

NEW NOVELS

Terra Incognita

"The Timeless Land," by Eleanor Dark; Collins.

Because Eleanor Dark has brought to the records of the first settlement at Port Jackson a rare degree of imaginative insight, her fine novel should convey to her own people and to the rest of the world a deep and lasting impression of the actual nature of the difficulties with which those first settlers were confronted.

She has chosen the wisest course in the construction of her novel. Gleaning from much research the facts; pondering over the letters and journals of the most articulate members of the First Fleet; studying the findings of experts on aboriginal life and lore, she has, over a period of years, stored up a solid fund of knowledge. With an unerring selective instinct she has chosen those personalities from the records which best serve to make her picture and her argument vivid and convincing. In order to give the story richness, variety, and that additional detail which adds spice to any historical novel, she has created brilliantly several characters in whom are embodied all those small but vastly important traits which distinguish a man from his fellow, one race from another.

One of the most striking features of the novel is its powerful atmospheric suggestiveness. Eleanor Dark writes well. But that is not all. She has, besides, the ability to transport the reader into the very heart of the scenes she describes. One can feel the indefinable uneasiness of the aboriginal in touch, for the first time, with a civilisation entirely beyond his comprehension. "There was more than uneasiness—a kind of tense and alert defiance, dangerous because no enemy resisted, an anticipation of peril, demoralising because the peril was shapeless, unseen, unnamed. They could react to it only as they reacted to other, more normal perils, with noisy threats and ferocious declarations of their intrepidity."

And over against this is set the fear of this strange land, which, though for the most part unacknowledged, undoubtedly haunted the leaders of the expedition, the convicts, and even Arthur Phillip himself. The great silence of the land, the elusiveness of the natives, the unyielding nature of the soil and the unpredictability of a strange climate filled the responsible members of the settlement with foreboding. "Things happened differently here. Seasons were reversed, the earth, the soil itself seemed another kind of substance, the very pattern of the stars overhead was unfamiliar. Everything which lived in it, everything which grew in it was stamped unmistakably with its character. What happened, then, to man transplanted? Different standards, different habits of thought, truths for which their fathers would have died became no longer truths, the clear drawn pattern of the social structure they had known blurring, fading, growing unreal and unimportant, and some new conception arising, born out of their union with the land . . ."

In choosing individual members of the administrative group for special notice the author has shown, again,

an unerring selective instinct. Her study of Arthur Phillip is illuminating. From it he emerges clearly in what one feels are his true proportions: a man of great integrity and no little imagination; one whose sense of duty was often at odds with his natural sympathies; a human being at the mercy of physical disability and mental conflict; an official in one of the most difficult situations in which a government representative could find himself. The portraits of lively, immaculate Captain Tench, capable Surgeon White, repressed Lieutenant Clark, disagreeable Major Ross, lovable David Collins and a somewhat enigmatic Hunter are excellent. Against these, the composite character study of Andrew Prentice and his children, the fictional escaped convict and his offspring, stands out impressively. In Prentice, Mrs. Dark has presented a memorable creation. Physically magnificent, mentally superior to his comrades, this man exerts all his own natural cunning and enlists that of the aborigines in order to gain his freedom. And in spite of a suggestion of over-dramatisation he remains credible to the end.

In spite of great length and long stretches of narrative and descriptive prose, this novel maintains its vitality to the finish. It is the outstanding Australian novel of 1941.