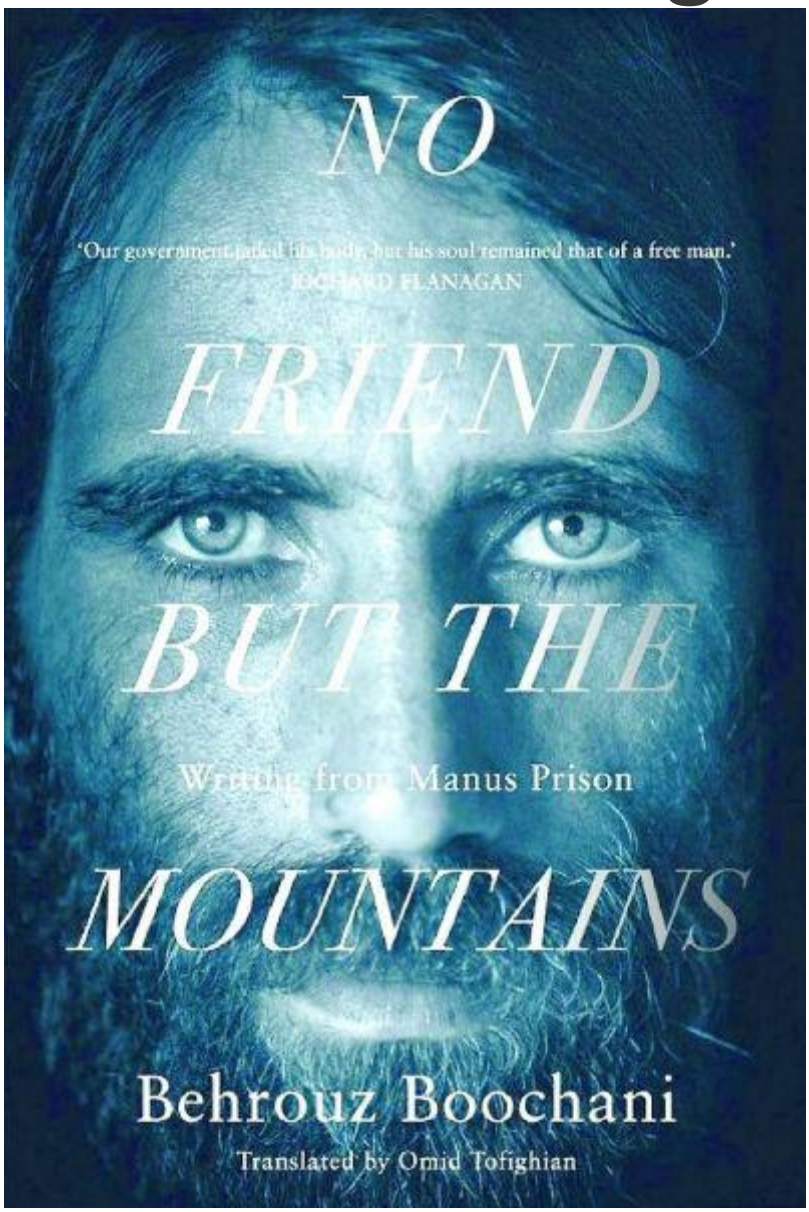
EUREKA STREET

On first reading Boochani on Manus



Andrew Hamilton

07 May 2019

I came late to *No Friend But the Mountains: Writing from Manus Prison*, by Behrouz Boochani. I expected to find a harrowing account of life on Manus Island, accurate and unadorned. He is a brave journalist. It is indeed accurate and harrowing. But I was not expecting to be blown away by the literary quality and the epic scope of the book.

My response took me back to a similarly seminal book read in my youth. Then, too, I wondered at the epic scope of the story and the power of music in words to convey meaning. At the risk of proving myself a smarty pants I shall describe that experience because it illuminates my reading of *No Friend but the Mountains.*

Although I then had only a little time to myself in a very regimented day I had access to a 19th century copy of the *Iliad* which I read avidly. One line stays in my memory; it translates: 'He went unwillingly along the shore of the many sounding sea.' It describes the Trojan seer Chryses returning to the city. The Argive King Agamemnon had brutally refused his request to give back his daughter after seizing her as a sex slave.

I was captivated by the way the sound of the line conveyed Chryses' desolation, the splashing of waves and the loneliness of one man within the coming cosmic struggle of which he is the unknowing catalyst. Tennyson catches finely the music of the final two words in his line in *Ulysses,* 'The deep moans round with many voices.'

The early pages of Boochani's book had the same effect on me as did the Iliad. His description of the boat journeys to Christmas Island displayed the same captivating storytelling, the same mastery of language to make the reader hear the storm and feel

drenched by the waves, the same cosmic themes of sea, storm and fate, and the same detailed attention to the way individuals responded to this crisis. The alternation of expansive narration and short italicised summary phrases, too, echoed the dialogue and choruses in Greek tragedy. The book works in three dimensions.

As in the *Iliad,* too, people are described with honorific titles. The swift of foot Achilles, wily Odysseus and Thersites of the long speech find their parallel in the Fat Boy, the Prophet, the Cow and the Gentle Giant. People are pared down to their characteristic stance in the story. The parallels between the *Iliad* and *No Friend but the Mountains* are not accidental. In contemporary Kurdistan, as in Homer's Greece, literary and oral cultures intersect. Such devices of oral story telling as the repetition of formulaic phrases are to be expected. The collegial composition of the book by Boochani, his translator and others also echoes the layers of oral compositions in which generations of storytellers retold and amplified the story.

"Boochani explores character by noticing and reflecting on his own and others' response to the dehumanising forces at work in the prison and to the mechanisms by which people are ground down."

All that said, the significant differences between the two texts are also illuminating. Homer explores human character shown in events within a warrior culture. His dominant stories are of battles to which he attends in great detail, even down to precise reference to the places where spears and swords enter and leave the body and what they touch on the way. The forces that govern the success of the warriors' actions are the favour and rage of capricious Gods.

Boochani's story is one of endurance within a prison, in which there are no events. Space is fenced in and time has no past or meaningful future. People suffer as did Richard II: 'I wasted time and now doth time waste me.' Effective action is impossible and humanity itself is under siege. Boochani explores character by noticing and reflecting on his own and others' response to the dehumanising forces at work in the prison and to the mechanisms by which people are ground down. His is an entirely secular world, and he resists any recourse to prayer or spiritual consolation even in the most dangerous of times. Human fate is controlled by the actions of other human beings, especially by the Australians who have constructed the prison world on Manus Island.

In the central sections of the book Boochani describes the reality of imprisonment for the people held there, showing and reflecting in detail on the effects on the prisoners of heat and overcrowding, of the pervasive stink of sweat and latrines ankle deep in urine, of hunger caused by inadequate and poor food, of the reduction of people to numbers, of the long queues for everything, of the hierarchy in the prison of government representatives in Australia, unseen officials, officers watching and officers in direct contact with the refugees, ancillary nursing and catering staff, the local PNG officers and the refugees themselves, and of the combination of arbitrary changes to regulations and processes and of the refusal of officers to take responsibility for any decision to vary regulations. In the most shameful example, this led to a son repeatedly being prevented from telephoning his dying father.

All these things were designed to turn people into sheep, terrified by any rumour, malleable to every command, and unable to take responsibility. When reflecting on the mechanisms by which the prisoners' behaviour and feelings are controlled, he uses the concept of *Kyriarchy*. By this he refers to the way in which all the relationships of one person with another, with the natural and built environment, and with time are controlled in such a way that freedom is

excluded, humiliation, dependence, competition between people and self-disgust are fomented, power is exercised hierarchically and arbitrarily, and regulations are made by unnamed people at a distance from the people to whom they apply. The result is inflexibility in what is demanded and arbitrariness in what is delivered.

Boochani correctly describes the resultant conduct of the prison and the dehumanisation of people as the intended outcome of a policy that sent people unwanted in Australia to the prison in order that their suffering would deter other people from coming by boat.

From my observation in Australian detention centres such a system flows inevitably from the view that people may be used as means for extraneous goals. In this case, to deter others. Once that position was adopted to justify the mandatory detention and later exile to Nauru and Manus Island of innocent people, their subsequent treatment was inevitably controlled by instrumental goals that were increasingly, and now totally, divorced from the human dignity of the people affected. In Australia in the last few years the treatment of refugees has been increasingly shaped by operational questions of how to guarantee absolute control.

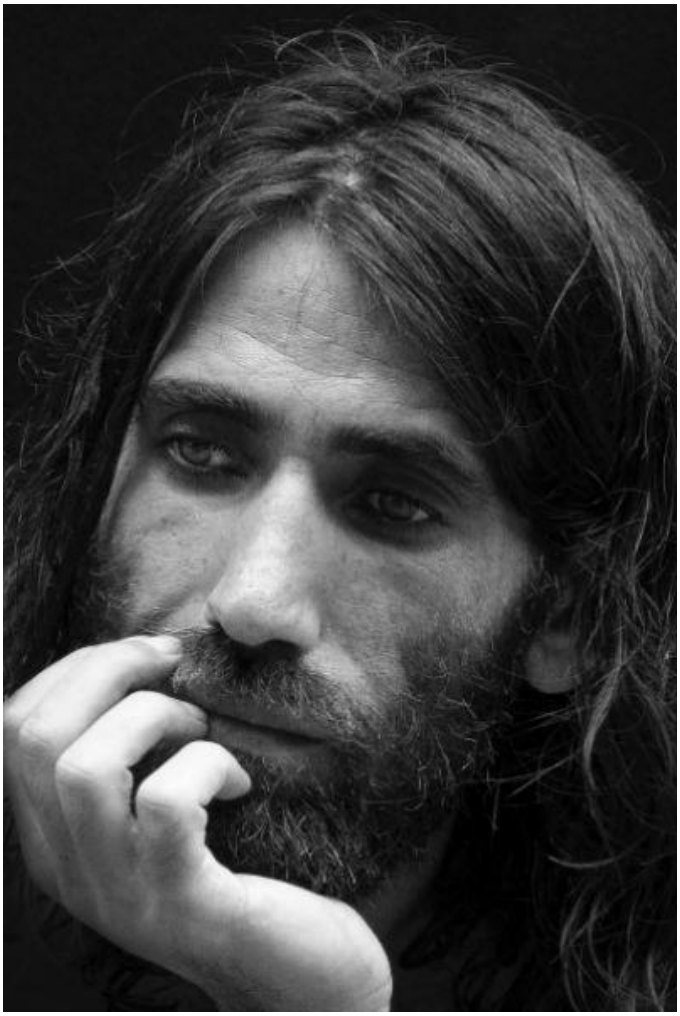
The incrementally complex hierarchical steps created between policy makers and those dehumanised by the policy ensure that no one in the process regards as salient the consequent degradation of the people seeking protection. As a result everyone involved in the administration can avail themselves of the Nuremberg defence, but none can escape the moral corruption that taints them. As the goal of deterrence has melded into the goal of electoral advantage, the taint has spread to affect the way that unemployed, Indigenous Australians and the homeless are treated.

Boochani's story, however, is not ultimately about death but about life; not about slavery but about the search for freedom. He details the ways in which he and others seek a standing place in this dystopia and so might find grounds for self-respect. These underlie the formal titles he gives to people. Some prisoners seek it in manners — respectable dress and address, others in attempts to lead, others in jesting, others simply in being the first in queues and being fed, others in attending to the needs of their neighbours.

Boochani is sensitive to the way in which all these masks can be self-delusion, adopted to be seen to have the virtue or power that one knows one lacks. He describes the Gentle Giant, the one person in the prison to whom he also refers by name, as the only person whose kindness is disinterested. But he also recognises that such social roles are an act of resistance to *Kyriarchy*. Maysam the Whore, a young man with a gift for satirical dance, gathers people to his subversive performances, much to the discomfort of the guards. Boochani tries to find himself through suffering in solitude. When alone he can sometimes wonder at the beauty of nature around the camp and also remain connected with the dreams and memories of his youth, with all the dislocation caused by war. These lyrical passages lighten the heaviness of the storytelling while highlighting the squalor and brutality of the prison.

"It is hard for an Australian reader to read this book without anger at what is done in our name on Manus Island and without shame at the portrayal Australians as incurious, faceless, brutal empty vessels."

In the final section of the book Boochani describes his risky climb on to the top of a hut and a lyrical vision that brings together the mountains of Kurdistan of his childhood, his first love, the flowers and vegetation of Manus Island. He concludes the book with an event that matches in its epic power the sea journey with which it begins.



The prisoners riot and so, despite their lack of self-awareness, assert their freedom. The riot was put down brutally in one section of the prison. The other prisoners were marched outside the fences and later returned. An edited version of the final pages shows how Boochani brings together enigmatically the themes of the book:

The prisoners are docile sheep. They re-enter the prison as if they are mute and deaf. The officers also look weary ... But the bastards always have something to prove. When we re-enter the prison rather than accompany the prisoners from Fox Prison to their rooms, they take us to the large tent called Charlie ...

No one except prisoners are in that space. We are to witness a scene that will ensure no-one will ever again risk even contemplating the possibility of challenging the Kyriarchal System.

Alongside the walls of the tent enclosure
Bodies on top of bodies
A mixture of blood
Different blood flowing into each other
One blood ...
Over on the side lies a young lad, his eyes in pain, calling for his mother. It is Maysam the Whore. All his cheerfulness, all his childish playfulness, all seem to have faded from his face forever. He is a different man now; crushed, terrified, annihilated ...

... Chauka flies down from the summit of the tallest coconut tree in the prison to unite with the hero
Chauka laments
The Hero laments
The chant of a bird and the chant of a man
Both chants blends into one
The lament ... of nature ... this lamentation of nature
This lament ... of a human ... this lamentation of the human being
The message arrives.

They had killed Reza. They had killed The Gentle Giant.

This death of the only named and naturally good person in the prison and crushing of its satirist seem a total defeat of freedom. But in the movement of the book they seem paradoxically to be the seed of its vindication. A hint of resurrection in a godforsaken world.

It is hard for an Australian reader to read this book without anger at what is done in our name on Manus Island and without shame at the portrayal Australians as incurious, faceless, brutal empty vessels, compliant cogs in the Kyriarchy. It may also prompt shame at how we imagine people who seek protection — variously as victims, heroes, vicious, virtuous, pawns, people unlike us and as ideological causes — as anything but real human beings like ourselves. Certainly, too, shame at how sporadic are our efforts to free these prisoners.

No Friend But the Mountains deservedly won an Australian prize but was considered ineligible for others because the writer was not Australian. The book itself mocks that exclusion. Boochani's years in the little patch of Australian rule on Manus Island branded him as Australian in the same way that African slaves became American by the brand their American owners burned on to them.
This is one of the great Australian books, uncompromising in its exploration of humanity *in extremis,* assuredly poetic in its style, and revealing of the nation as a *tabula rasa.* It will continue to be read and honoured in the distant future when the people who devised Manus Island are remembered only as footnotes in it. At the end of the book the prisoners briefly recover their humanity at a heavy cost. *No Friend But the Mountains* asks whether Australians will venture on the same path.

Andrew Hamilton is consulting editor of *Eureka Street*.

direct: https://www.eurekastreet.com.au