

Fraser Island in history and art

THE spell that Fraser Island has cast over the artistic imagination began with an event whose truth was stranger than fiction, and on which contemporary accounts were as diverse as the transmutations of art.

The 'Great Sandy Island' was charted by Cook and Flinders, who also observed the campfires of many 'indians'. Logging, which continues today, began in the 1860s; from that time the Aboriginal population declined.

The wreck of the *Stirling Castle* in May 1836, and the fortunes of the castaways provide the central incident of Sidney Nolan's Fraser Island paintings, Tim Burstall's film *'Eliza Fraser'* and Patrick White's novel *A fringe of leaves*. A tropical cyclone on the Island in the thematic incident of another White novel, *The eye of the storm*.

Eliza Fraser was a Scot, born in the Orkneys; her ability to survive is about the only thing in common between White's novel and the comic film. She gave birth to a stillborn child in a lifeboat, and some of the crew absconded in another boat. After landing on Fraser Island Captain Fraser subsequently died and the Aborigines regarded Mrs Fraser as a freak. The story of her rescuer varies. The favoured version is that John Graham, an Irishman was transported for petty theft in 1824 and sent to Moreton Bay for a local offence. He took to the bush in 1827, lived with the Aborigines and gave himself up in 1833. He volunteered to look for the survivors. To rescue Mrs Fraser he made use of his knowledge of Aboriginal ways, stripping and venturing unarmed into the group.

Sidney Nolan depicts Mrs Fraser and the convict as insubstantial figures in a dreamlike landscape of translucent green. She is white and wisp-like, while the convict is an alien figure in black and white stripes. The natural setting dominates the Patrick White novels, which also emphasise the alienness of man in the Antipodean landscape. On this point **Judith Wright addressed the 1975 Fraser Island Environmental Inquiry:**

So many of us have as it were an inward expectation of a European landscape and therefore I think, it has been difficult for us to appreciate the subtle beauty of Australia which is very different. Painters have trained our eye much more to appreciate this beauty; our interpretation of the landscape has altered as a result of its revisioning as it were by artists and also by writers.

[Nolan's first series of] *Fraser Island paintings were not all representational as one might say. Some of them were symbolic. Some of them, on the other hand, were representational of the scenes themselves particularly of the lakes and the rain forests. I can certainly say that although I had already been to Fraser Island before I saw the painting, my own appreciation of the Island was very considerably heightened by the sensitivity with which Nolan had responded to the landscape and by the paintings themselves. [The first series] amounted to 25 paintings of which most were of the lakes, the marshes, the ocean beach and the rain forest trees. Two or three were symbolic, harking back to the story of Mrs Fraser and her shipwreck on the Island. The later paintings were said to have been more symbolic, more, as it were, working the experience of the Island into a symbolic background and whole - a memory of Australia - than they were representational.*

[In Patrick White's *Eye of the storm*] *I think that the experience of the protagonist Elizabeth Hunter, a mystical experience, is the central point of the novel and I think that White chose Fraser Island as the scene of this experience, because he himself felt towards Fraser Island, a kind of experience, the kind of feelings*

that one has after an experience of considerable beauty and joy, but only a place so distant as it were, from the worse faults of men and a place so beautiful, and so subject to violent and beautiful cataclysms of nature would have formed a fit background artistically for that particular experience.

This quality of remoteness, Judith Wright maintained, is the Island's main value to Australians in general:

These are the qualities of wilderness the qualities of ocean-side wilderness - which Fraser Island does to particularly represent and the water, the lakes and the rain forest, which Patrick White describes so well. They give a sense of awe, I think, of sensitivity towards the landscape and I feel that that sense of awe pervades both the novel and the paintings. I know very few children - urban children - who have been able to experience, as people of my age did, the by of loneliness on a coastline, of beauty experienced without human interference.

This quality is still there, she added:

[In about 1947] *I went across on one of the timber loading boats from Maryborough. There was almost no access to Fraser Island for tourists at that time and I actually worked my way across as cook, and tied up in a mangrove creek. I do not like to remember the experience of the sand flies. After leaving that area, I walked. There was almost no way of seeing the Island except on foot. I walked across to the ocean beach, and through a good deal of the rain forest and it was an extraordinary experience to me. I had not long been in Queensland, I had not seen the kind of landscape that the north coastal Queensland areas offered at all. It was my first experience of country at all like Fraser Island and quite an early experience of rain forest itself and I found it very moving indeed, and I would say that at that time walking through the island was a more exciting experience in its then more or less untouched state than driving across it was the last time I went. Of course, when you are walking, when you are actually camping in a place you do have an experience of it that cannot be provided when you are in a vehicle, which is one reason why I think that the wilderness experience of Fraser island should be preserved and that access should be more by personal excursion than by actually being brought there. It was an experience that I have never forgot and more particularly as I think during the whole of my three days on the Island, we met only three people and they were all forestry employees. The beach was totally deserted as far as one could see. It was, I think, in October and there was hardly anybody on the Island at all. And yet when I returned in 1973, the same experience was there quite clearly.*

a cultural monument: *Australia has practically no cultural inheritance, unlike other countries which appreciate the work of their artists and the places which have been, if I must put it so, hallowed by association with great works of art.*

*Fraser Island should be thought of as a cultural monument, because one of the greatest artists, now working overseas I Sidney Nolan, has done two series of paintings of the island and of its history, as it were, Fraser Island story, and the magnificent and major novel, *The Eye of the Storm* which Patrick White published just before he got the Nobel Prize, takes for its main setting, the Fraser Island beach.*

Judith Wright, 1975