When Blackbirds Sing

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With an introduction by Dorothy Green

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INTRODUCTION

Few modern Australian writers can have directed such savage, pointed criticism, in books and in letters to newspapers, at the leaders of State, Church and the professions as Martin Boyd. He denounced in print Lloyd George, Baldwin and Churchill, generals and newspaper tycoons. He wrote furious letters to two Archbishops of Canterbury and recorded his disillusionment with a third. His letters to Archbishop Temple on the saturation bombing of Hamburg and Dresden do not suggest that the cleric got the best of the argument. Boyd, for one thing, had first-hand experience of the appalling trench warfare of the first world war, as well as his service with the Royal Flying Corps at a time when the British were losing fifty pilots in training a day. Few critics indeed who wrote with such controlled passion have had their criticisms so abundantly vindicated by subsequent history and the work of professional historians.

Boyd's most important fiction, *Lucinda Brayford*, the four Langton novels, underpinned by the two versions of his autobiography, *A Single Flame* and *Day of My Delight* each describe a great arc, an emblem of the tragedy of our times: the movement to total disillusionment with authority. In his boyhood and youth, within his own family and at school in Melbourne, Boyd heard the voice of authority as the voice of the Good, its commands based on reason and justice. From 1914 onwards, after the old men of Europe had either murdered, or wrecked the lives of, a whole generation of young people, the voice of authority sounded to him like the voice of Evil. The second world war, the Depression between wars, Korea,

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Vietnam, none of the consequences which flowed from the first European 'civil war', did anything to change his view. A considerable part of his energy as a man and an artist was devoted to preventing the further slaughter of a generation of youth. By then of course, the nature of war and its targets had changed.

This is not an aspect of Boyd's work which receives much critical attention. Society does not like to hear about what Boyd called 'the sickness at the top'. It is not indeed the first aspect of his work which strikes a reader new to his novels, though it is present in his most ephemeral pot-boilers. One cannot help being carried along by the easy flow of the narrative, the atmosphere of leisured enjoyment and social sophistication, the constant shimmer of wit and sheer fun, even against a darkening background, the brief but exquisite glimpses of the natural world at whichever end of the globe his Anglo-Australian characters happen to be at the moment. The people he writes about belong mainly to a social group living in what might be called fortunate circumstances, and that conditions us to believe we are reading about fortunate circumstances. It is a shock to look back at the work as a whole and realize that we have been reading about the disappearance of reason, truth and justice from the public life of the Western world. The little enclave of colonial gentry in the Langton novels, always slightly out of step with their society, are really a microcosm of European civilization in the classic sense; their hereditary connections with English branches of their family simply make the point clearer. What happened to this forgotten group of emigrants in Port Phillip from the 1840s and 1850s onwards, their displacement as leaders of Melbourne society by Western-district graziers, their engulfment by the cosmopolitan adventurers of the gold-rushes, was a pale portent of what was to be repeated in the tragic mode in Europe between 1914 and 1918,

leaving power in the hands of those who had no concept of responsibility either to the land or to the future.

Hardly any American or British readers today and few Australians are aware that Australia ever had such a class of emigrants as they meet in Boyd's novels; these novels, indeed, have done most to keep their memory alive. Martin Boyd once remarked that the British were interested in Australia only when there was a war on; the observation provides more than one occasion for satire in these novels. Certainly many educated Australians even today are surprised when they go to work or study in England or America at how little their kinsmen know about this country, and, in the case of the British, how little they wish to know. If the British have an image of Australians at all, it is a distorted one acquired from the Australian comedian Barry Humphries, implying that Sydney and Melbourne are populated by male and female Dame Edna Everages. It is rare for an Englishman who has not visited Australia to know that its capital is Canberra. A few have some dim memory that Australia was the place to which England once sent its convicts, but the implications of the fact for themselves are lost on them. The Americans know little more, but, from mixed motives, display more willingness to find out. They however never refer to the fact that the American colonies had a much longer association with the convict system than Australia did, one no less cruel.

Australians have never helped to dispel these historical falsifications. They have been so much in love with their homespun equalitarianism that they have ignored the small, but valuable, contribution to their culture made by the younger sons, or cadet branches of 'good families', the occasional royal bastards under assumed names, the members of the 'acceptable' professions and their wives, without which the tapestry of Australian history would

lack a rich thread. The best way to assess this contribution is to imagine what Australia might have been like if it had not been made. There would then have been no antidote at all to the ethic of Calvinist utilitarianism that prevailed in the middle classes, which, like their counterparts in Britain, believed that riches were a sign of godliness. Like every other type of emigrant, the 'gentry' wished to better themselves financially, and in some cases used methods of doing so which did them little credit. But they did not automatically put money before everything else, as the class that displaced them did, and this was one of the reasons the gentry found it hard to survive, unless they were willing to marry into the commercial classes. Individuals might fall short, but as a class they were the bearers of values, which however attenuated they had become, were in origin Renaissance-Greek. One of these values was a code of civilized behaviour which made for ease of intercourse in social life, a code which they adapted with considerable tact to new social conditions. It was as if the wide cloudless skies and the brilliant sunlight of the country itself had rid the English conventions of their stuffiness and left that endearing mixture of order and informality, which characterizes, or used to characterize, some of the older Australian station homesteads. Boyd draws a contrast, for instance, in *Outbreak of Love* between the simple ease of manners of the governors of the early days compared with the increasing taste for pomp and ceremony of their twentieth-century counterparts.

The main opposition set up in each of Boyd's principal novels is between those who do things simply because they take pleasure in them and those who do things from some other motive, because it will advance their career, or push them up the social ladder, or because 'it is good for them'. One consequence of not having as a rule to work for a living, is that one can work at what one enjoys

and this encourages the belief that life was meant to be enjoyed. The idea that the world was beautiful and we were meant to enjoy living in it was for Boyd a primary distinction between the aristocrat and the bourgeois. The characters he most admires are most often to be seen taking pleasure in one another's company, at picnics, sketching parties, home-made amusements; sharpening their wits on one another at dinner, listening to music, swimming, wandering in the bush, all without any sense that time matters. The idea that time is money is absent from Boyd's scale of values and its rejection is part of the search for truth he is conducting in these novels. His purpose is to analyse ruthlessly what was left of permanent worth in the aristocratic tradition he had been brought up to respect, an analysis he brings to an unexpected conclusion in the novel *Such Pleasure*, the story of a snobbish woman intent on reaching the top of the social ladder; a character, he said, who was based on the short-story writer Barbara Baynton.

Boyd's subject matter has inevitably led to misunderstanding and accusations of snobbishness. His notions of class were entirely his own, vertical not horizontal, according to his half-serious division between Right and Left in *The Cardboard Crown*. On the Right were all the people who liked their work, quite apart from the money it brought in: farmers, artists, craftsmen, musicians, sailors, clergymen. On the Left were all those to whom money was of supreme importance, stock-brokers, businessmen, anyone who believed that 'living matter was something they could control like a machine', for profit. What he ultimately valued in people, as he did in books, was the degree of their humanity. 'Good birth' counted for little with him if lovingkindness was absent. One of his most sympathetic portraits, for example, occurs in an early novel *Dearest Idol*. The most attractive and intelligent character in the book is the young wife,

kind, straightforward and without pretentiousness, the daughter of a self-made rich man of no education. Beside her, her 'gentleman' husband cuts a poor figure. Another instance is the treatment of Helena's bourgeois father Bert Craig, in *A Difficult Young Man*, whose simplicity and humane feeling give him his high moment of tragic dignity. The real targets of Boyd's satire are the dishonest, the hypocritical and above all, the cruel. Snobbishness, by contrast, is venial, since at least it has an element of aspiration in it, ignoble though it may be.

Intertwined with his examination of the 'aristocratic' is Boyd's analysis of the role of heredity in human behaviour, a major theme in *The Montforts*, *Lucinda Brayford* and the Langton novels. His aim was to reveal the persistence of hereditary traits, over long periods of time, and to suggest the possibility of inheriting similar patterns of experience, as in the case of Alice Langton and her daughter, Diana, who are both exploited by the men they love. All the material he needed was at his hand in the family he was born into. He said once, it appeared to him that when he was young the world was composed entirely of his relatives. His father's family, the Boyds, and his mother's, the à Becketts, formed a numerous and close-knit tribe. Ancient and distinguished on both sides, the à Becketts in particular retained in the colonies an inherited streak of rebellious eccentricity, combined with an artistic talent which sometimes amounted to genius. They also had a highly developed sense of the ridiculous and a ready wit; one of Boyd's great-uncles helped to found London *Punch*. In the remote family background, a collateral connection with St Thomas à Beckett 'hung like a glittering ornament on the family tree', while on his father's side was a distant connection with Dean Swift. The Boyd ancestors, Irish aristocrats of Scottish origin, played a turbulent part in history, but during the eighteenth century

married women who brought a rich gift into the family: great painterly ability combined with scientific curiosity, which has endured to this day. One of Boyd's cousins was a biologist who became the first woman lecturer at the University of Melbourne; in the art world, the name 'Boyd' in Australia today is a household word. Arthur and Guy Boyd, Martin's nephews, have overseas reputations as painter and sculptor; their younger brother David is equally well-known as potter and painter, and the younger generations are making their mark in many directions, including music. The late Robin Boyd, another nephew, was one of Australia's most famous architects, a profession for which Martin himself was training before the first war.

From his mother's side of the family, which included a long line of judges, barristers, and Victoria's first Chief Justice, Martin Boyd inherited a passion for reason and justice, and a disconcerting logic which could still disturb a dinner-table, when he was well into his seventies.

Boyd's father, Arthur Merric Boyd, and his mother, Emma à Beckett, were both fine painters, and their children all grew up in an atmosphere in which it was as natural to paint and sketch as to breathe. As described in *The Cardboard Crown*, his eldest brother died young; the next brother William Merric was justly known as the 'father of Australian pottery'; his wife, Doris Gough, was his partner in this enterprise.

Boyd's father and mother appear in the Langton novels as 'Steven' and 'Laura', the father a somewhat remote, but extremely just figure, with enlightened views about child-rearing. The mother was a beautiful, highly gifted woman, and deeply religious, a trait she passed on to her son Merric and to Martin. She is drawn perhaps in more detail as Susan, in *The Montforts*, an early novel in which

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Boyd felt he had made inadequate use of his material. This is not quite true: *The Montforts* has its own special attraction, especially its account of pre-goldrush society, and in softening some of the portraits later, Boyd lost a little of their clarity. His brother, Merric, is to some extent the model for Dominic in the Langton novels. The reader is warned however against expecting too much literal truth. Dominic's portrait has some of Guy Langton's features superimposed upon it: he understands Dominic's streak of violence because he is aware of its latent existence in himself. And throughout his life, Boyd himself experienced, as the fictional Dominic (if not the real Merric) is shown to have done, that feeling of never quite belonging to any group of which he was a member. The only good he recalled about being in the army as an officer was that, for a time, this feeling ceased to trouble him.

From this circumstance arose a recurrent theme of the novels, certainly of *Lucinda Brayford*, which meant most to him: the fruitless search by a woman, or sometimes a man, for a supreme attachment, to one who will accept simply and unconditionally a love and a fidelity which is offered in all innocence, without reserve. The story of Dominic and Helena might seem to contradict this statement. But the last sentence of *When Blackbirds Sing* casts a shadow over assurance. The fate of Dominic, hinted at in the beginning of *The Cardboard Crown* was evidently to be a tragic one, and it is not hard to guess what would have been the greatest tragedy for him. Boyd had intended to complete his story in a fifth novel, but tells us he refused to do so because his publishers wanted him to inject some sex and violence into the book. It may be so, but there is always the possibility that his own deeply concealed internal loneliness might have made it too painful for him to write, though he made

several attempts; the later 1960s were not the happiest time for him emotionally.

The first of the Langton novels, *The Cardboard Crown*, introduces us to two of the elders of the tribe by whom Boyd was most influenced as a child, his grandfather, barrister and member of the Legislative Council, William Callander à Beckett, the 'Austin' of the novel, and his wife Emma Mills, the model for 'Alice'. William à Beckett was an extraordinarily able and versatile man, who served his state and his district diligently without finding sufficient outlet for all his energies. These erupted at times into eccentricities, though not of the long-drawn out kind attributed to him in the novel. Emma Mills brought great wealth into the family, made by her father's investments in breweries! There was also the suggestion of a convict taint, the result of a misunderstanding, but the story remained a well-kept secret until recently. Emma's wedding seems to have been the occasion of some drama, but whatever the circumstances of her married life, she, like her fictional counterpart, Alice, was a woman of great beauty and distinction, who was evidently the main-stay of the whole clan. One hopes fate dealt with her more kindly than with Alice. The book paints in, deftly and succinctly, the background to the family history, makes sense of the Langtons' divided loyalties, which caused them, like so many of their generation, to shuttle backwards and forwards between England and Australia, at home in both hemispheres. From the revised version of the book, the possibility that the sins of the fathers are visited on their children is ruled out, but the operation of malign influences from both past and present, working together with chance to shape destinies, remains a hypothesis. And never far below the brilliant surface of social life, even in the richest comic scenes are we allowed to forget

the growing pressure of a mystery: the impossibility of defining and separating out what is good and what is evil from the warp and woof of existence, without the fabric falling apart.

In *A Difficult Young Man*, Dominic emerges from the background, a figure which the previous book prepares us to accept. He is after all the grandson of Austin and Alice, no slaves to convention. He is a moody, but handsome and attractive young man, whose best impulses are always doomed to be misunderstood and whose old-fashioned code of chivalry is so at odds with the new manners of his times as to be unrecognizable, even by those supposed to be of his own class. Moreover, his parents, Steven and Laura, are both artists, and have solved the problem of having insufficient money to keep up their social position by opting out of class altogether. They spend a short period of time, for Dominic's sake, at their ancestral home in Wiltshire, but, disgusted with English snobbery and distressed by the poverty of the villagers, they are glad to get back to Yarra Glen, their farm and their 'picnic' way of life. His parents' solution satisfies Dominic's brother Guy only intermittently; his head is full of Anglo-Catholic liturgies and medieval history, but his experience later teaches him the wisdom of their choice. In this second book, the conflict between commercialism and things that are valued in and for themselves becomes more overt and is embodied in the parabolic conflict between Dominic and his Aunt Baba, the worst type of social climber.

Outbreak of Love is perhaps the most misunderstood of the four novels. It is usually taken to be a frivolous interlude between the second and the fourth, and the dreadful irony of the title is ignored. The book is certainly full of extremely comic scenes, but under all of them, and under the book as a whole runs a current of unease which bears us inevitably to the 'outbreak' of war. It is a book full

of little understated conflicts, between the 'Roman' and the 'provincial', the 'Teutonic' and the 'southern', none of which has anything to do with geography; between the heart and the head. Its account of the ease and swiftness with which war hysteria can be whipped up among supposedly civilized people, we have seen paralleled in recent times. The novel is usually referred to as a comedy of manners; a more accurate description would be 'a tragedy of manners'. As a study of the conflict between self-interest and self-transcendence, of the difference between smartness and good breeding, of the humanity that is the basis of all true courtesy, it could hardly be surpassed. The mediating consciousness of the book is chiefly Guy's, whose growth in compassion and understanding is one of its strengths. Among the most unforgettable scenes is the young man's sudden, almost physical awareness, after enjoying himself at a ball, of the agonizing loneliness of the unloved and the unlovable, in this case, of his ageing spinster aunt, against whom he has just been railing.

As in all the novels there are brief exquisite sketches of the Australian countryside, full of keen perceptiveness of its aloof aristocratic quality, its affinity with the archaic landscapes of Greece or Tuscany; there are no fake nymphs and satyrs here.

When Blackbirds Sing concentrates wholly on Dominic, using an omniscient narrator. It is concerned only with his war experience and the difference which this makes to the way he perceives himself in relation to the world. It is an entirely personal response, stated in a plain, direct style, which makes it all the more convincing. There is no attempt to argue that Dominic's attitude of mind has universal validity. It is himself he must finally answer to; there must be no more denial of his 'essential self', at someone else's bidding. By reason of its very simplicity the novel remains one of the most power-

ful arguments in Australian literature for the recognition of the common humanity of peoples.

This belief in the common humanity of peoples, 'the human godhead', is inseparable from Martin Boyd's religion. Men cannot function, he believed, without 'a necessary Myth' suited to their particular nature. For him, this was the Greco-Christian tradition wherein the pagan gods were redeemed in Christ. The literal truth did not bother him; the poetic truth was essential, though he objected to intellectuals who sprayed the literal truth 'with weed-killer' to cure simple people of superstition. In *A Single Flame* he subjects to rigorous scrutiny the simple faith taught him by his mother and his headmaster, Canon Long, of Trinity Grammar School and admits that it had no chance of surviving in the post-war world. But he distils from it a bedrock ethic acceptable to agnostics, which he calls 'the classical morality', and applies it to the situation of Europe in 1939. It is one of the finest statements of belief and of a basis for action of the period, and has lost none of its cogency. Theologically, its argument is that humankind is the Mystical Body of Christ and that therefore the brotherhood of man is a biological fact. Our neighbour, that is, is in a very real sense our self. There is much about Boyd's theology which reminds us of Karl Barth's, though in spite of his early theological training at St John's, Melbourne, Boyd had little use for professional theologians. The second important point he makes is to link politics and morality. He said once there were no political problems, only moral ones: 'If politicians had any morals, they wouldn't have any problems.' The statement remains true. So does the statement he made about Churchill's extravagant military gestures: 'No responsible man creates a chaos greater than his capacity to restore order.'

Boyd made a second attempt in England to lead an active religious life by joining a Franciscan order, but made the same mistake of expecting the gospels to be taken seriously. It was not until he was living near Cambridge during the second war, that his religion became again for him a vivid reality. This was partly due to the proximity of King's College Chapel, where he heard the finest music every day, but also to his friendship with Hugh l'Anson Fausset, a writer of unusual mind and spirit. He became a major influence on Boyd's thinking as a re-reading of his own books makes clear. He had a wide-ranging knowledge of European literature, as well as of religions other than Christianity. Like many writers, Boyd absorbed much of the information he needed from listening to the conversation of experts in their field, and he was fortunate in his friends. He disliked academics, and refused to think of himself as a 'man of letters'. To him, living was more important than writing, and people than places.

His boyhood home at Yarra Glen, his 'heart's home', remained for him the touchstone of his happiness, but his attempt to settle permanently in Australia in 1948, was unsuccessful. To escape the English winter, he finally settled in Rome, partly because of personal ties. These brought him no lasting happiness. He had however many good friendships to sustain him and an unwavering faith. The last energies of his writing life he spent writing a pamphlet defending youth and attacking the war-mongers who had dragged us into Vietnam.

As an expatriate, Boyd was accused more than once of 'rootlessness', a curious accusation to make against a writer whose bias is so obviously in favour of Australia. He replied that he was an expatriate more by accident than design, and that in any case his roots were

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