

Interview with Robyn Davidson

by Tim Youngs

ABSTRACT

In an interview with Tim Youngs, conducted on 8 July 2004, Robyn Davidson discusses her relationship to Australia and her peripatetic existence, which she compares with the movement of traditional nomads. Refusing an easy identification with them, she nevertheless admits having a romantic feeling for their lifeways. Modern forms of post-industrial rootlessness, she acknowledges, are not the same as ancient forms of nomadism, which are disappearing with globalisation, a process whose effects she plans to represent in a series of films. Reflecting on her travel books, *Tracks* and *Desert Places*, Davidson talks of how they are artefacts and their narrators' creations. The construction of a persona affords her a welcome anonymity. Writing about a journey is to relive it but also creates a distance between the event and the writing. Davidson likens travel writing to the novel and she considers some of the characteristics of women's writing. Finally, developing some comments made in her introduction to the *Picador Book of Journeys*, Davidson talks about the future of travel writing.

Note on contributor

Robyn Davidson is the author of *Tracks*, which won the 1980 Thomas Cook Travel Book Award, and of *Desert Places* (1996). She is also the author of the novel *Ancestors* (1990), which was shortlisted for the Premier's Award, and a collection of essays, *Travelling Light* (1989). She edited *The Picador Book of Journeys* in 2001.

TY I know you're in the middle of packing for a trip to India and you've talked about how you feel yourself to be nomadic, having a home nowhere and spending your time between three continents. Is that still working out for you?

RD Well I don't know about working out. It's hard work and every year I swear that this year I'm going to find the focus place. You know, it'll be London or Sydney or India, and it just never quite happens. I've really been in that state ever since I left Australia in 1979, so I should be used to it. But as I get older I find it more exhausting, morally as well as physically. I often think that I should go home to Australia, and I do go home as often as I can. I've probably been back to Australia every second year since I left, but Australia has changed a lot and I have changed a lot, so what actually am I going home to? If I do go back it's as if I have to re-establish myself in, not a strange place, but in a different place from the one I left. It might be my fate that I just try to keep these three countries, four counting the States, going until I'm just too tired to do it and then exhaustion will take over and I'll choose a place willy-nilly, and it won't be so much from choice as from simply how it falls out.

TY You still refer to Australia as home.

RD Yes, I do, but not without ambivalence. It's the closest thing to home but on the other hand I've spent twenty years in and out of London. I have a flat in London, so that also feels like home, and I've got the cottage up in the Himalayas and that certainly feels like home because it's where I've built a garden, I care about its fate, I care about all the people who live around me there, and I feel entangled with their lives, and because of the situation there. They're quite dependent on me for employment and therefore there's a sense of responsibility. I think more and more people are living in this way. The norm in which you had a home which was the centre of the circle from which you might venture or radiate out is changing a lot, I think, and the norm tends to be more people like me who have come from somewhere else and who are quite shallowly rooted in various places.

TY How do you compare this kind of nomadic existence that you lead, and I think a number of people lead now, with the more traditional kind of nomadic existence? I'm thinking in particular of the way that Bruce Chatwin tries to suggest that there's an affinity between the modern kind of movement and the older movement.

RD I'm not sure about this. I think it's something quite different although I understand Bruce's romantic attachment to the idea of nomadism through the peripatetic nature of his own life. I certainly understand that. But I do think it's a somewhat romantic idea because traditional nomadism, it strikes me, consists of people who feel identified with an area of land. It's difficult to make big generalisations because there are different kinds of nomadism but I think it's stretching the point to associate our modern, somewhat unrooted movement with that of nomads. If you talk to an Australian aborigine, for example, you couldn't get a person more identified with a place, a landscape, a piece of country, so it's not the same thing.

TY Nevertheless when you've written about the aborigines and the Rabari nomads there's definitely a sense of your having found an affinity with these people. And there's that very striking passage in *Tracks* in which you suggest that you achieved an understanding with Eddie that was beyond and without language.

RD It's so difficult to talk about these things really because they veer on the edge of a wish to identify; as I think would be true of Bruce [Chatwin]. A question mark hangs over your own lack of roots or lack of a centre and there's a wish to affiliate with people who would traditionally move around. I understand that very well but I just think you have to be a little bit cautious about making direct parallels. It's more a wish or slightly romantic notion. As for Eddie, well, I think we did become very close, as close as people could with such cultural differences. Not because he was a nomad but because of the nature of that whole event, of me, this young blonde woman with camels, arriving in his country. How he thought about that I've no idea really except that I know that he had a good time. I think he chose to travel with me – quite an extraordinary decision when you think about it but based on pleasure, really, because he felt like doing it and it was a good lark. So I think it was less to do with him being a nomad and me travelling through, as to do with the very specific particular elements of that coming together.

TY What would you say to those critics of travel writing generally who suggest that the kind of identification that you talked about, the kind of wish to identify with nomads or aborigines, tells us more about the travel writer than about nomads? How content do you feel with that kind of balance between what you tell us about yourself and the culture in which you grew up, on the one hand, and that of the aborigines on the other? Do you feel you have successfully managed to tell us something about each or do you have any anxiety that perhaps Eddie and the Rabari have fulfilled a function for you, and does that matter?

RD Does it matter? The two books are very far apart, both in time, and as a young woman in *Tracks* and a much more cautious person, I think, in *Desert Places*. *Tracks* was so unguarded, a completely honest book, an innocent book really. I'm not an academic, I'm not an anthropologist, I don't have any of that; but if there was any insight into aboriginal culture in *Tracks* it was through that complete transparency and openness and honesty, so whatever people saw of aboriginal culture or aboriginal people through the narrator of *Tracks* is clear. It's very open, it's not filtered by anything, so I think it probably has a place. Even though it's not at all ethnography, it does say something quite honest about what was going on in Central Australia at that time and the relationship between aborigines living there and whitefellas who were coming through to administer the land rights legislation. It described that sudden social change in Alice Springs. One year aborigines had no rights whatsoever and the next year suddenly the town has got 10, 15 leftish, tertiary-educated people working for it and that's a huge change. I think *Tracks* did talk about that. I think aboriginal people might, generally speaking, like the book. In fact I think a lot of them loved it, loved the whole idea of it, loved the idea of me going through Pitjantjatjara country with camels because the Pitjantjatjara had traditionally used camels in the '50s and '60s, and I think they liked the way I talked about it. Yes, it was a very popular book and I think probably still is with most aboriginal people.

TY You say aboriginal people loved it, but what about white Australians because you're outspoken against the racism but also against the misogyny of Australian society?

RD Well, surprisingly it was a popular book. It is still popular. I think it's still taught in some secondary schools. I think what overcame the righteous anger was a kind of chutzpah that charmed people and also I think the book slotted into an idea Australia was looking for about itself, trying to say something about the relationship between the periphery and the centre and aboriginal culture and whites and blacks in a way that wasn't *Crocodile Dundee*.

TY The kind of moment in which both books are written is very interesting and you said a few minutes ago that you weren't an academic and yet what really strikes me about *Desert Places* in particular is the way in which you engage with ideas that are predominant in academia now in terms of representing cultures. I still am really struck by that first page in *Desert Places* which I always use to teach travel writing because that first sentence where you say memory is a capricious thing brings the reader up short and invites the reader to be on their guard. Then you provide these examples of the colour of the turban that you might have got wrong and, even more startlingly, the beggar whom

you say is muttering mantras or perhaps nonsense. It's a remarkable invitation to us to reflect on the limitations of travel writing and to question your authority as an interpreter. Why and how did that come about? Is it a coincidence that academics are preoccupied with the same sorts of questions?

RD It's funny isn't it? No, I didn't think about that at all. I do read a lot, so in a sense I suppose I'm absorbing those ideas anyway. No, it wasn't conscious. It's something I arrived at very much through again trying to be honest about the relationship between what actually happens and a book about what actually happens. I've been concerned about that ever since *Tracks* because *Tracks* was written innocently. But it struck me afterwards: I thought a lot about the relationship between the book and the event; what really is the relationship between the book and the event? What really is it? If I had written the book 5 years later it would be a completely different book and although there's not a word of untruth in the book – nothing's made up, it's absolutely how it all happened – it is an artefact. It's a structure. It's something structured around whatever it was that happened. As for the process of writing *Tracks*, I was in London, it was two or three years after the event, I sat down in this hideous flat on my own and churned out a first draft in three months and I swear to God when I wrote that book I remembered every single day of the journey with extraordinary clarity, every camp over nine months, and then as soon as the book was finished I forgot it. So for me also the event became the book. I'm very interested in memory and concerned about it and of course even more so in something like travel literature where the immediate assumption is that you're giving someone a piece of reality. It's nonsense really: you're creating an artefact and you have an extraordinary responsibility about how you talk, not just about yourself and what happened, but towards the people you purport to be talking about. We can't be innocent about that any more, the way we talk about other cultures. I think *Desert Places* is for me the end of the possibility of a kind of approach to travel writing. That's what the book is to me. It's about that. It's not really about how I went to the Rabaris and had a bad time. It might be about that as well, but the writing of the book for me was about coming to terms with the fact for myself that a particular kind of travel book simply cannot be written any more.

TY You said you remembered everything when you were writing *Tracks*. This question is not meant to be mischievous but it might sound it because a potential contradiction is that you remembered everything that happened on the journey and yet in *Desert Places* you say that memory is a capricious thing. Is there a contradiction?

RD Yes and no, I suppose. I'll go back to describe how I think it happened. I did the journey – and I've talked about this in *Tracks* – not thinking that anyone would be very interested in it. I had no intention of writing a book. I'd gone to *National Geographic* for the simple reason that I simply had to have a couple of thousand quid to do it. After all that work in Alice Springs I simply needed the money and that felt like a cop out to me, but that's all in *Tracks*. Then the way *Tracks* was written, a publisher wrote to me from London and said 'Please do a book', and I thought: OK, I'm finding it very difficult coping with this sudden celebrity, I suppose, and I want to withdraw from it because I don't trust what it does, therefore if I write a book they can have the book and I'll return

to my anonymity. So that's the attitude with which I wrote *Tracks*. It was something I could throw like a bone to the dogs. Then when I got to London I was very isolated, I didn't know anyone except Doris Lessing and I lived in this horrible flat, and because it was so isolated it seemed to me that I had an extraordinarily vivid recall of a part of my life that I felt had been usurped. That journey across Australia was very vivid. I was extraordinarily alive during that time, it seems to me, so there was an intense kind of reliving of the journey and it struck me even then that there was something strange about this. Nine months – how many campfires in nine months? That's a lot of days. To be able to go back in my memory and remember each campsite and how I felt, and how it was literally like a reliving, wasn't so much a recall as a kind of intense reliving. Then having taken that vivid reliving and put it into the form of words took away the vividness of the reliving and what I ended up with was this book, which is now how I remember the journey, pretty much.

TY Did you keep notebooks on your journey?

RD Very little, no. I had two letters that I'd written; long letters. I had some notes here and there, those awful boring diaries about how you feel today, so not very useful in terms of recalling things, but it was just so visually strongly embedded and I felt so vividly alive that that's what made the reliving possible and somehow the act of putting it into words captured the vividness of it and transformed it into something else. So every now and then I still get very strong dreams. I might have just a sudden flash of being in the desert and remembering it. Pretty much it's gone now.

TY You talked about the book as an artefact. Something that's common to *Desert Places* and *Tracks* is the way in which you draw attention to the structure of the artefact and to yourself as a kind of artefact; to travel itself as an artefact.

RD Well that's a novelistic instinct, isn't it? If you're a writer, you're a writer, you're a writer. Both of the characters, it seems to me, the narrator in *Tracks* and the narrator in *Desert Places*, are created people, they're created characters, and I recognise both of them, but they're not quite me. They're bits of me or they're projections of me, but they're not *me*.

TY You've written in the introduction to your book of journeys about the permeability of boundaries, the blurring of genres nowadays, and you have just compared your writing of travel with a kind of novelistic device, so the gap in your eyes isn't that great between fiction and travel writing? Or at least the kind of devices that you would use in a novel are those that you also employ in travel writing yourself?

RD I think that the devices you use to make a good book are the same, sort of universal. Obviously it may manifest itself in the most extraordinary different ways but ultimately you have to make a form that works. If you're a writer, that always takes precedence over raw content. It's not like academic writing where you've got a particular kind of structure. If you're a writer you're making something that you want people to read. You're bringing to it your ability, whatever it is. I don't mean that one contrives to

do that. It's more instinctive, I think. It's whatever a writer's instinct is. You're not contriving something in a slightly cynical way at all; you're constructing something.

TY When in *Tracks* you have the reader recognise that Rick Smolan's photographs are artificially constructed, it seems to invite the reader to think about the way in which your scenes in *Tracks* may be constructed. Was that a deliberate device or was it coincidental?

RD No it wasn't deliberate, it's part of the same thing. I think once again it's a sort of innocence. But *now* it would be. If I wrote something like that now I'd be very conscious of saying just that: don't trust appearances. It's interesting apropos of that how, each time another version of the journey is produced, there is a further distancing from the reality of the journey. For example, Rick eventually did a picture book of the journey and people love to look at that book and for years I wouldn't look at it because it struck me as yet another distancing of the real, of this artefact diluting the truth of what I did. I suppose I felt as if it was constantly being stolen from me. But now I like looking at it, and in liking looking at it I realise that indeed that original event has been inevitably stolen from me, because it has been turned into these endless forms and eventually there will be a film made of it, probably, and it would be yet another aeon away from what actually happened.

TY Can I ask if there are any literary or other cultural models you've found for drawing attention to the structures of the journey, to the gap between the experience of the journey and the narrating of it? Were there any writers, either of fiction or of travel writing, who you were influenced by?

RD No, not consciously, not at all. It just seemed that that was the truth and that's what you have to deal with when you're writing this sort of stuff. You're faced with it. You can't avoid it. People *do* avoid it, which is one of the problems I have with the genre.

TY Let's dwell on that for a moment. You wrote in a newspaper article, I think – it's also evident in your remarks – that really after your subversion of the conventions of the genre in *Desert Places* there was, you felt, nowhere else for travel writing to go. I think you said that and I think your impatience with travel writing is quite evident, and then it seemed to me that perhaps you have tried to take it somewhere else by broadening its definition in your anthology.

RD In the anthology, yes. I know it's a slightly cheeky anthology, but I did want to say: what is this genre, what really constitutes it, what is its relationship to this rapidly changing world structure, what does it mean, where does it fit? It seems like it's a slightly anachronistic genre as it stands, and I think I got into a lot of trouble with travel writers for saying that. They felt somewhat threatened.

TY Anachronistic because of the limitations of its subject matter or because of its form?

RD I don't mean there aren't fabulous writers within it; it's not that. It's that as a genre it's not dealing with this new world that we're in, which isn't about centre and periphery and all; it's a jungle we don't quite know. What does it mean for an English person to go to a far away place, romanticise and bring it home for consumption? This is a question. That's my impatience with it. As to whether it will go anywhere, if I did say that, it's rather a silly thing to have said because genres go where they go and we can't possibly know where it will go.

TY You feel it's a moribund genre? After all, once you've drawn attention to its artifice, as you have in both books, and you've encouraged the reader to be on their guard, as you have in *Desert Places*, where does one go? Does one continue to subvert it?

RD Yes, I think you just continue to try to subvert it and what will be interesting will be – as I think I said in that introduction – as more and more so-called peripheral cultures begin to describe the centre, so it will be a sort of reversal, and that is happening. I think the other thing that I said was we'll always need to know about each other. There will always be a curiosity about what's going on over there, so I guess in that sense of course the genre will continue, but I think that old rather formal structure has to give way to some new paradigm.

TY You mention in your introduction to the anthology the things that travel writing misses out, particularly the involuntary travellers, the migrants and the refugees, and so on; and I'm wondering whether you feel that there should be a return in some sense to the kind of impulse that motivated the social voyages of the 1930s, the Orwells and Priestleys and so on, but perhaps attending to refugees and migrants rather than the working class.

RD I think so, yes. I'm absolutely gripped by this idea at the moment. In fact the next project, should it ever eventuate, is making a series of films about exactly this: that on the one hand we have this century, which will, I do believe, see the absolute eradication of classic or traditional patterns of nomadism that have been with us since we came out of Africa, and it's about to disappear; at the same time, and for the same reasons, you've got these global shifts that no-one really quite understands but they're certainly happening. You've got these vast movements of people that the world has never seen before. It's trying to make sense of those two, an ending of something and a beginning of something else, and how they relate to each other and what are the forces making that happen. I want to make films about that.

TY Will the films perform a similar function to your books? In other words would you try to find a way of drawing attention to the films' artifice also in the structures of film-making?

RD Perhaps. I'm not a film-maker so it's a whole new thing for me. It's terrifying! I think certainly what I'd try to do is once again subvert the classical form of documentary. Let's say you had a series of documentaries about the end of classical nomadism. Well, we all know what they would look like, and there's nothing wrong with those films – they're very useful films – but they're not the films I want to make. I would like to be

able to show these radical changes from both ends of the spectrum, as it were, from those traditional patterns being uprooted and chucked away, to these new patterns forming, and no-one quite knows where they're going, how they will establish themselves.

TY How far on are your plans? Is it an idea at the moment?

RD Well, it's why I've accepted this visiting scholarship at Cambridge, to just try and do some research. It's the first time really on any project that I've taken time out to really read around it, and then of course it depends on someone giving me the money to do it. That's the big thing!

TY What does the visiting fellowship involve?

RD It involves a lot of working out how academia works! It's an extraordinarily coded world. I go along to the lectures and seminars and read and read and read and read and talk to a few people here and there. I'm not sure yet how useful it's going to be, but I'm taking the time to do it.

TY We haven't talked about your novel.

RD Please, let's not! I'm quite happy to say that it's a very bad novel. It's scary that I still get letters from people saying how wonderful they thought it was. I've often thought that what I would do is take the novel back and rewrite it because there are things in there that have potential. But I wrote it when I was under a lot of stress and pressure – not that this is an excuse – and I was shifting: I think I lived in forty addresses in three or six months, in three different countries, and I think particularly for fiction you really need to be rooted in somewhere. You can't carry a novel with you in that nomadic sort of way. It's just too hard.

TY What would you preserve in it if you were to re-write it?

RD Some of the initial stuff, the aunt, the great-aunt, just bits and pieces through it and I'd take out a lot of the more fanciful things.

TY Could I ask you about the editorial process? Have your editors had much of an input?

RD I've been very lucky with editors, I've loved all my editors. Liz Calder was the editor of *Tracks* and she was very light. I remember one thing she did do which was absolutely correct. There was a point in *Tracks* where I go a bit potty in the desert, where I can't find the water. I'd put that section into the third person, which felt sort of right to me because I was so distanced from myself at the time, and she said it didn't work. And she was right. But otherwise very light. They've let me do what I do, really. For *Desert Places* it was Clare Alexander, again a very sensitive, very light editor. I think there's a big difference between English editors and American editors, for example, American editors want to get right into the text up to the elbows and change it all around and I

wasn't having any of that. I've been lucky that way. I like being edited, I like having a sounding board, I'm not at all precious, I think. So I find it can be a very useful relationship.

TY Had you done any writing before *Tracks*?

RD No. Well what had happened was I wrote the *National Geographic* thing and they were amazed and happy that they didn't have to ghost write it. They were very pleased with what they got. Then they edited it into a sort of *Geographic* form, slightly soppy, and I was terribly cross and put out by that, so I wrote a longer piece of about 10,000 words which went to the London *Sunday Times* and was syndicated around the world. On that basis Liz asked me to write the book, and I was a natural! I'd always written. I'd always written for myself. But I would never have thought of becoming a writer.

TY We haven't said anything about the centrality of travel to the Australian experience, to the Australian tradition, and of course it's very important to Australian writers both in 'fiction' and travel writing.

RD Yes, that's right.

TY Do you see yourself now, even if you didn't at the time of writing *Tracks*, as part of a specifically Australian literary tradition?

RD No, I wouldn't have had a clue, but again I think simply because it was so unimpeded, so unconscious, so honest that it couldn't help but in a way subvert all sorts of things. Female, for a start; the explorer tradition turned on its head. If you look at the relationship in explorer literature between aborigines and Europeans, it's turned on its head in *Tracks*. So in a lot of ways it sat there in relation to these Australian forms that everyone was familiar with, but it was really quite subversive. In retrospect I see it that way. Of course, I didn't at the time at all; I wouldn't have had a clue.

TY Do you identify yourself as an Australian writer or as a writer who happens to be Australian?

RD I think it would have to be the second. It would be a bit cheeky to say the first, simply because I've been out of the country so much.

TY As lots of Australian writers have.

RD As they have, yes I know.

TY You mentioned Doris Lessing earlier as being the only person in London whom you knew. May I ask how that came about and whether your relationship with her has had an influence on your writing?

RD I think it has had an influence on me and therefore on the writing. The way it happened was again through this sort of youthful innocence or youthful arrogance, perhaps. I was reading *The Golden Notebook*, I thought it was an absolutely key text, and I wrote her a fan letter and said how useful the book was. Doris is a very clever woman and she smelt my letter, I'm sure. She gets 50 fan letters a day but she got something in mine and she wrote back, and we wrote a bit and she said if you're going to do this book you should come and do it in London, so I said all right and we became very good friends and we're still friends. I ended up living at the bottom of her house in Kilburn. She gave me, I think, what is so important for older people to give young people: someone to respect, something to aspire to. For women, let's face it, in those days there wasn't a lot.

TY You've written about the difficulties as a woman travelling but you've just drawn attention to the fact that there are difficulties for a woman publishing, too, and Doris Lessing has helped you come to terms with those, or overcome some of the difficulties.

RD Yes, I think it's unquestionably better now. There are more opportunities for women now than there were, but a lot of women's work still gets forgotten. I think essentially, by and large, with big exceptions, men aren't really interested in the way women think. So I think a lot of stuff by women gets buried because it's by women. That's still true and it's still appalling. There's terrific stuff out there by women, and in the travel genre as well. I suppose what I'd say about women and the travel genre is that they haven't really altered the central problem with the genre that we alluded to before. They're still writing within that tradition. It seems to be slightly out of synch or out of phase with how the world is changing.

TY There have been attempts by some feminist critics to argue that women travel and therefore write quite differently from men, even in the colonial period. The argument is that because women suffered under the patriarchal society they may empathise with subject peoples abroad and that even though women may be indirectly a part of the colonial process, they're still writing and perceiving differently from men, and part of that different perception may be an identification with or noticing of domestic detail that men don't. Do you agree that there is this kind of difference?

RD Oh yes, I do think so. There would have to be. It's sort of axiomatic. There would have to be a difference in perception because your life is shaped by difference. What you're allowed to see is different. I don't necessarily think it's a negative thing always, either. If you look at the study of anthropology, women anthropologists have opened up the other fifty per cent. With the Rabaris, for example, I had equal access to men and women. If I'd been a man I would not have had that, so sometimes it works in your favour. I don't think it's necessarily true, however, that because women have suffered oppression they're rather nicer about the other oppressed. Some of the stuff written by those English ladies in India is appalling: how to beat your servant, that sort of thing. So I don't think it necessarily translates as a deeper sympathy or a wider understanding. It might in certain instances be true but not as a general principle.

TY If I may rephrase an earlier question: a woman writer or a writer who happens to be a woman?

RD Oh, definitely a writer who happens to be a woman; most definitely. But with the understanding, of course, that what I write will be what a woman writes. It will be from a female perspective.

TY In *Tracks*, in particular, you were drawing attention to yourself as a woman traveller, and – I suppose this is part of drawing attention to the structures of travel writing and of travelling – you focused on aspects of travelling that were not normally described, bodily functions, and so on. There wasn't much you left invisible. But you mentioned that you use a persona; that the self is a construction. You've written how there are at least two different Robyn Davidsons.

RD Quite a few more I should think!

TY But I guess people have tended to read your work autobiographically?

RD Yes, of course. Well that's the form it's written in. I don't know what to say about these complicated relationships between one's true self and one's constructed selves. I rather like that girl who crossed the desert but I can't really imagine how she's related to me. It's a very funny, strange thing.

TY That's not just because of the passing of time that she's not related to you, is it? It's because there's the experience you didn't get in the writing? Does that give you something to hide behind, comfortably, the knowledge that the 'real Robyn Davidson' is not the 'I' in *Tracks*, even if the reader wants it to be? Does it give you an assurance that the reader hasn't got to you?

RD Yes, possibly,

TY Even if readers want that to be you, does it give you an assurance that the reader hasn't got to you?

RD Yes. I hadn't thought about that, but, yes, I think it is something like that. I'd say it's both an automatic thing that you do as a writer – it's just what you do – but also, yes, it gives me my privacy in a funny sort of way. It's an odd thing to say, isn't it, when you talk about how I wrote about her – menstrual blood and whatever? How did I have the chutzpah to write that! So there's a lot of confidence there about what I was allowed to say. I'm sure I wouldn't be nearly so brave now. I'd be much more censoring.

TY Can you see yourself writing another travel book or will you see how the films are going?

RD Well, I'd quite like to get into film just because I'm having trouble writing at the moment anyway. I've got very stuck on a memoir. Proper writer's block, what they talk

about, I've got it, because it's a very difficult book to write for all sorts of reasons, technical reasons really. I've been struggling with it for years so I just don't want to go down that road for a while. I'm very interested in a film, particularly in this sort of area, because I quite like what you can do with film, although of course what I also want to do if I can get these films going is to write a book around the films.

TY Have you come across the work of Melissa Llewellyn-Davis, a kind of feminist anthropologist?

RD No.

TY I think you would be interested. She has visited the Masai in Kenya a number of times and filmed them over several years, and something she does that's very interesting, rather like your drawing attention to artifice in the book, is always to make you feel conscious of the fact that you're watching a film, a construction. For example, in a film of hers called *Memories and Dreams* she shows the Masai being aware of the camera and commenting on it and saying things like: 'Won't I look silly in this get up?', and: 'What will they think of me in the West?'.

RD Oh, that's wonderful!

TY And she also shows them asking her quite intimate questions about her married status and her partner, so it does away with the pretence that there's no dialogue between the film-maker and themselves.

RD That's very good.

TY Also, at the beginning of this film she shows the Masai looking at an earlier film she made of them, so that you have a kind of frame within a frame. Again it's interesting because they're commenting on the changes that have happened since she made that film, so you don't get the sense that you often do in films that they're frozen in time.

RD That's very good. I'd love to see that. This image keeps coming back to me of an aboriginal campsite on the outskirts of Alice Springs. This would have been in '72, '73, '74, something like that, and they had just got electricity into the camp, but there were still people living in rusty car bodies and old tanks that had been turned upside down, and there were a lot of social problems. The electricity had been run in, and there was this shelter that they were all under, kids, little kids and mums and dads and grannies and everybody under this grass shelter with an electrical cable and television and they'd got these blue movie videos of whitefellas fucking. They were sitting there and they were killing themselves laughing. You just think how can you any longer make a film about a sort of frozen aboriginal culture, this traditional culture, in the face of this? It just doesn't make any sense to do that. It's a key image to me, of them watching these frightful whitefella porno movies and shrieking with laughter!

TY Are you confident that you'd be able to make a film about this subject without lapsing into a kind of sentimentality about a way of life that's disappeared?

RD No, it's very hard.

TY Because your theme really is about a mixing, and survival and adaptation, isn't it?

RD Yes, it is, but I am also sad that the old forms are going because I also have my own areas of romanticism about human movement and what qualities it allows and what other things it suppresses. For one thing, if you're constantly moving around all the time it's very hard to accumulate wealth, it's very hard to set up a class system, you can't have a standing army. There's all sorts of things that make for a social structure that is to be admired in lots of ways.

TY So it's all right to romanticise so long as you acknowledge that you're romanticising and you draw attention to it?

RD I think it's a truth, I think it's actually true. What's romantic about it is liking that, I suppose.

TY Would you call yourself a socialist travel writer, may I ask?

RD No. Well, I suppose if I had to define my political position that would be it but I prefer not to define it. I think we need to do a lot of rethinking about political belief and what has worked and what hasn't worked and what we can hope might work and what won't, because my political passions have been seriously undermined by being so often wrong.