



GIRAMONDO PUBLISHING

## Tom Carment launches *Battarbee and Namatjira* by Martin Edmond

‘His eyes can look so far away and seem to know what’s there.’

This is Martin’s quote from artist Lloyd Rees – what he once said about Albert Namatjira’s sense of space.

I stand here as an example of Martin’s capacity for forgiveness. About twenty years ago, shortly after we’d met, Martin began using a small room in the downstairs of our terrace house in Womerah Lane, Darlinghurst, as an office and writing room, away from the distractions of his own small place twenty houses up the lane. He installed a computer in there and a printer that took about three minutes to print each page. One day I decided to change a light fitting and pulled all the fuses out to do so – lost him a couple of chapters of the book he was working on: *Autobiography of my Father*.

Before I met Martin I used to see him sauntering down our lane, or loping perhaps, a thoughtful expression on his face and always looking about him. And in retrospect I think Martin’s way of walking is a bit like the way he writes, not in blinkered headlong plot-driven rush, but in a more expansive and considered way. The wonder is in the details of what he tells and how sensitively he builds up a picture, creates a world – he has no need for exaggeration or hyperbole.

Most of us know the bones of the story of Albert Namatjira. It is one of those iconic stories, which in the manner of Chinese whispers has been distorted and simplified down the years. In 2012 when I visited the Indigenous section of the National Gallery in Canberra I was really pleased to find a new room there devoted entirely to Namatjira and few of the other Hermannsburg watercolourists. There was an excellent and varied selection of his work, with sensor lighting that went off when you left the room. Two couples in their sixties and seventies were also viewing the works. One of the men said, arms crossed, ‘Yeah these are by Namatjira. He drank himself to death.’ I felt a bit outraged and was about to go over and say something but one of the women said, ‘That’s not true dear.’

Previous to the TV and digital age no Indigenous person has been quite so famous; and no Australian artist has been so well-known and reproduced. Especially in the post war years, Namatjira’s outback arcadias have cut a window into hundreds of thousands of suburban lounge room walls.

Rex Battarbee’s story is much less well-known and often squeezed into the box of ‘Albert Namatjira’s teacher’, unfairly: for he was a very good painter, the facilitator of an art movement, and so much more than that. Martin says that he was a man who never looked back.

Despite Namatjira’s sad final few years, and his frustrations with government authorities, I think that the narrative Martin fleshes out here is not a tragic one. It’s instead a triumph of serendipity, the story how two men met, became friends and shared something very special, achieved something very special.

It is a big story in that it touches on many themes: first contact, the conflicts of religion and tradition, art, friendship, and the overcoming of hardship. There is humour too, as on the occasion when a white man criticised Albert’s drawing of a kangaroo. His riposte: ‘I’ve eaten more kangaroos than you’ve seen.’

Although it is mainly set in the ’30s, ’40s and ’50s, Martin begins with the Arrernte creation story, then goes on to tell the history of the Lutherans and how they came to Australia and then ventured far into the outback. These ‘digressions’ as Martin calls them are both rich and

enlightening, and necessary to our more complete understanding of what is to come.

Rex Battarbee's story, as Martin tells it, is very moving. If the First World War had not intervened, Rex would probably have happily spent his days as a prosperous Warrnambool pig farmer. He really liked farming. But his horrific battle injuries ended that. He spent three years in hospital, coming out with a useless left arm and bad lungs. It was suggested at the rehab hospital that perhaps he could become a lift driver. Encouraged by his sister however (she had been taught by Walter Withers) he discovered painting, commercial art and, what he enjoyed most, landscape painting. And because his damaged skin was so sensitive to turps and fumes, his medium had to be watercolour. On the other hand Albert Namatjira you feel, would have led some sort of enterprising life if he not met Rex, but probably not in art: as a truck driver or jack of all trades I imagine. Apparently he possessed 'the finest untrained bass voice' that one visitor to Hermannsburg Chapel had ever heard. Martin assiduously plots the twists of fate and circumstance that led to the two men meeting. When they eventually did, and went off painting together, as Martin describes it, Rex soon realised that his student and companion was a prodigy.

Albert in return showed Rex his country, and taught him the stories about it. In that era, it took time and effort to travel to the centre of Australia, either up from Adelaide or down from Darwin – No FIFOs in those days.

And it seems that Hermannsburg Mission in the '30s and '40s was a magnet to a cast of interesting visitors. It was an era of great fluidity in profession: someone working on the telegraph line could become an ethnographer, an evangelist could be a linguist. Bob Croll, RM Williams, Frank Clune, Ted Strehlow, Charles Mountford, Olive Pink and the poet Roland Robinson to mention a few, enter the story in fascinating cameo roles.

The eccentric Teague sisters visited Hermannsburg and helped organise an exhibition to fund a water pipeline. Violet Teague a well-known portraitist hired a taxi all the way from Adelaide, which rivals Bea Miles trip to Perth as one of the longest taxi rides in world history. As a sometime taxi driver, Martin has a vested interest here...

Pastor Albrecht who ran the Mission for decades comes across as a highly principled and strong character who, as well as saving lives, perhaps unwittingly, preserved a lot of Arrernte culture that might have been lost had the pastoralist and government authorities been allowed free rein. Martin outlines Rex's crucial role during WWII in protecting Albrecht from those who would have this 'German' mission shut down its occupants dispersed.

Another strange story is that of Albert's copyright, assigned to his dealer John Brackenreg and Legend Press in the '50s, then renewed in 1984 and further extended by the US free trade agreement. Unable to access copyright to the two biggest and best collections of Namatjiras, the publishers have illustrated this book with black and white photos, poignant images: Albert in an Alice pub, all the white drinkers turned away from him, Rex looking dapper with his leather watercolour satchel over his shoulder, hiding his withered hand beneath his hat.

Martin has had to describe the paintings in words, and indeed I think the book is richer for that. He talks about both Rex's and Albert's pictures, in a beautiful way, that puts us right in them, so to speak, and into the painter's mind. He analyses the way they paint water, rocks, trees and space. Martin has a long pedigree in writing about painters, in his two books about NZ artists Colin McCahon and Philip Clairmont. I know of few other authors who write this well about painting. As a painter myself, a *plein-air* painter, I see how lucky it was that Albert was taught by a watercolourist rather than an oil painter. This medium, quick-drying and portable, was so suited the travelling outdoor lifestyle. As well, its luminosity so suited the colours of the sky and land they were looking at. Rex and Albert's watercolours, within the parameters of their mimetic realism, are some of the most luminous ever painted in Australia. Martin points to the similarities between the two artists and the differences: Rex's emphasis on patterning of things close-up and in the middle distance, like dragon lines, and Albert's wonderful sense of space, the delicacy of his touch.

There is frequent mention in this book of Albert and his family struggling to protect their paintings from the weather and the dirt. In one instance they crossed a flooded river with a number of wrapped-up watercolours held aloft, gifts, trying to get to Rex Battarbee's wedding on time. There are some narrow-minded and spiteful characters in this tale too – a contrast to the humility and kindness of Rex Battarbee – some curators and critics like John Reed, who wrote angry letters

about the mistake of the government funding a film about Namatjira (he wrote: 'the painting he is doing is entirely false to his own culture and is merely a clever apeing of a completely different one'. The use of the word 'apeing', most unfortunate), and Hal Missingham, the Director of the AGNSW, who said that he'd think about hanging a Namatjira if he ever came up to scratch, and the officials who prevented Albert from leasing a viable cattle run, and from travelling to Perth.

I guess there was a period when Namatjira's popularity served him ill amongst some in the arts community, when modernists were looking to America. The trope of those most reproduced landscapes, with a tree on the left or right with blue ranges beyond, was felt to be kitsch. The full variety and originality of Albert's compositions was perhaps not well-served by the subject bias of the ubiquitous mass-produced reproductions.

The end of this book is undoubtedly sad. Albert moves away from the puritanical influence of Pastor Albrecht, copes with the death of two of his daughters in childbirth, with the crazy demands his fame has brought, tries to share his good fortune with his large family, and suffers ill health. Martin quotes an exhausted Albert saying to a journalist 'I wish people would leave me alone for a while and let me work as I want to work – like any other painter – when I see something lovely enough to make me want to paint my best.'

But despite this ending, the historic encounter between Battarbee and Namatjira remains, and it is a truly noble one. The great paintings too remain, and the tradition of Hermannsburg Art carries on today in both watercolour and painted ceramics.

Albert Namatjira was restless and yet Martin shows us that very often his works were pictures of home. Martin writes: 'And so it seems that there is at once a way back and no way back; a home but not a home; a place that is, under the enormous, cloud-streaked, sheltering sky, both here and not here.'

I hope that Martin's research is just the beginning, and, in particular, inspires someone to find and retrieve Rex Battarbee's paintings, hidden away in private collections, to exhibit them nationally and to publish them.

Congratulations to Giramondo Press for publishing *Battarbee and Namatjira* – the design, paper stock and editing are all of the highest quality. And, above all, congratulations to Martin on this timely and engrossing book – so rich, eloquent and truthful.

This speech was delivered at the launch on 5 November 2014 at Better Read than Dead Bookshop, Newtown.

Tom Carment is a distinguished Sydney-based landscape and portrait artist. His most recent publication is the book [Seven Walks](#), featuring his paintings and sketches and texts, and photographs by Michael Wee.