

# The Starry Floor from Observatory Hill

## *26 Views of the Starburst World: William Dawes at Sydney Cove 1788-91*

By Ross Gibson

University of Western Australia Publishing, 304pp, \$29.95, 2013

ISBN 9781742582979

## Reviewed by Nathanael Pree

**I**N ROSS GIBSON'S *26 VIEWS OF THE STARBURST WORLD* THE AUTHOR EMPLOYS THE 'versioning method' he used in his *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland*, and credits iconic Japanese artist Hokusai's *36 Views of Mt Fuji* as being the inspiration for these 26 Views of the antipodean cosmos, as seen through the eyes of the First Fleet's astronomer and lieutenant. As in *Australian Badland*, and also *The Summer Exercises*, Gibson makes use of a literary technique that may be termed forensic, well suited to the investigation and dissection of Dawes as a man, yet this is also writing where the imagist, concise fragments that emerge owe as much to intuition as empiricism, and attempt to mirror the very heart and soul of his subject. All this at a pivotal time during which, to borrow F. Scott Fitzgerald's reflective phrase, such an arrival in these new worlds—and Dawes also saw the Americas and West Africa—would come across spaces 'commensurate to his capacity for wonder', when this awe was still aligned with the spirit of scientific discovery and discourse.

An approach to *26 Views of the Starburst World* could do worse than paraphrase author Lise Patt's approach to W.G. Sebald, and acknowledge that when it comes to William Dawes, 'what I know for sure' relies on the fragmentary nature not only of the work at hand, but also of the man himself. As in the works of Sebald, photography supplements the incompleteness and ambiguity of archival and historical evidence, and for Gibson this comprises reproductions of Dawes' two slim notebooks on the Eora language: most of the enigmatic lieutenant's documents were to perish in the aftermath of a hurricane several decades after his death. The notebooks, unearthed at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, and studied in depth by, among others, linguist Jakelin Troy, not only represent the start of a connection across the cultures of the colonizing and the colonized, but also give cohesion to a discontinuous narrative which outlines the formation of an antipodean consciousness and its poetics in the person of Dawes himself. They also represent the meticulous work of a man who by all accounts

was said to be eccentric, if the epithet can be understood to mean being on the periphery of the understood world, and in a position to apprehend, if not entirely comprehend, other spheres and spaces in the universe.

The epistolary genre, evident in the construction of these views, can be said to typify early colonist literature, given the volume and nature of writing engendered by the experiences of transportation, from the nuanced works of Watkin Tench to the methodical and pre-planned correspondence of the governor himself. Inga Clendinnen in *Dancing with Strangers* noted the presence of at least one publishing contract, Governor Phillip's, before the First Fleet embarked, and one might infer that the colonizers' antipodean experience existed to be made into text. In Dawes' hands this appears to have been made up of a skein of stars and stories that (here and there) emerge as points of entry into the overall text. Gibson's work, then, could also be seen as versions or letters from the metaphysical as well as the actual places to which his subject was irresistibly drawn, and through these fragments one can almost hear Dawes pleading for a chance to stay longer and go further in, and observe some of the points of brightness that determined his way.

Dawes can be regarded as one of several Europeans 'relativised' (Gibson refers to Greg Denning for this term) into 'new states of mind by their experiences in the Southern Hemisphere'. In his *The Diminishing Paradise: Changing Literary Perceptions of Australia*, Gibson noted the need for an equilibrium between culture and environment to be sought, 'so that seeming chaos can give way to a new order', and in *26 Views of the Starburst World* he implies that Dawes was on the verge of making such an approach by the time his lack of diplomatic skills and inability to make effective political alliances in the fledgling colony ensured he was sent home. This elusive balance, Gibson observes, 'applies to writing as much as to setting up a camp'. On the surface, at least, Dawes seems to have conducted his temporal and social affairs secondarily to his awestruck sidereal and cultural discoveries, and thus paid the price of being further isolated, dislocated and eventually exiled on yet another side of the starburst world.

Like Dawes' notebooks, which comprise translations from Eora into English based not on conventional grammar patterns, but on what Gibson calls 'event grammar', *26 Views of the Starburst World* reflects its author's interpretation of Dawes' project, namely to create:

a system of small stories, endlessly interwoven, significant only with reference to each other, contingently shifting meanings as more details for cross-referencing accrue. This system is not a line with a decreed beginning, middle and end. Rather it is a network of connections which can be entered

at any juncture, in any direction. This is why the notebooks themselves can be entered anywhere, from any direction.

Dawes' project may have been ostensibly scientific, but he was also informed by a sensibility that joined empirical and with romantic sensibilities. Besides, as Gibson noted in *The Diminishing Paradise*: 'Any literature which deals with something as mutable as the perceived characteristics of a new society and its habitat must be construed as creative'. To use a term coined by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Dawes' writing and travels in Gibson's hands become 'rhizomatic', cultivating restlessness and gathering language and elements of country by restless and apparently random accretion. Yet Dawes also comes across through Gibson's account as meticulous in his records and possessed of an innate and unerring ability to measure distance by his footsteps, and with greater accuracy than his contemporaries with their rods and chains. Naturally, he made maps and charts, yet what marked him out, Gibson claims, is that he was also able to converse on tangential or unrelated matters while pacing out the contours and scale of the terrain without losing either coherence or precision.

Dawes' main Eora interlocutor, the teenage Patyegarang (Patye), feeds him fragments of speech that turn into the seeming random phrases taking form in his notebooks. Gibson admits it is unclear how their relationship commenced, and what exactly it comprised. Clendinnen imagined their meetings at night, with the stars outside and a candle inside Dawes' quarters that ostensibly prevents them from sleeping. She speculated that he might have been handsome, 'as these brooding, solitary types often are'. Gibson attaches as an image to *View 18*, 'What Did He Look Like', a portrait that might be a likeness of his protagonist, 'almost a dandy, cooled by aloofness', and also highlights the candle in his reproductions of the notebooks' pages, hinting at the idea of romance. However, and beyond that, both writers observe that this relationship encompassed more than that between two human beings, namely that between peoples and cultures, and in Dawes' case between a man and a whole new world. Gibson refers to the 'antipodean effect' on other soldiers and transports alike, and the blurred lines of distinction between collaborator and conqueror, and by implication Patye and her people may have experienced a similar ambivalence.

William Blake's 'starry floor and wat'ry shore' form the porous lining of the lieutenant's antipodean experience. The romantic world inverted and the walks turn into territory. Gibson proposes that through his experience of the land, through Patye, Dawes may have had a sense that he was 'gradually coming into country', as a wayfarer, navigating psychic areas that transcend delineation based not only on Greenwich Mean Time or the supposed solidity and permanence of natural phenomena (as Gibson observes through recalling the account of Samuel Johnson kicking a rock), but those that form a shifting lattice

over areas assumed to be discrete, and labeled as water, land and sky. Dawes' maps come to resemble aboriginal art, the pointillism evident in his shift of perspective: 'a map of what', asks Gibson, paths, elevation, contours of another sort, such as 'the best way to take fat from the kidney of a wallaby'? His sketches remain as a language additional to the notebook translation, a language that Dawes himself may have sketched as he observed it developing inside himself, or which he was brought into, and which remains as documents in the archive that may be, as Gibson observes, 'semantically useless, and imaginatively endless'.

The lieutenant as astronomer, recorder and measurer, then, goes through a process of displacement, 'extending the limits of himself into the fugitive expanses of the territory'. Note the multiple ironies implicit in Gibson's choice of adjective. It is the land withdrawing, receding, but which one? And, with this extension, what about Dawes' own modes of expression? How might his voice have changed? Would the archetypal, clipped English vowels of command change into lines more consonant with the breath of someone walking through a world of things made dynamic by their constant naming and assertion? At this liminal stage in the process of contact, what is it in the land that he cannot quite catch?

Gibson touches on another aspect of his subject that is less appealing, the side of the shifty entrepreneur—a flirtation with illicit sources of income, hints at shady dealings bound to lack success. Did this multi-talented, almost mystic man also feel the resentment at being unable fully to control his own temporal destiny? Was there a side to him that was less than admirable, dishonest even, a mover and shaker nursing a sense of entitlement despite the calling of his higher self? Gibson refers to a 'forensic impulse' within Dawes' kind of intelligence, as a drive to extract aspects and opportunities from all manner of human experience and environments. Maybe this impulse included an urge to look into the less salubrious corners of his community, elements of which he appears to have detected at times within himself. Perhaps a reader could approach him in a similar reflective spirit, divining, looking for evidence, remaining open to the different angles of life he explored and the shadowy as well as illuminated places his threads would lead him.

Like the notebooks, *26 Views of the Starburst World* can also be read as a series of 'truncated utterances, compressed narratives and cryptic admissions', and this form contains and expresses their clarity and strength. The chapter 'Blustertown' almost seems to collect a range of tropes peripheral (or central, by the logic of inversion that defined his experience?) to Dawes' world, such as canoes and birds, aboriginal mariners, the pelagic and the city experiences, the natives on the eve of dispossession, the navy cast adrift. These tropes run through the fragments out of which the precarious structures that house and attempt to articulate past time are built. Dawes' own papers outlived him by mere decades,

burnt and scattered over the waters of another hemisphere, and between his death and this effacement of his documents the passing of indigenous cultures in the face of the relentless expansion of what would come to be called the developed world continued at an ever-increasing pace.

Scanning horizons east of the Caribbean, where Dawes faded into obscurity, back to the Antipodes, one can pause at the coast of West Africa and envisage a solitary figure: an image of Dawes in Sierra Leone shadows Werner Herzog's interpretation of the stranded and outcast Cobra Verde, a gaunt Klaus Kinski in the role of another explorer, called into being by Bruce Chatwin, who would go on to write *The Songlines*. So continues a seemingly endless process of summoning, ever-present palimpsests of misplaced men who come across themselves by taking up custodianship of the tracks of others, to which Gibson's work comes across as an expressive and emotive contribution.

**NATHANAEL PREE** grew up in England and received his first degree from University College London. His Masters' dissertation was on W.G. Sebald's prose-fiction poetics of melancholy and restlessness. He is currently a doctoral candidate at the University of Sydney, where his current research interests lie in the articulation of spaces where literature, poetry and history intersect.