

**Review of *God, the Devil and Me* by Alf Taylor
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Nyoongah writer Alf Taylor invites the reader into the febrile imagination of an Aboriginal child raised, at his father's request, by Benedictine monks and nuns at New Norcia Mission (Western Australia) in the 1950s. The book concludes in the early 1960s—Alf is vague about dates—with his escape from New Norcia in order to track down his mother (his father meanwhile has died).

In the hands of some writers, this “separation, escape, return, reconnection” story could be a triumphant narrative arc. But it is typical of Alf Taylor that by the time he brings young Alf to his mother's embrace and “the biggest cry I had for a long time” (285) he has already warned the reader that no satisfying relationship with his mother ensued: “After I got out of New Norcia, I couldn't communicate with my mother, as a son should. I really hurt when we laid our mother to rest” (221). Note “as a son should”—this book is saturated with the author's guilt.

New Norcia's Catholic liturgy and instruction offered Alf an idiom for awareness of himself, for his feelings about those loved and absent, and for his apprehension of authorities present and unloving. For example, in writing about how he missed his mother, Alf makes templates of self-mortification from the life of Christ. While Christmas liturgy represented Jesus as a baby, and “no baby could be so cruel and send us to Hell”, at Easter Jesus was an adult “dying for our sins. Like I said, I always prayed to His Mother Mary. I guess, in a way, she replaced my mother.” So Alf “prayed to her asking her if I could take her son's place. I mean I was the one who hung him up on that cross so why shouldn't I be there instead of him?” (49).

Alf's child-hood interiority—as he chooses to represent it—is agonistic: a small boy, at the mercy of internalised authorities and fighting back with dreams and fantasies. What kind of man emerged from this struggle?

From the opening pages Alf tells us that he has not managed adulthood well. Alcohol abuse has troubled his life (and others of his New Norcia cohort, he says). He has always been the “fuck up” that the Benedictines told him he was, or so he frequently assures us. “Even if we had one thousand and one hundred commandments to live by, I'd still be breaking the fuckin' lot” (219). When he inadvertently ruins an unsupervised interlude enjoyed with other New Norcia boys, he recalls:

I blamed all this bad luck on myself, thinking things like: if I wasn't in their company, this [being picked up by a patrolling priest] would not have happened. I was a walking disaster, a good for nothing no-good little back devil. I was worse than the Devil's droppings or even a hyena's turd. I really kicked the fuck out of myself that day, which was not unusual in days to come (79).

There are many moments of such self-excoriation in *God, the Devil and Me*, but there is also a redeeming sense of authority's absurdity. When Alf is reported by another child for stealing a marble, Brother Augustine tells him "You will burrrrrn in Hell, Taylorrrrr. Stealing is a morrrrrtal sin" (9). As the encounter continues, young Alf's terrified attention is increasingly focused on something of which Brother Augustine is oblivious: "the jungle that was growing out of his nose" (10). That is often Taylor's position: cowed by authority but beckoned, by his own imagination, into escape holes. The monks' and nuns' overbearing presence – not least, a propensity to flog with the strap—are episodes in Alf's Grand Guignol.

Constantly intriguing a reader of this memoir is a comic undercurrent: horrified disbelief that child-Alf's moral imagination could be so shaped by the monks' and nuns' theology and by their brutal order of punishment and reward. In the above quotation "no-good little back devil" borrows the language of nuns' and monks' daily abrasion of New Norcia's children's fragile self-worth. One nun called the children "little dead black flies" (29). Alf evokes this inculcated framework of self-judgment, but he also parodies it. His memoir is constantly teetering, in this way, between the misery of an innocent child and the adult narrator's rendering of that child's grotesque complicity with New Norcia's torment. It seems to have been easy to persuade these children of their Original Sin, and Alf flings his sense of guilt back in the reader's face: look what they made me into!

New Norcia was founded by Rosendo (or Rudesindus) Salvato in 1847 as a mission where Aboriginal people could be taught agriculture. It became integral to generations of the region's Aboriginal families, some of whom (like Alf's uncle) worked for and lived at the mission. Alf's grandfather and father grew up there, and so when Alf's father became so disabled (losing a leg in an accident) that he could no longer support this family it was an easy and reassuring decision to entrust young Alf to Benedictine care. His older brother was already at New Norcia. On a visit with his mother and father, "I ran over to my brother, holding him and started to cry. (Jesus, I was a sooky-arse little kid.) Then I ran to my father and begged him to let me stay with my brother at the Mission" (33).

The Benedictine staff richly fed Alf's imagination with representations of God and the Devil, but Alf's writing demonstrates that they did not control his imaginative reconstruction of these entities. Soon after separating from his parents "I tried to write a small poem to God, asking him to look after my mum and dad" (5). Alf imagines conversations with a Jesus who contradicts the Benedictine's injunctions against Nyoongah traditions (133-136). Alf says that what saved him was his "pencil", his ability to write, read and imagine. "To me, they were my weapons" (13) and "writing helped me from going insane at a very tender age" (14). As well, New Norcia had grounds—"bush", so that "I really found a friend in the pencil whenever I went bush" (15). He wrote fantasy addresses on his letters to his parents: "Paris, Rome, London and I think even New York" (15). Often, when in the bush, he is accompanied by an imaginary friend called "Toby"—"a kind, caring and understanding boy who could never hurt anything in his life" and who "loved the bush and its animals" (127). As he explains, "Being afraid of God as a child, I had to create someone who wasn't a little black devil" (127.) On one occasion, the Devil—converted into an avuncular 'Mr Devil' (129-31)—helps Alf to find Toby when they become separated in "the bush."

With such a mind, it was possible for prayer to become a kind of play. A section headed “didgeridoo” has child-Alf, after “lights out” in the New Norcia dormitory, snuggling into his bedding and imagining “Luke the albino Apostle” talking to Mary Magdalene in the Garden of Eden while animals, including kangaroos and koalas, gambol around them, and Mary plays Luke’s didgeridoo (16-20). Towards the book’s end there is an even longer fantasy—told as a dream enjoyed while he travelled back from a football match to New Norcia on the mission bus (238-273). Alf dreams he is in Heaven, where he is allowed to sit in the lap of ‘Mother Mary’ and where he is advised by Peter to endure the Benedictines as well-meaning instruments of “the British Australian government” (248). Into the dream comes Judas Iscariot who tells him that Jesus and the other eleven apostles were as sinful as any other human. Dreaming Alf found Judas “a mirror of myself, scared, timid, apprehensive, vulnerable and, above all, gullible” but with “an air of authority” and “a tinge of bravado” (252).

These fantasy passages cut the reader loose from our accustomed mooring in autobiographical realism. Any autobiography will trace continuities between the ‘I’ recollected and the recollecting ‘I’. When obeying this convention, Taylor attributes something about adult-Alf to things that happened to child-Alf, using words that make explicit the elapse of time between child and adult. After telling a story about a (rare) word of praise from Sister Agnes, he comments: “Even to this day, I cannot accept it when someone compliments me about something nice” (22). Introducing his account of stealing altar wine, he writes “While in the Mission, alcohol became the foundation of my life” (22). “Even today, I am still confused [about a God both loving and judgmental]” (37). “Even today, I can’t stand Easter”, he writes, after he tells of being punished for stealing a chocolate Easter egg (62). “I still have an uncontrollable fear of bees today”, he admits after telling of bees swarming onto him (69).

Such sentences are concessions to ‘autobiographical realism’ in that they plausibly find seeds of adult-Alf in the experiences of child-Alf. But in Taylor’s recreation of child-Alf’s fantasies and dreams the child’s subjectivity is re-worked according to the demands of Taylor’s comic vision. Taylor becomes less the recorder and more the fabulist of his child-hood; the distinction between child and adult interiorities blurs. For example, his account of food seems more poetic than literal. Sheep’s eyes and sheep’s brains become metonyms of all the meals that the children had to stomach while they observed monks consuming much tastier fare. As a piece of bacon disappeared into the mouth of one monk, “it winked at me” (58). There is no way for the reader to judge how much such fantasy passages are adult-Alf improving on what child-Alf then invented for himself. Indeed, this is the book’s sustained challenge to an autobiographical reading: how much is the interiority of child-Alf embellished by adult-Alf? One can pose this question without doubting that Alf was an imaginative child, pressed into sustained fantasy by New Norcia’s bewildering, arbitrary world.

As a preternatural survivor, he claims licence for his fabulations. “My liver is hanging on by the skin of its teeth; kidney, heart and pancreas—shouldn’t be too long to wait for plastic ones or even a monkey’s. But anyway, who gives a fuck? I enjoy living on the edge of reality; that makes me push myself beyond life’s perimeter” (52). And perhaps there is fabulist licence, also, in Catholicism itself. Altar wine as Christ’s blood? As an altar boy, Alf had easy access to the wine that a priest consecrates in the mass. He now feels bad that he stole may sips.

This altar wine belonged to the body of Christ and I was to come through the darkness of the early morning and claim the body of Christ as my own, not knowing I was committing a sin that even the Captain Cooks would frown upon. But to me, to drink this wine, which the priest was about to turn into the blood of Christ, was great. I didn't know which elevated me to the highest, drinking the blood of Christ or the sweetness of the wine. Being a nine- or ten-year-old, I had a fondness for the sweetness, not the blood of Christ (105).

An imagination so licensed has no difficulty allegorising Captain James Cook. I have no doubt that Western Australian children in the 1950s were told that Cook discovered Australia. But in *God, the Devil and Me* "Cook" becomes a derisive signifier of settler Australians' supremacy over Aboriginal people, and so memory is infused with critique. There are "Captain Cook Australians", lusting after Aboriginal women (71), and there is "the Captain Cook Government", rewarding achievement with medals (81). Perth is a "city that belonged to Captain Cook" (83) and in that city's hospital "there were little Captain Cooks lying everywhere" (85), for Australia is "Captain Cook's land" (88). He imagines Cook being pleased to observe New Norcia children "marching to the tune of the British flag" (98). He hopes that the spirit of a deceased classmate "is free and not with Captain Cook's God because he deserved better" (111).

Alf's retrospect on New Norcia is conditioned by his adult knowledge of the alternative way that Aboriginal Australians of his generation were subject to "Captain Cook": Western Australia's reserve system. Alf came from a family that had sought to avoid the discipline of the State system by finding work in agriculture—including jobs at New Norcia Mission. Child-Alf knew he was ancestrally connected to New Norcia. He recalls exploring its old flour mill and wondering "if my grandfather had worked there along with his sons" (103). To be under New Norcia's authority was thus an alternative to living on a reserve, under state officials. "I guess growing up in New Norcia Mission we were in better stead than the kinds who were brought up in a reserve" (145). Poorly educated, "reserve people" were easy prey for "born-again Christians" (145), and adult-Alf believes as well that they missed out on the higher European culture that child-Alf admiringly alludes to as "Mr Shakespeare and Mr Michelangelo" (146). *God, the Devil and Me* hints at the complexity of adult-Alf's reckoning with the Western Christian heritage that New Norcia transmitted to him.