7th greatest producer of CO2 in the world? It will be bigger than most other countries, that single coal mine! And in addition to that the coal mine is going to go, the Reef is not designed for huge flows of enormous ships, it's a shallow complicated place and so it's going to smash up reefs, there's going to be oil spills, there's going to be dredging all the time to keep it shallow enough for all these ships. We're back, it's Judith Wright, Judith Wright finished that book saying, "We have won the fight", but I fear the fight… |
| **Robert Manne** |
| She had a nice phrase for it, "An end without a finale". |
| **Iain McCalman** |
| Exactly. |
| **Robert Manne** |
| And she was absolutely right that the victory was temporary and its now, as you say, it's – my daughter has been involved in that campaign as part of AYCC but Greenpeace as well. It's I think by far the most important environment struggle now going on in Australia and it's one of the most important in the world |
| **Iain McCalman** |
| It is and it has mobilised people, one thing I've been very touched by is the reception of my book in the United States. |
| **Robert Manne** |
| Oh, say a little bit about that. |
| **Iain McCalman** |
| It's just that I assumed it wouldn't get much mileage because they see the Reef as an Australian thing. |
| **Robert Manne** |
| It's not American. |
| **Iain McCalman** |
| It's not American. |
| **Robert Manne** |
| I've just been in America. |
| **Iain McCalman** |
| But in fact, it's had tremendous reception and it was reviewed in all the major: New York Times, New York Times Review, Wall Street, The Economist had it as the 'Book of the Year'. |
| **Robert Manne** |
| Tim Flannery did in a review of books. |
| **Iain McCalman** |
| Yes, I was really very moved and I get letters from the United States saying, "Australia is the custodians of the most beautiful and important organism in the world and we are as they say, 'rooting for you' ". |
| **Robert Manne** |
| Which leads me to the last chapter of the book which is about the marine biologist Charlie Veron and you begin the chapter with a very sombre moment really, which is a lecture, Sir David Attenborough is the Chair and The Royal Society which goes back to Joseph Banks and Captain Cook. You're writerly enough not to remind us in a way of the symmetry, but anyway Charlie Veron talks to them and really tells in forty minutes, that audience that the Reef is under threat and that it may not survive this century. |
| **Iain McCalman** |
| That's right. |
| **Robert Manne** |
| Say a little bit about Charlie Veron, again I love the story about his life and how he's come to this position. |
| **Iain McCalman** |
| He's an extraordinary character Charlie, he's a very Australian there's a larrikin maverick element about him, always was through his scientific career. He's called Charlie, his real name is John Veron because his teacher used to bring in all these creatures to show people, worms and all sorts of things and his teacher said you know, ironically one day, "You're Charlie Darwin, you're like Charlie Darwin" and all the kids called him 'Charlie, Charlie'. So Charlie it's been ever since and in fact he is I call my chapter, 'The Darwin of the Coral' and in fact he won the Darwin Medal which is the highest medal you can get for coral science or for anything in the Darwin field. But he is in many ways, what was special about Charlie is that he's a scientist whose passion was expressed initially or even his methods were diving, he was a diver so he observed the Reef, he was not a lab scientist. He spent 7,000 hours underwater in the Reef. Nobody knows the Reef more than him and in fact he's responsible for naming 20% of the world's corals. And he's lived in Townsville in a little bush place like that, he's a very humble but absolutely passionate scientist and a really great scientist. His daughter died, his daughter was drowned and it was a very deeply traumatic experience for him, and I think my own interpretation is that in the aftermath of his daughter's death he became more conscious of death and he's started to think about what was happening to the Reef, it's dying. And so he becomes I think, one of the great prophets of what is happening to the Reef now, he's very pessimistic I have to say. But he's asked by The Royal Society to address the best scientists of the time at this particular moment with Attenborough as the Chair, and he gives this talk and it's very grim but moving moment and beautifully rendered because he's again one of these scientists who is determined to get the story across to people. So that's Charlie, is the last person in the book in a way bringing us up to today, bringing us up to what threats we face now and he continues to campaign. |
| **Robert Manne** |
| Now I must, I don't know what time we're meant to end? |
| **Iain McCalman** |
| It's probably now, yes in five minutes. |
| **Robert Manne** |
| I'm sorry, I was intending fifteen minutes at this point of questions from you, I'm extremely sorry that… Oh no-one told me there was a clock in front here telling me, (Laughter), I'm very sorry I did intend to allow some time for questions, on the other hand it's a very rich book and I think it's been an extraordinarily enjoyable hour that we've spent listening to Iain. |
| **Iain McCalman** |
| Thank you. |
| **Robert Manne** |
| Thank you very much. (Applause). |
|  |
|  |
|  |
|  |
|  |
|  |
|  |
|  |
|  |
|  |
|  |
|  |
|  |
|  |
|  |
|  |
|  |
|  |
|  |
|  |
|  |
|  |