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'Vast Crystal Globe' – Awash in the Sublime

James McAuley's Twentieth Century Sea Voyage ('Captain Quiros,' 1964)

Abstract: In his unusual mid-20th century epic poem 'Captain Quiros,' Australian poet James McAuley reimagines European exploration of the southern hemisphere in retelling the two Pacific voyages of the lay Franciscan Portuguese sea captain (Pedro Fernandes de Queirós). "Quiros" crossed the Pacific in search for the fabled, utopia-laden Terra Australis with the last Spanish voyages of discovery of the late 16th and early 17th centuries. The well-researched, deliberately 'out-of-fashion' long poem, drew on the 1904 Hakluyt society English translation from Spanish (1876) of the 17th century chronicle of Quiros and his secretary Belmonte and on McAuley's own post-war experience in the Australian administration of New Guinea. This article focusses on the text's compelling representation of the ocean through which the expeditions travel rather than on the narration of events and encounters. In exploring the archetype of early global travel it examines how, in his depiction of oceanic space, an alternative to an Australian inland 'horizontal sublime,' McAuley embellishes the original Spanish text from his reading about ancient maps, the Portuguese Luis de Camões' epic 'Os Lusíadas,' and histories of South Pacific exploration and also, the mid-20th century perspective of pioneer environmental writer Rachel Carson. Her landmark 'The Sea Around Us' combined powerful scientific and literary descriptions of oceanic phenomena, some of which are traced in the high mimetic descriptive passages of McAuley's poetic narrative.¹ McAuley's portrait of 'Ocean' and its crossing conjures the sphere of the in-between between continent and islands, known and unknown places and peoples, past and future, faith and the abyss. This ambivalent ocean of indeterminate space, alternatively benign, chaotic and indifferent, is the stage on which the reader sees Quiros' voyages to the land of desire unfold and transform into a dystopian, if more sombre, understanding of the world and more recent Australian history. In the identity-ridden 1950s, the poem helped elaborate Australia's hitherto little acknowledged oceanic identity within a wider region, offering a richer variant on its customary insular interior profile.

The sea and the ocean have long been the scenario for major writing projects – epics, sagas, long novels, poems, including in the Australian spatial imaginary. The ocean voyages of novelist Joseph Conrad made landfall in South-East Asia and Australia. Each day on the way back from school I would walk past the hulk of the only vessel Conrad captained, the 'Otago,' laid to rest and rust away on the eastern shore of Hobart's Derwent River. My great-grandmother travelled several times by boat from Tasmania to visit her sister in Christchurch, New Zealand. In the early 19th century Hobart, Tasmania, was the whaling capital of the world. Our school text Swift's satirical 'Gulliver's Travels' reached as far as Australia. However, in Australia, the interior has for a long time held the imaginary to ransom.

Poet Ian Mudie, one of the Australian cultural nativist Jindyworobak group claimed in the 1940s how "it is the outback and not the ocean that grips the minds of Australians";² a perception nurtured well into the fifties, as in Russell Ward's 'The Australian Legend' (1958).³ If the ocean did not grip Australia, which I and others now dispute, it at least caught the imagination of the mid-20th-century

1 Cf. Rachel Carson: *The Sea Around Us*.

2 Michael Evans: *Island Consciousness and Australian Strategic Culture*, p. 1.

3 Cf. Russell Ward: *The Australian Legend*.

Australian poet James McAuley, who dedicated two years to writing an unlikely 65-page epic-style poem ‘Captain Quiros’ (1964) about the quest voyage of the 17th-century Portuguese navigator Pedro Fernandes de Queirós (or Quirós, in Spanish). Quiros travelled with two Spanish sea voyages westward across the Pacific from what is Peru searching for the fabled ‘Terra Australis’. The first, in 1595, reached the Solomon Islands, the second in 1606 reached Vanuatu, but the third in 1614, with Quiros’ death, never left Panama. Nonetheless, I consider McAuley’s seascapes, the vital oceanic elements in the poem, to be an important elaboration of the Australian imaginary.

The ocean appears early in Part One, in what Lyn McCredde describes as “exquisite images”⁴ setting the scene for the long sea voyage and its encounters with islands and the remote, a world of wonders and terrors:

Blue hemisphere from Pole to Pole,
 Vast crystal globe where ignorance could scry:
 Projecting fears and longings of the soul
 On the unknown – monsters that swim and fly,
 Whirlpools and primal darkness on the deep;
 Leviathan unchained; dolphins that leap
 Over the mainyard. So in old maps we see
Imago Mundi done in red and gold,
 With fabled lands through which green rivers run
 To a blue scalloped sea.⁵

The archaic, even Biblical, language of “scry” with its “crystal globe” and “primal darkness,” and the Gothic motifs – monsters, Leviathan, and gilded maps evoke the allure and fear of those late Renaissance voyagers shifting into a vast unknown. Archetypes of exploration raise themes and motifs central to post-colonial and more recent transnational critical perspectives (Paul Gilroy, Suvendrini Perera);⁶ the key tropes – of crossing, identity (the quest for origins), encounter with the Other, history and time. They present binaries for nature and society – centre/periphery, utopia/dystopia, ignorance/knowledge, modernity/the traditional, the ideal and the real. ‘Captain Quiros’ comes from McAuley’s less well-received neo-classical phase of the nineteen-fifties in which he deliberately pursued a ‘writing against the grain’. So, while it is essentially a modern epic ‘Captain Quiros’ is described defensively, as “out of fashion” (Collected Poems [hereafter: CP], p. 142), even by its 17th-century narrator the Spanish chronicler and dramatist Luis de Belmonte Bermúdez.

Context

Other Australian poets of his time took up maritime themes. McAuley (1917-1976) almost certainly drew on the maritime motifs of Australia’s first modernist poet Kenneth Slessor (1901-1971) notably his elegy ‘Five Bells’ (1939) set in Sydney

4 Lyn McCredde: James McAuley, p. 37.

5 James McAuley: Collected Poems, p. 111.

6 Paul Gilroy: The Black Atlantic; Suvendrini Perera: Australia and the Insular Imagination.

Harbour. McAuley's early poem of the same period 'The Blue Horses' (1940) sets up an inner city industrial ambience reminiscent of the much admired T.S. Eliot.

The harbour derricks swing their load upon the shore.
The sacred turbines hum, the factories
set up their hallowed roar.⁷

Coastal motifs and themes are evident in the work of contemporary poet Francis Webb especially in his depiction of the 19th century whaler and entrepreneur Ben Boyd in the long poem "A Drum for Ben Boyd", with its evocation of the coastal landscape of southern New South Wales. While McAuley's later poem 'Captain Quiros' has shifted beyond Slessor's modernist frame, the influence of maritime motifs in the older poet's long poems arguably endured, notably the maps and sea exotica of 'Five Visions of Captain Cook' (1931) and of 'Captain Dobbin' (1929), published in the 1930s when McAuley published his first poems. Nonetheless, McAuley turned from the more familiar English navigator (James Cook) to the lesser known earlier Portuguese navigators who in the fifteenth century had been sailing to the southern hemisphere, including India (1498), Malacca (1511), Timor (1512), and probably the Australian north and (possibly) eastern coasts (1521).

McAuley's interests in maritime tropes were probably fuelled by his war-time research on maps of New Guinea while stationed between 1943 and 1945 in the Victorian Army Barracks in Melbourne with Alf Conlon's Directorate for Research on Civil Affairs (DORCA). The young poet and his fellow researchers were investigating Portuguese chronicles⁸ and old maps, to help find material on New Guinea to assist the military effort against the Japanese who had invaded early in 1942. Mapping material may have included replicas of the fifteenth-century *mappa mundi* commissioned by the Portuguese from the Venetian map-maker Fra Mauro. Also, McAuley would have come across the speculations on the Portuguese navigations by George Collingridge de Tourcey in 1895⁹ held in the Mitchell Library. The researchers would have been assisted in their endeavours with the secondment to the Directorate at this time of the experienced Mitchell Librarian Ida Leeson.¹⁰

Lay Franciscan Quiros had a utopian vision of the fabled 'Terra Australis' as the location for a future new Christian society but only arrived in 1606 with the second expedition at an island of Vanuatu which he thought might be 'Terra Australis' and which still bears some of the name he gave it - "[Austrialia del] Espiritu Santo".¹¹ The utopian Portuguese explorer was already the subject of McAuley's early short poem 'Terra Australis':

7 James McAuley: *The Blue Horses* in id.: *Collected Poems*, p. 9.

8 McAuley read at this time Bernard Miall's translation of Azurara's chronicles of the early fifteenth century voyages commanded by Henry the Navigator down the west coast of Africa. *Conquests and Discoveries of Henry the Navigator*.

9 George Collingridge de Tourcey: *The First Discovery of Australia and New Guinea*.

10 The assembly of a significant collection of historic regional maps was supervised by Mitchell librarian Ida Leeson, as described by Sylvia Martin in *Ida Leeson: A Life*.

11 The Australian 19th-century Catholic Archbishop Patrick Moran had argued fifty years earlier than McAuley's long poem, and as wishfully as Quiros, that the navigator had arrived in Australia, near Gladstone in Queensland, thus constituting a Catholic founding of Australia.

Voyage within you, on the fabled ocean
 And you will find that Southern Continent
 Quiros' vision – his hidalgo heart
 And mythical Australia, where reside
 All things in their imagined counterpart.¹²

Contrary to Ian Mudie's assertions it contributed to a Jindyworobak oceanic rather than purely inland exploration of origins. McAuley's poem was published in the 'Jindyworobak Anthology' (1943).¹³ Other Portuguese navigators were addressed in several of McAuley's early poems of this period. McAuley's 1944 narrative poem 'Henry the Navigator' (CP, 1971, p. 21) drew on the fifteenth-century Portuguese Chronicle of Eanes de Azurara. In it the poet speculates on Henry as the "fountainhead" for later European quests to "discover" the southern continent in the following centuries (arguably from Cristóvão de Mendonça in 1521 to Willem Janszoon in 1605-06).¹⁴ In a similar vein, drawing on his library research, in the 1945 narrative poem 'The True Discovery of Australia' (CP, 1971, p. 29) McAuley imagines finding an epistle from Jonathan Swift's fictional navigator Gulliver describing his supposed encounter with the peoples from the southern continent (Part IV, *Gulliver's Travels*, 1726) from which location Gulliver is eventually rescued by a Portuguese trading vessel.

Conjectures about the discovery of Australia by Quiros, the romantic trope of the oceanic quest, would later be incorporated in Jindyworobak lore as evident in the long poem 'The Great Southern Land' (1951) by Jindyworobak founder Rex Ingamells.¹⁵

Genesis

The long poem 'Captain Quiros' came nearly 20 years after McAuley's 'Terra Australis'. An apparent after-thought, the poet recorded later how, towards the end of his less well-received neo-classical phase in the late 1950s "in the midst of uncertainty and dryness", he "suddenly took up again an almost forgotten project, of writing a long narrative poem about Quiros".¹⁶

The project came as a kind of rescue, reflected in his preceding poem on poetic process 'The Inception of the Poem':

[...] suddenly unbidden, the theme returns
 That visited my youth; over the vast
 Pacific with the white wake at their sterns,
 The ships of Quiros on their great concerns
 Ride in to the present from the past.¹⁷

12 James McAuley: *Terra Australis*.

13 Probably because the subsequent three stanzas offer a celebration of iconic Australian fauna and flora rather than for its nautical first stanza.

14 See Kenneth Gordon McIntyre: *The Secret Discovery of Australia*.

15 Not a Jindyworobak Douglas Stewart, editor of the 'Bulletin', wrote the light-hearted long poem 'Terra Australis' in 1949.

16 James McAuley: *A Map of Australian Verse*, pp. 202 f.

17 James McAuley: *The Inception of the Poem* in id.: *Collected Poems*, p. 108.

McAuley's retelling of Quiros' utopian Christian project ("that noble voyage") against the materialist, gold-seeking objectives of the Spanish expeditioners was certainly empathetic: "'Terra Australis' you must celebrate | Land of the inmost heart, searching for which | Men roam the earth" (CP, p. 113). Using the 1904 translation by Clements Markham¹⁸ from the Spanish chronicle for the Hakluyt society, Quiros' historical quest was laden with the poet's own projects and divergences with contemporary secular values and ideology that came from intense reading in philosophy and theology, resulting in his conversion to Catholicism in 1952 after contact with Catholic missionaries in New Guinea. The poet explained how as a "reconvert" he was "seeing the world in the light of a recovered acceptance of Christian tradition and orthodoxy".¹⁹ Looking back to a supposedly quiet 1950s in peace-time Australia, the poet's experience with Catholic Labor politics with the formation of the breakaway anti-communist Democratic Labor Party in 1955 had been neither calm nor detached but gave tension and relevance to the navigator hero in his attempt to found a just, free, spiritually-oriented society. The sea voyage, while an imperial venture for the Spanish to gain new territory and converts, is for the navigator Quiros and, its author McAuley, an archetype of spiritual transformation.

The Crossing

McAuley cited Patrick White's 1957 novel 'Voss' as a source of inspiration. He thought White's account of the fictional inland explorer modelled on Ludwig Leichhardt, as "undertaking things normally the business of poetic narrative and drama".²⁰ McAuley's unusual poem describes a journey not through sandy deserts but through the treacherous blue deserts of the enveloping "Ocean" (capitalised as is Coleridge's "Moon" in "the Ancient Mariner"). Part One, sets out on the Pacific from Callao in Peru. The poem is dominated by acts of crossing, a vast wasteland the quester must navigate – invariably empty, a grey cold element of infinite latitudes: "Ocean's empty tract" (CP, p. 115), "the Antarctic void", (CP, p. 143) and "blue desert plain" (CP, p. 149) as well as capriciousness in "Ocean's changefulness" (CP, p. 162). The Quiros epoch precedes by two centuries the exploration of Australian oceanic space Paul Carter addresses in 'The Road to Botany Bay' (1987). In 'Quiros' the narrating traveller's description of the barrier Ocean is marked by strong emotions of epic suffering prescribed by Aristotle²¹ – "loneliness" (CP, p. 148), "strangeness" (CP, p. 151), "uncertainty" (CP, p. 161) and the journey through it with "hardship" and vicissitude" (CP, p. 162). The endless

18 Markham's 1904 translation of the earlier Spanish chronicle (The Voyages of Pedro Fernandez de Quiros) was dedicated to the British naval explorer Robert Scott following his first expedition to Antarctic in 1904. Scott had become interested in the Antarctic expedition through contact with Markham. Scott died tragically when leading the second expedition that reached the South Pole after Amundsen in 1912.

19 James McAuley: *A Map of Australian Verse*, p. 202.

20 James McAuley: *The Gothic Splendours*, p. 35.

21 Aristotle: *Poetics*, XII, 145b, p. 9.

horizon suggests “excess of space” or the experience of a “horizontal sublime”²² Bill Ashcroft detects in 19th-century Australian settlers’ responses to the unfamiliar endless inland horizons. Quiros’ vast oceanic landscape evokes overpowering disorientation, reflecting that creative aporia from which McAuley, as poet, was fleeing.

This oceanic passage also invites the phrase “oceanic feeling” Sigmund Freud coined to suggest the sensation of unboundedness and limitlessness, akin to an early phase of ego-feeling, a subsequent sense of “oneness with the universe” which Suvendrini Perera²³ associates with the emergence of religious impulses. Perera also argues how such sites of an Australian oceanic sublime are a meeting place for notions of “nation and subjectivity, the psychic and the historical”.²⁴

Generic Precedents

With its iambic pentameters,²⁵ archaic diction and heroic couplets the poem approximates the traditional epic form. The 7-line stanzas vary the 8 lines of its possible model ‘Os Lusíadas’ (1572) by Portuguese epic poet Luis de Camões which recounts Vasco da Gama’s fifteenth-century navigations. McAuley read that epic in the 1940s perhaps in Major Thomas Mitchell’s 1854 translation.²⁶ Camões’ hero Vasco da Gama journeyed south and east through the Atlantic and Indian Oceans, whereas Quiros travelled westward across the Pacific from the Americas. Part Two on the second expedition describing an island of now Kiribati as “Gente Hermosa” (or beautiful people), refers in epic allusiveness to da Gama’s amorous adventures through the tropical islands of the Indian Ocean: “Freely the great Camoens could contrive | A magic isle of Venus in the sea”. (CP, p. 149). The epic’s putative narrator and author Belmonte also cites as his literary guides the 16th and 17th century Spanish writers, dramatist and poet Félix Lope de Vega and Alonso de Ercilla, author of the epic of Chilean conquest, *La Araucana* (CP, p. 146).

Projections

The Portuguese epopeia ‘The Lusiad’ offered an important antecedent in asserting the oceanic identity of Portugal and also, arguably of Australia 400 years later. One of Camoes’ successors the modernist Fernando Pessoa re-imagined in 1934 the voyages of “the immense and possible ocean” going even further to “the sidereal south” (“Horizon”). ‘Captain Quiros’ is driven by the topos of

22 Bill Ashcroft: *The Sacred in Australian Culture*, p. 26.

23 Suvendrini Perera: *Australia and the Insular Imagination*, pp. 40f.

24 *Ibid*, p. 41.

25 Iambic pentameter matches the dactylic hexameter of heroic verse Aristotle thought appropriate for narrating action in the classical epic.

26 Mitchell learned Portuguese while living in Portugal in the early 19th-century in the service of the Duke of Wellington following the Napoleonic invasions (1807-1814).

the “journey south”²⁷ associated with early voyages from Europe into unknown paradisaical regions, the motif of the “happy isles” seen in Nietzsche. Critic Livio Dobrez has described this pattern of writing as “Australia being re-explored, but from the inside”.²⁸ As in McAuley’s earlier explorer poems there is abundant imagery and vocabulary of navigators, maps, charts, “cosmography” (CP, p. 113) appropriate for tracing a journey into unknown “Other” places. Jose Rabasa calls this “the centrifugal movement from name-laden Europe to the periphery, where legends and drawings characterise vast territories without history”.²⁹ In this way McAuley’s narrator Belmonte elaborates on Quiros’ project: “[...] the last continent | Still waiting for the impress of the dreamer” (CP, p. 129). The arguably early Australian Quiros can thus be placed among what David Malouf has envisaged about settler Australians as “late-comers [who] share in a sea-dreaming, to which the image of Australia as an island has been central”.³⁰

In 1962, at a time of continuing reflection on Australian identity, McAuley wrote of the early European apprehension of the South Pacific as:

the Antipodean realm, where everything is the reverse of the European order of things; the light of the Golden Age lingers upon it; it is the New World, man’s chance for a new start; the Promised Land of a latter-day chosen people.³¹

Against this rosy projection Quiros’ ultimate bleak vision of futurity in Part Three points to the harsh consequences of exploration: “The natives shot and poisoned from their land” (CP, p. 173). McAuley’s poem predates but anticipates the post-colonial turn of the last quarter of the 20th century. His experience in colonial administration in New Guinea as a lecturer at the Australian School of Pacific Studies (ASOPA from 1946 to 1960) gave him insight into questions facing settler nations like Australia, an awareness also evident in the poetry of some Australian contemporaries, from the Jindyworobak movement of the 1940s (Rex Ingamells and Roland Robinson) to Judith Wright, and emerging indigenous writers Jack Davis and Oodgeroo Noonuccal. ‘Captain Quiros’, which I consider McAuley’s proto-post-colonial long poem, brought to life his own public and private quests, and was enriched by his own experience of and insight into New Guinea, a traditional society such as Quiros might have encountered in 1595.

Islands

The sea voyage involves the making of landfall in the tropical South Pacific, forewarned by the sighting of seabirds, “Tree trunks and coconuts, and turtles floating [...]”, (CP, p. 153) episodes in which the ocean’s coastal zones are now depicted as welcoming, less intimidating. It also involves the encounter with the Other, the islanders. Part One describes Quiros’ arrival at the idyllic Santa Cruz of the

27 Mary Louie Pratt: *Mapping Ideology*, pp. 158.

28 Livio Dobrez: *Identifying Australia in Postmodern Times*, p. 39.

29 Jose Rabasa: *Allegories of Atlas*, p. 323. Rabasa’s words recall Edward Said’s description of the European: “battery of desires, repressions investments and projections”, *id.*: *Orientalism*, p. 36.

30 David Malouf: *The Island*.

31 James McAuley: *Literature and the Arts*, p. 123.

Solomon Islands: McAuley's evocative description of chief "Malope's place" – a ceremonial, utopian traditional society, suggests both past and present:

This is the island world, Malope's place
 Much like our childhood world of presences
 That looks out from a mythic time and space
 Into the real: a land of similes
 Where man conforming to the cosmos proves
 His oneness with all beings, and life moves
 To the rhythm of profound analogies.³²

Tragically such timeless societies would be changed irremediably by the passage of the Europeans.

McAuley's descriptions, such as Malope's place, drew on his direct experience, his notebook recordings,³³ of his time visiting the coastal landscapes of Kubuna and Yule Island missions in New Guinea, Australia's immediate northern neighbour then under its administration, whose landscapes resemble those of Australia's own tropical north. The poet admitted that 'Captain Quiros' was "saturated with New Guinea. I couldn't have written it without that experience".³⁴ Historian Oscar Spate observed that "*Quiros* allowed McAuley to draw on his New Guinea experience, giving him an empathy with Melanesian ways of thought".³⁵

Not many of the topoi traditionally associated with Australia are present in this long, less-known narrative. However with the palms, turtles, rainforests, waters and people of the south western Pacific (the "colour and marvellous world of the Pacific explorations")³⁶ McAuley added to the Australian imaginary the topoi of its tropical North and its oceans to the east, as would contemporaries Judith Wright and John Blight, and successive writers such as Alexis Wright.

The Ocean

McAuley's friend, poet Vincent Buckley, was dismayed to find a final draft even more "persistently prosaic and pedagogical than the first"³⁷ and out of keeping with contemporary poetic fashion. The poet, however, refused any modification, seemingly mindful of what Aristotle had advised the epic poet on diction: "The poet should elaborate his diction in the quieter passages which involves no characterisation or thought".³⁸ So the 'Quiros' narrative erupts with patches of extraordinarily lyrical, concrete beauty, especially in the "quieter patches" of the ocean voyage and island visits. In researching the poem McAuley had read, among many navigational texts, the 1952 study by Rachel Carson 'The Sea Around Us',

32 James McAuley: *Collected Poems*, p. 121.

33 In the nexus between his life and art, McAuley recorded in his Notebook (24 August 1958) that he would try to write the lyrical passage on Malope's place after he had returned from New Guinea, perhaps the Sacred Heart Mission at Yule Island, with a fresher view of its tropical coastal landscapes.

34 Graeme Kinross Smith: *James McAuley* p. 317.

35 O.H.K. Spate: *Luso-Australia*, p. 16.

36 John Thompson's interview: *Poetry in Australia: James McAuley*, p. 102.

37 Vincent Buckley: *Cutting Green Hay*, p. 178.

38 Aristotle, *Poetics*, XXV, 1460b, 1. pp. 37-40.

notable for her scientific observations and poetic citations about the sea.³⁹ A similar noting of oceanic phenomena is reflected in McAuley's long poem showing the poet's considerable research, thus conforming with W.H. Abrams' view of the epic as "that most ambitious of literary enterprises".⁴⁰

The account of Quiros' journey is studded with passages about the ocean, its moods and exotic creatures - "flying fish and albacore" (CP, p. 115), "pale moon jellies" (CP, p. 146), and the region of its skies - "clouds huge as Asia" (CP, p. 146), and southern hemisphere constellations familiarity with which was essential to early navigators. It offers evocative descriptions of sea phenomena seen in Carson- of phosphorescence - "A luminous glory [...] The bows turned up a billowing silver blaze | Over a milky plain of phosphorine" (CP, p. 147); St Elmo's fire, also seen in 'The Ancient Mariner' - "the mast tops seemed alight | Burning like candles [...]" (CP, p. 148) and the southern hemisphere 'Aurora Australis' - "With tracts that burned with opal-yellow hue | Changing to orange, green and azure blue, | And sheets of cold fire as of a lightning sheen". (CP, p. 147). Arguably the poet was following Aristotle's description of the mimetic role of the poet in depicting that wondrous world of the Ocean, also known as the early Greek god Oceanus: "Since the poet, like a painter or any other image-maker, is a mimetic artist".⁴¹

Quiros' voyages also encompass the hazardous coastal geographies of the coral reef and beaches "all features of sea country".⁴²

The Boat

The symbolism of the boat is central to McAuley's retelling of Quiros' two maritime voyages across the then unknown Pacific Ocean. The very beginning evokes their difficult task: "Four ships upon the calm Pacific fold | Smooth water at the stern, scarce making way". (CP, p. 111) and the question of survival ("How will you fare?" CP, p. 113). The boat introduces the "place of otherness, an unpredictable and alien environment possessing great beauty and destructive power".⁴³ Boats represent the journeys of personal and spiritual discovery behind Quiros' project but particularly the Christian element of what is one of Australia's most important Christian poems. Since the days of the Apostles, the ship has been a symbol for the Christian church and the seas and elements suggest the world of sin through which Christians must struggle: "In wintry gulfs when storms beat from the Pole [...] | In a blind world of rain where men despair". (CP, p. 113).

McAuley's long poem goes further back than the Christian world, adverting to the earlier precedent of Noah's ark. In writing the poem, McAuley had been

39 In his Notebook for 1959 McAuley records Carson's observations about "moon jellies," and phosphorescence including what Darwin observed in the Beagle off Brazil. Norma McAuley Collection, State Library of New South Wales.

40 W.H. Abrams, Geoffrey Harpham: A Glossary of Literary Terms, p. 97.

41 Aristotle: Poetics, XXV, 1460b, 1, pp. 7 ff.

42 Nonie Sharp: Saltwater People, pp. 31-35.

43 Michael McCaughan: Symbolism of Ships and the Sea, pp. 54-61.

reading⁴⁴ the ‘Old Testament Book of Wisdom’⁴⁵ whose reference to “the frail wood of the boat” is reflected in the representation of the vulnerable wooden vessels available for Quiros’ journeys (“unballasted”, CP, p. 119, with “rigging and sails rotten”, CP, p. 136). Noah’s “vessel of derision” (CP, p. 141) thus prefigures Quiros’ spiritual cosmography in his own “later Ark | Rid[ing] on baptismal waters to embark | Mystical Adam, the whole company | Of settlers bound for a new heaven and earth” (CP, p. 142). The vessels described in McAuley’s 1964 poem uncannily foreshadow contemporary times of dislocation in which similar fragile craft are used to transport travellers seeking survival across waters and seas. Drawing on McAuley’s post-World War II anthropological experience in his work on New Guinea at the Australian School for Pacific Administration (ASOPA), the sacred purpose of Quiros’ European ‘Christian’ boats is nonetheless queried in the indigenous perspective offered in Part One:

Three tall floating structures had appeared
With white-skinned crews, the colour of the dead.
Were they non-human spirits, to be feared,
Or friendly ghosts of ancestors returning?⁴⁶

They foreshadow possible sinister future presences – “the demon company that might bring them harm” (CP, p. 122).

Reflecting McAuley’s own recent highly divisive experience in 1950s Labour politics, which brought about a split between the secular and Catholic wings of the Labor Party, the boats in ‘Captain Quiros’ offer a range of symbolic representations of human nature ranging from noble quest to murderous pillaging to the simple bid for survival.

Time

Being historical, looking from the future of both its narrator Belmonte and its author, to the past of its protagonist hero Quiros and back again to an unwinding and even more remote future, ‘Captain Quiros’ involves the crossing of seas and time – mythical, historical, colonial, reaching into the poet’s own time, the 1960s, and the unknown future of his readers. McAuley’s experience of New Guinea gave him a privileged insight into challenges facing a society emerging into modernity. That being said, at a regional and global level, McAuley was personally involved in efforts in Australia to stem communist influences in the unions, the Labor Party and in society, having become in 1956 first editor of the centre right literary and general review *Quadrant*. McAuley’s originality in ‘Captain Quiros’ was to incorporate the future in Quiros death-bed prophecy in Part Three, drawn from Quiros’ Memorials to the King of Spain pleading his project. It reflects the failed hero’s acceptance of and author’s knowledge of the nature of

44 McAuley’s 1959 Notebook. Norma McAuley Collection, State Library of New South Wales.

45 The Book of Wisdom is one of the Septaguint books of wisdom of the Old Testament, not included in the Protestant Bible but known to the Catholic convert McAuley.

46 James McAuley: Collected Poems, p. 121.

colonial projects. Thus the sea voyage also brings about both vision and disillusion as Quiros admits:

I saw the primal energies in motion,
Like blind hooves shattering our secular scheme.
The long blue rollers of the Southern Ocean
Had washed away the outlines of my dream.⁴⁷

McAuley's Southern Ocean matches Elizabeth Deloughrey's description of the sea as "a shifting site of history".⁴⁸

Quiros' vision also employs the analogy of maps in which time and space are blended: "And many births of time I saw displayed | Like flat depictions in cartography" thus plunging into "deep perspectives of futurity" (CP, p. 173). Like Wai Chee Dimock's "deep time"⁴⁹ successive historical phases are foreseen, recounted and passed over like palimpsests. The recurring motif of ships as human vessels either wrecked on the shores or forever submerged, reinforces the theme of the ephemeral.

Quiros' death-bed prophecy accesses pre-historical time enabling Quiros to gaze on the Continent he only dreamed of:

"I saw the South Land, vast, worn down, and strange:
Man in his tribes and insect, beast, and tree,
Set in a cyclic pattern beyond change."⁵⁰

The lines are deeply ironic. Such fragile changelessness would be swiftly altered by imminent futurity as the monologue shifts to colonial history – the Dutch, English and French arrivals and the British settlement and also more recent global history. This extends from the Enlightenment to World War II and the Holocaust, returning to regional history – the dislocation of Australia's first people: "The natives shot and poisoned for their land".⁵¹

The dystopian experience concludes with the uninitiated third journey on Quiros' death with Belmonte gazing out from Panama on the inscrutable Pacific: "Calm to the west the clouded Ocean lay; | But I had reached the end of voyaging". Effectively Belmonte signs out for himself and Quiros' vast project and "self-reflexively"⁵² for the author himself who with his long poem would leave his neo-classical grand works for more contemporary genres and stylistics.⁵³

Conclusion

Reflecting on Roland Barthes' observations in "Mythologies", Suvendrini Perera has argued more generally how the sea is "fundamentally other, a field outside

47 James McAuley: *Collected Poems*, p. 172.

48 Elizabeth Deloughrey: *Routes and Roots*, p. 168.

49 Wai Chee Dimock: *Through Other Continents*, p. 28.

50 James McAuley: *Collected Poems*, p. 173.

51 *Ibid.*

52 Jennifer Strauss: *From Heroism to Pietàs*, p. 607.

53 As Lyn McCredden has conjectured, one of the "voyagings" of 'Captain Quiros' was "floating one's own commitment before an alien readership", James McAuley: *Collected Poems*, 1992, pp. 47f.

human signification”.⁵⁴ Such a sense of human insignificance and courage is presented thematically and generically in the course of the 305, 7-line stanzas of McAuley’s modern epic. That the modern epic was a risky project was already suggested in Belmonte’s first Poem when he urges “Go, little stanza, set like a ship to sail, | Inner and outer Ocean” (CP, p. 113). Whether it might be considered an attempt to write a “national biography” will be for contemporary and more recent readers to decide, though its perspicacious 17th-century narrator guessed well that things like that were already “out of fashion” (CP, p. 142) not only in 1964 but also in 1614. As it is, ‘Captain Quiros’ represents a generic excursion, aided by ocean voyaging, through the utopian quest, the “heroic mystery” proclaimed by Belmonte in his second Poem (CP, p. 141), followed by dystopia to a proto-post-colonial apologetics, anticipating perspectives that would be taken up in the last quarter of the 20th century. Perhaps unsurprisingly such sea voyages foreshadow desperate and courageous collective and enterprises that would be undertaken in the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

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54 Suvendrini Perera: *Australia and the Insular Imagination*, p. 48.

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