

## A Time of Bibles and Guns: Ivan Southall's *The Long Night Watch*

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“All those dates and prophecies they dug up. Everything fitting together like they'd read it in yesterday's newspaper.” (Ivan Southall, *The Long Night Watch* 71-72)

In Ivan Southall's *The Long Night Watch*, each of the thirty-five chapter headings except one includes either a date or a range of dates. (The one exception, chapter 25, inserts a date at the end of the first paragraph). Some dates occur only once. Others—for example, October 16, 1938, September 22, 1940, July 25, 1941, and February 16, 1942—appear repeatedly. Most of the repeated dates are also linked; for example, chapter 20's heading links October 16, 1938 and February 16, 1942.

What is the purpose of this extraordinary attentiveness to calendar time? If we conclude that the temporal conjunctions imply a narrative in which “accidents [. . .] do not happen” (59), we parallel our reading practices to those of the members of S.W.O.R.D. (Society for World Order under Divine Rule). S.W.O.R.D. is Southall's imaginary political-religious sect, a group of 100 Australians who in a time of war study the language of the Bible for signs of the divine pattern within world history. Like them, we may decide that solving the narrative puzzle requires only that we become clever readers, capable of tracing the connections between disparate events. According to S.W.O.R.D., “all events happen because other events precede them” (59). If this is true, then life is like an intricately plotted novel, and we are historical subjects born to our identities and destinies. Whether we are jackboot-wearing Nazis or cricket-wielding British colonials, “the life [we] get stuck with derives from destiny or the so-called accident of birth” (58). Accepting their destiny, the members of S.W.O.R.D. are convinced that they know how to read the plot.

If we are familiar with Southall's other work, both his novels that end so unconventionally and his lectures on children's literature, we might be suspicious of such confidence in the significance and clarity of the plot.<sup>1</sup> A writer who prefers the ambivalent to the simple, Southall ends *A Journey of Discovery: On Writing for Children* by insisting that there both is and is not a boundary between children's literature and adult literature (102). A similar ambivalence concludes his account of how he became a children's writer, when he observes that beginnings and endings in life as well as fiction are “conventions of language” (*A Journey* 92). Recalling his childhood religious training, he emphasizes that “at this moment” (92) he still believes that “Creation is infinite” (92).

The ability to have it both ways, to acknowledge the infinity of creation even as he situates himself in human clock time—“at this moment”—foregrounds the ambiguity of time in *The Long Night Watch*. Infinity cannot be pinned down; clock time can. An obsession with time is characteristic of the apocalypse, and *The Long Night Watch* might be read as an apocalyptic fantasy. Yet it also grounds itself in the days and weeks of a

particular historical moment. And if we read the novel as the members of S.W.O.R.D. read their Bible, confident that they can recognize the end of time, what do we make of the final chapter that takes place so many years after that supposed end?

In summer 1941, 100 members of S.W.O.R.D. led by Brigadier Matthew Palmer, an imposing politician and former military hero, depart Australia for a deserted volcanic island. In this version of birth is destiny, the Chosen People are “Anglo-Saxon-Celtic” (68). To them, S.W.O.R.D. offers a clear and reassuring knowledge of beginnings and endings: “We can tell you what is happening in the world and why it is happening and how you may be able to cope with it” (70). The apocalypse is happening and the way to cope is to separate from those who are not chosen and “re-establish a direct physical link between God and Earth” (116). Hence the voyage to the island of Tangu Tangu where the members of S.W.O.R.D. await divine rescue, the coming of the Heroes of Light.

Although we will not find Tangu Tangu in any atlas—I have tried—the novel incessantly maps its location. The unnamed narrator first tells us that the island is “close to the Equator at 146 degrees 50 Minutes East” (8). Brigadier Palmer confirms this location and adds that the island lies just north of the Admiralty Islands and the New Guinea mainland (33). Here is the site of a government-sanctioned mission whose motives are never clear, but Operation Sword, the code name that the government uses, is both evocative of the terminology operative during the war, and also predictably a matter of concern to the Japanese.<sup>2</sup> When the Japanese subsequently invade “Tangu Tangu and islands of the Bismarck Archipelago on February 16, 1942” (159), they claim to do so because of their alarm over the garrison’s name. What puzzles them is that they find only five adolescents.

Whether the Japanese attack upon Tangu Tangu is simultaneous with a supernatural rescue of the other members of S.W.O.R.D. is left unresolved. What we do know is that whatever happens, it occurs at precisely “5:28 a.m. local time [. . .] on February 16, 1942” (7). We also know that this event happens, “in the third year of the Second World War; two months after Pearl Harbor; eight months after Hitler had headed out into Russia” (7-8). It is, “the Dark Age of modern times” (7), the time of Southall’s own early adulthood, when Southall says his generation learned “too much about fear” (*A Journey* 33). From the Allies’ point of view, at this precise moment the war is not going well at all, and from Australia’s perspective, this is when the nation feels most vulnerable to the threat of invasion.<sup>3</sup>

To anyone familiar with this period of Australian history, Southall’s decision to focus upon February 16, 1942 does not appear accidental. On February 15, 1942, Singapore, “the symbol of British might in the far east” (McKernan 110), was captured by the Japanese. This defeat was not only very costly in terms of Australian casualties; it was symbolically “enormously demoralising” (McKernan 110). The next day—the very day of the novel’s apocalyptic crisis—the Australian Prime Minister John Curtin stated that “The fall of Singapore opens the Battle for Australia” (Robertson 93). In his radio broadcast, Curtin urged Australians to prepare for a battle comparable to the Battle of Britain, and declared, “It is now work or fight as we have never worked or fought before”

(Robertson 97). When the Japanese subsequently bombed Darwin, a northern Australian city on February 19, 1942, the conviction that invasion was imminent reached its height.

Conventional historical adventure fiction might evoke this apocalyptic mood in a narrative that takes its adolescent protagonists from national crisis to victory. Southall is not at all interested in this conventional narrative arc, however, and turns to the conventions of speculative fiction to ask questions about time, religion, and war that concern him. He makes *The Long Night Watch* a novel that we read not to determine what happened—Southall refuses to say—but to experience the terror and confusion that characterize living in a time of war. Yet if this is the case, why is Southall so meticulous about his dates? It is unlikely that readers ignorant of Australia's wartime history will respond to the novel's profusion of dates by educating themselves about the events that underlie the novel. Even if they were to do so, chronologies of Australia's response to the war always refer to a set of key dates and events, yet Southall's attentiveness to time exceeds those chronologies.<sup>4</sup> In contrast to how dates normally function in historical chronologies, that is, as a way of creating causal order, the novel's obsessive accuracy serves to make us more ignorant and more anxious. We sense that the dates matter, but we are not sure how.

Our ignorance of the history behind the dates thus makes us very much like the members of S.W.O.R.D once they are on Tangu Tangu. They do not know that the day before they arrive on their island, Japanese troops land in southern Indo-China. They do not know that on November 19, 1941 a German raider sunk the *Sydney* off the coast of Western Australia, and that on December 10, 1941, two other ships, the *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse*, were sunk by Japanese aircraft. Although Hogan Hanley Hancock, one of the novel's adolescent watchmen, reports that he has seen 22 sharks, "One [. . .] flying the Rising Sun. [. . . another] flying the Swastika" (91), the members of S.W.O.R.D. do not know that serious bombing raids took place on Australian controlled territory from January 1942 on, and that the Japanese seriously "debated [. . .] whether they should invade the north of Australia" (Beaumont 30). They do not know these details of the war's progress because once on the island, only the Brigadier has access to a wireless and his attempts to make contact are not always successful. The Brigadier may be suspicious when he cannot contact Rabaul, in the Australian territory of New Guinea, but he never knows that the Japanese capture this important port on January 23, 1942. Oblivious to the extent of Japanese advances, we share the ignorance of the members of S.W.O.R.D. and are willing to accept as they do that lights seen on February 16, 1942 are indeed the vanguard of the Heroes of Light.

Other repeated dates such as October 16, 1938 and September 22, 1940 also allude to frightening historical moments. The appeal of S.W.O.R.D.'s apocalyptic discourse in the Bijou Theatre on those dates makes sense to anyone cognizant of the fate of Czechoslovakia in October 1938 and the Battle of Britain in September 1940. Southall takes pains to ensure that we regard October 1938 as the moment when the catastrophic consequences for Czechoslovakia of Neville Chamberlain's visit to Munich became apparent. Hogan is not particularly concerned when Chamberlain "rush[es] off to Germany to try to prevent the Battle of Armageddon" (61), but in October 1938, the

futility of Chamberlain's actions become apparent and Hogan's family converts to the apocalyptic vision of S.W.O.R.D. Southall also ensures that we are aware that the September 1940 event in the Bijou coincides with the Battle of Britain when "the walls of the pit at the feet of the British race were breaking" (111).

Other dates do not appear in conventional histories of World War Two, and their effect is to disrupt the novel's temporal structure so that our faith in the causality implied by chronology collapses. For example, the first three chapters that refer to October 16, 1938, chapters 11 to 13, interrupt a series of chapters that refer to 1941. Undoubtedly Hogan's first encounter with the apocalyptic vision of S.W.O.R.D. on October 16, 1938 in the Bijou Theatre in Melbourne is the first step in bringing him to Tangu Tangu three years later. But just as October 16, 1938 determines the events of 1941, October 16 is also predetermined by earlier dates and events. In chapter 11, the heading links October 16, 1938 with June 4, 1925, a date whose only significance is that it is the day that Hogan is born. In contrast, chapter 12 goes back much further in time, linking October 16, 1938 to 1700 B.C. which might be a beginning, or might simply be a reference to another time when religion offered a way of explaining the events of the world.<sup>5</sup> The narrator foregrounds his failed attempt to organize his story whereby every effect has its cause: "The farther back one stretches towards any starting point, the more obscured the starting point is seen to be" (102).

A further puzzle is that some dates, such as July 25, 1941, the date that brings S.W.O.R.D. to Tangu Tangu, stand on their own. Brigadier Palmer acknowledges that there may be a biblical parallel in having spent 40 days aboard ship, but he regards the time aboard ship as accidental, the product of waiting for a destroyer to accompany them, not as a divine sign. So how do we know which dates matter? Two other dates, that appear at the head of chapter one and are the only headings not in parentheses, also appear only once. Is the lack of parentheses an accident of sloppy editing or a clue? Are the dates of April 23, 1873-October 14, 1941 the real clue to the mystery of the novel's ending? October 14, 1941 is only one of many dates when Jon David Griffiths, the adolescent night watchman, struggles to keep awake as he stands guard, ready to "raise the alarm if the invaders came in" (14). April 23, 1873 is presumably when the drum was last beaten, "[s]eventy years before" (14), when Christians carrying "Bibles and guns" (14) invaded Tangu Tangu and killed five islanders.<sup>6</sup> The narrator tells us that as a consequence five Christians were "slain in reprisal and eaten" (14); it is their bones, presumably, that are found in an island cave. Should we conclude that there is a connection between the five Australian adolescents who are found by the Japanese invaders February 16, 1942 and the five islanders murdered 70 years before? Is Jon truly involved in an "ironic circle of history" (14) in which there are no accidents because everything has been predicted in the Bible?

The novel is perfectly willing to suggest that the divine participates in human time. What it questions is the nature of the divine. On Christmas day, 1941 (another date that is mentioned only once), Jon grudgingly performs his duty. Perched on top of a cliff, known by earlier inhabitants as the Seat of the Watcher for God, Jon knows that his task is to warn the sleeping inhabitants of what he sees. Trapped by his promise to the

Brigadier, Jon is cynical about the value of prayer, and suspects that the Japanese are more likely to show up than the Heroes of Light are. Even if God does intercede, and Jon is willing to entertain the possibility that prayers work, he worries whether prayers necessarily summon up the good. Jon's ambivalence is grounded in his recognition that the Brigadier's ability to excite a crowd is comparable to Hitler's: "you get caught up in it like all those Germans screaming Hitler's name. It's the same madness" (88). The night of the Japanese invasion, Hogan sees both their airplanes "and the awesome lights of God" (131). He too wonders whether S.W.O.R.D. has misunderstood the nature of the divine. All five adolescents who remain alive at the end—once characterized as those who were most eager to die for their Brigadier—come to doubt the promises of S.W.O.R.D. But why they alone are found alive is never clarified.

In problematizing their survival, *The Long Night Watch* concentrates on the anguish of being adolescent at a time when dates appear to be so significant, but no chronology of dates can satisfactorily explain when or why war becomes inevitable. In the light of recent events and our own apocalyptic turn, we too might understand the compulsion to focus on dates and to long for a chronology that explains exactly when the world changed. We might well sympathize when Jon is asked what he wants to get out of life and the adolescent blurts out, "I don't want to die too soon, sir" (16). *The Long Night Watch* does more than address our current feelings of terror; leaping back to earlier dates, it foregrounds the hysteria that arises whenever people are afraid of their own time. S.W.O.R.D. appears to offer people both an explanation of what is happening in the world and a solution. Although the acronym of S.W.O.R.D. echoes Japan's plans in the 1930s and 40s for a Greater East Asia New Order, and the Brigadier's charisma and racial theories are disturbingly like Hitler's, we can easily think of contemporary equivalents. Apocalyptic visions for which powerful adults readily find children willing to die are not found just in the history of World War Two.

In the foreword to the novel, the unnamed narrator takes offence when a reader compares his manuscript to the stories found in the Bible. The narrator is disturbed by the destructive consequence of religious writings of any sort: "Millions have so vigorously believed in these writings or traditions of remarkable events, that they have persecuted, imprisoned, tortured or killed millions who have not shared their beliefs" (9). To read *The Long Night Watch* as the members of S.W.O.R.D. read their Bible, paying attention to every date, eager for signs of the apocalypse, would be to mistake Southall's intent. *The Long Night Watch* does not demand our belief, for the consequences of belief remain dangerous. The novel's heart does not lie in the secrets of its apocalyptic ending, but the process that leads to it: "How was it that these events ever came to happen? Why were they allowed to happen?" (102). These are the questions that compel Ivan Southall; these are the questions that remain timely today, June 7, 2003.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, the inconclusive ending of *To the Wild Sky*.

<sup>2</sup> Examples of code names used in the war are Arcadia, Cartwheel, and Matador. They refer respectively to a U.S.-British conference in Washington, December 1941-January 1942, the “converging drives on Rabaul by South Pacific and SWPA forces” and the “British plan to defend northern Malaya, December 1941” (Robertson xiv).

<sup>3</sup> In accounts of Australia’s participation in World War Two, chapters that describe December 1941 through February 1942 frequently bear titles such as “Panic” (McKernan 96) and “Australia’s Gravest Hour” (Robertson 77).

<sup>4</sup> See the dates and events listed, for example in “Chronology of the war,” Joan Beaumont, ed., *Australia’s War 1939-45*, xv-xvi.

<sup>5</sup> Another temporal oddity is the novel’s anachronistic references to the Holocaust, both in its imagery and as a word that was not widespread until long after the war.

<sup>6</sup> Of course, 1873 to 1941 is not exactly 70 years.

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