

BLOOD
and BONE

Daniel
DAVIS
WOOD



*Of course, you summon ghosts at your peril.
The sufferings of others can bleed into
your soul. You try to protect yourself.*

Susan Sontag

PART I

Oftentimes I find myself wanting for words when I set out to say things about Rowan Scrymgeour. A dozen discarded notebooks contain the wreckage of earlier efforts, and fragments scribbled on receipts and napkins litter my desk like shrapnel from a blast. The problem is not that words escape me altogether. The problem is that they burst into babble the moment I try to commit them to the page. It's as if the soul of Scrymgeour himself refuses to abide containment in words and thwarts all my efforts to concentrate him into some expressible form. But I don't mean to begin with a writer's complaint so much as a concession to the inadequacy of writing. Every last word that follows from here is a word I have tortured out of myself. If what I have written sometimes warbles towards the inarticulate, that is the price exacted by torture and the price of articulating Scrymgeour at all.

What compels me to speak of Scrymgeour now is the

total, deceptive erasure of his complexities in the only other likeness of him in public view today. The statue was unveiled on June 18, 1971, outside the council chambers of the town of Jericho in the deserts of central Queensland. I have been there and I have seen it, twenty-two miles east of the site on which Scrymgeour built his homestead and a century after the settler was slaughtered while his dwelling was burned to the ground. Mounted atop a sandstone plinth in a weatherproof coat that licks at his heels, he stands beneath the scorching sun to gaze out over the western plains with the determined demeanour of the visionary pioneer. His deepsunk eyes should be shielded from view by a brow pinched into a squint by the glare, and his high cheekbones and tight, thin lips should have been warped by a scowl, but the certainty of the sculptor's mould has forgiven his every crudeness. It's likely that what suggested his features to whoever cast him in three dimensions was a scratched and faded ferrotype portrait taken in 1890, or one of the reproductions Scrymgeour published in broadsheet newspapers that year, and so it's possible that the flaws in the art say less about the sculptor's skills than about the shortcomings of his source. But the face in that portrait has haunted me for more than half my life, ever since my mother showed me a copy when I was a boy, and looking at it now I see that it undermines the statue's authority by clearly afflicting the settler with hardships missing from the bronze.

Rowan Scrymgeour glowers out from the sepia heatstruck and sweatstained, wearied and worn down, swarthy, savage, flyblown and bitter. Every last one of his fifty-odd years is etched into his weatherbeaten face. His short, choppy hair recedes across a scalp splotched over with blisters and moles, and bugbites and blemishes cascade from crow's feet and scatter his cheeks to slip under the fuzz of a scrubby beard. Not that he appears impoverished or in any way feeble and sapped of his strength. In a charcoal waistcoat, narrowed at the sides, and a white-collared shirt rounded out by broad shoulders, he projects in his posture enough self-assurance to distract from the shock of the scars on his skin. Tilting his head down just a notch while slightly lifting his line of sight, he meets the eye of the camera with a deep and penetrating glint. A grim wound curves down from temple to cheekbone, skirting the rim of his left eye socket, and beneath it the upward slash of a harelip twists his mouth into an involuntary sneer. His right shoulder slouches an inch below his left, the result of an injury that afflicted him with a lifelong limp, while his left hand reveals postaxial polydactyly as he clutches at the waif who has just flinched in front of him.

The name of the girl is Abigail. She is eleven years old or thereabouts. She has a weak, wiry frame wrapped in thin skin made ruddy by too much sun, and the same thin lips and deepsunken eyes as the man

whose touch has caused her recoil. More notable, though, is the long, lank hair that hangs loose around those features, combed straight without any attempt at a braid or chignon, as well as the white gossamer gown with lace trimmings tarnished, despite its elegant cut, by threadbare sleeves and a stain at the waist. Having evidently dressed up for her portrait, and yet having failed to meet the standards of her time, the infelicities of her appearance hint at a life lived far beyond the presence of even one other woman. Hers was a youth spent with only her father for company, and he was the sort of man whose company was rarely tolerable. You can see it in the pressure of his fingers on her shoulder. He clasps her by the clavicle as if seizing a runaway dog by the scruff. He clasps her as if to stop her from fleeing like the son who turned his back on his father so many years before. I'm sure, of course, that neither of them thought much of this pose at the time. Knowing what I now know, however, I can't help but look back on that frozen clasp and see it as less a record of a fleeting touch and a flinch than a distillation of the entire existence this man and this girl shared out there in the desert.

When historians discuss what occurred at the Whangie and at scores of other homesteads like it, the word they most often favour is 'flashpoint'. When I stand in the dust where I know the Whangie once stood, I can't think of any word more appropriate.

'Flashpoint' evokes an explosive flare so intense, so violent, that it consumes every last vestige of life around it before consuming itself and flaming out in an instant. The desolate landscape here seems to have suffered exactly that sort of torment. Nineteen miles west of Jericho, a bend in the road to Julia Creek is the nearest sealed surfaced to where the Whangie was built. The site itself sits three miles further across a wasteland of white dust and chalk marl and skeletal scrub. Only animals now inhabit this place. Jack jumpers with gigantic jaws march across the earth on some unfathomable mission while the air comes to life with the whorls of insects and flies that pollute it like smog. Kite hawks dangle roadkill from talons as they haul themselves into the sky. Ravens swoop and skip over the dust to guzzle the entrails that drop to the ground.

Far back in the east behind me I can hear the rumble of an oncoming car and the distant whip of its passing by, and then I hear, from up ahead, the murmur of the Auchtermuchty River. Taking a few steps towards the murmur, the land this side of the water slopes off while the far bank eclipses the western horizon and soars upwards to form the Auchtermuchty Escarpment. The sudden rise marks the easternmost edge of the mountain ranges that ripple across the continent before smoothing out into the Great Sandy Desert. The churning water chews away at the rocky base of the rise as if the water itself has prised apart the earth and

allowed sunblasted highlands to ascend in the west while suppressing the flatlands from here to the coast. Diverting from a course running southwest to northeast, from the Great Artesian Basin to the rainforests of Mackay, the river at this point hooks around in a horseshoe formation to carve out a sort of inland peninsula at the foot of the Auchtermuchty Escarpment. That peninsula, a half-mile long by a quarter-mile wide, was once known as the Auchtermuchty Bend, and the Bend was where Scrymgeour decided to build his little empire, the barn and the stable, the outhouse, the hitching-post and the cattle-pen, the wheatfield, and the clapboard shelter of the Whangie.

So many years after the events that obliterated his already precarious settlement and made this flashpoint a flashpoint, what first stirs my imagination is a vision of the cataclysm and its immediate aftermath. The slash and burn, the ambush and slaughter, and then the scattered corpses left to bloat beneath the sun. The leaking orifices calling out to swarms of insatiable insects and the bile and innards spilling from flesh and swelling the gullets of birds. But these images first stir the imagination because they are conjured up by the destitution of the Auchtermuchty Bend itself. Far more difficult to imagine is what made the Bend an appealing place, what led Scrymgeour first to look at it as a haven on which to stake a claim and then to resolve to defend his desolate claim to the death.

I can imagine him here on this blighted expanse of nothingness. I can hear his footsteps biting into the gravel with a limping plod and shuffle. I can see the shadow of a horse beside me, a darkness splayed across the white, and, turning, I can see the sorry beast all saddled up with lumber and bursting a cloud of flies with a snort and a twitch of the ears. Beside the horse is the man. He lurches forward, bent at the waist, and keeps his hands in the small of his back with one hand clasping the wrist of the other. He brushes past me, I imagine, as a hot wind whispers across the dust and whips it over the tops of our shoes. I can see flies crawling through the bristles of his beard. As he shuffles by me now I turn so he can't escape my sight and I watch him as he retreats from me and carries himself towards the escarpment. I imagine his jaw jutting out with every step he takes. I imagine those eyes scanning the ridge as it towers above him like a monstrous wave frozen the instant it crested. I wish I could imagine what he foresaw when he first set foot on this land. I watch the stomp and drag of those feet as Scrymgeour begins his descent to the river. He walks on, I think, like a man snared in vines, the vines of the empire he has come here to flee and yet whose reach he extends with each footfall he takes beyond its frontier.