

TO THE ISLANDS

First published by Macdonald, 1958.

In May 1957 Stow travelled to the north Kimberley to take up a post as a storeman at the Forrest River Aboriginal mission, where he stayed for a little more than three months. This became the setting for his next novel, completed just after his 22nd birthday, *To the Islands*, an assured and poised work that repays prolonged attention and still speaks with immediacy. Its structure is simple: it recounts a crisis in the life of an ageing, disenchanted missionary superintendent, Heriot. The narrative is staccato. Its climax comes when Heriot casts a stone at an Aboriginal man in his care whom he fiercely dislikes. Heriot believes he has killed his victim, and flees north on a death journey that doubles as a quest for insight.

Source: Nicolas Rothwell, Senior Writer, The Australian
www.theaustralian.com.au/arts/review/randolph-stows-test-classics-five-reprints



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Abridged Review by Nicolas Rothwell.

In *To the Islands* Stow succeeded in portraying his aboriginal characters in spare and unaffected narrative. He caught the way they spoke; he caught the ancient deep red cliffs and ranges; he caught the sun and heat and shimmer of the far north. The novel was something new in Australian literature, both in its setting and its treatment of the frontier. It was much admired on publication and won the Miles Franklin Award. Stow wrote a revealing preface for a new edition in 1982, explaining his wish to present the mission in a positive light and agonizing over reports that had come his way of troubles at Forrest River: how sad he would be now, given the collapse of the community into a crisis of sexual abuse and its dissolution about four years ago by order of the state government.

Source: <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/arts/review/randolph-stows-test-classics-five-reprints>

I remember first reading *To the Islands* as an undergraduate in the 1980's. I was amazed at how Stow managed to evoke such beauty and majesty into landscape and people while narrating a tale of such pain and anguish.

Source: Bernadette Brennan, Lecturer, University of Sydney
www.textpublishing.com.au/blog

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Abridged Review by Tony Hassall

Set in the harsh landscape of northern Australia, where Stow worked at the Anglican mission to the Umbalgari people in 1957, *To the Islands* explores some of the darker recesses of the European annexation of Australia with an authority that the passing of half a century has not diminished. It tells of the last days of the ageing, Lear-like missionary Stephen Heriot, who has devoted his life to atoning for a massacre of Aborigines at Onmalmeri. The legend of this massacre, which is closely based on the historical Umbali massacre of 1926, focuses on the continuing conflicts between European settlers and the indigenous inhabitants. The alienation of the Europeans in a landscape they have claimed but not yet truly possessed is reflected in the inner alienation of Heriot, who has lost belief and love, and finds himself imprisoned in a sterile ritual of atonement. Heriot is a richly human character engaged in an agonized search for a home in an alien universe.

To the Islands enjoyed immediate critical and popular success, and rapidly acquired the status of an Australian classic. In recognition of this, Stow revised it in 1981, eliminating what he saw as some youthful faults.

Source: "Vanishing Wunderkind – The great oeuvre of the enigmatic Stow" by Tony Hassall

