

Any Human Heart (William Boyd)

I wonder what Boyd believed he had done wrong in *The New Confessions* that he thought it necessary to re-write it? For the two books share the same plot structure almost to the point of isomorphism. I must re-read *The New Confessions* and try to decide which I prefer, though at present I like them both equally.

So, to *Any Human Heart*. The heart in question is that of one Logan Mountstuart. Any life is both ordinary and extraordinary, but Mountstuart's life out-extraordinaries us ordinary mortals. The book is ostensibly Mountstuart's posthumously published personal journal. It records his life from being a precocious 17 year old to death as an octogenarian. His life spans all the decades of the twentieth century. Boyd uses this to good effect in depicting the changing mores across that century.

Our Logan is from a privileged background. At his prep school we find him indulging in pranks which real boys might think of but never actually carry out. But *Stalky & Co* it isn't. There's no trace of enthusiasm for the Empire here, despite Kipling being still alive at the time. On the other hand I can well imagine Kipling's Wiley Old Bird having the same solution to the dilemma presented to Mountstuart's Headmaster. After a particularly serious offence, the Head was poised to give Logan a very public punishment - when he was stymied by the death of Logan's father. His solution? To inform Logan of his father's death, immediately followed by a good, if private, caning. No chance of sentiment getting in the way of proper discipline in an era when we still had an Empire and young men needed to be raised to prioritise duty. Not that our Logan gave a shit about duty.

Inevitably Oxford ensues. It is hard for us to credit now - even those of us who have lived through more puritanical times - just how shocking it was to "keep a mistress" in the 1920s. Logan's friend Dick would have been rusticated if his secret had been discovered. At Oxford we find Mountstuart hobnobbing with the Dons from the start. Effortlessly he slips into literary and academic society. The narrative drips contemporary celebrity names. One wonders which, if any, of the cameo portraits of the famous are accurate. Virginia Woolf, we learn, was an appalling racist, even by the standards of the time. Ernest Hemingway, rather than being the first rate novelist but suspect chap of popular imagination, was apparently a dodgy novelist but a kind and considerate fellow. On the other hand, Evelyn Waugh and Ian Fleming conform to expectation (poof and pornographer respectively).

After the obligatory writer's stint in Paris, post-Oxford, we have the equally obligatory period in the Spanish civil war in the 30s. Boyd captures the utter chaos of that conflict, and the naivety of foreigners' championing of the 'socialist' cause, fragmented and incoherent as the anti-fascist forces were. In World War Two we find Logan in Naval Intelligence where he tangles with the Duke and Duchess of Windsor. This is my favourite episode, I think: the Duke and Duchess are such CAUCs. Were they responsible for Mountstuart's later arrest and imprisonment in Switzerland - as a spy? Well, he was a spy, so fair enough - but who was the traitor who turned him in? After two years in solitary confinement he is finally released some months after the war has already ended, he and the others in *The Villa By The Lake* were clearly a political embarrassment. All's well that end's well? 'Fraid not. The most awful bit is to come.

Let's back-track a bit, because the narrative's heartbeat is provided by Logan's many lovers - or sex partners, anyway. After pining uselessly after his teenage crush, Lucy,

he lost his virginity to his best friend's girlfriend (or 'mistress' in the terminology of the time). Not exactly unusual, admittedly, but her ultimate suicide - though many years after the affair - adds to Mountstuart's burden of guilt. Her name - Tess - is, we assume, given her bucolic background, a Thomas Hardy joke, despite her penchant for gin being rather out of character. Somehow Mountstuart gets time to write a well received biography of Shelley, proceeds to a Parisian 'affair' with one Anna, if that's the right expression where a prostitute is concerned, and also writes his best selling - if less academic - book based on the experience.

The proto-feminist-socialist, Land, is next up for Logan's attention. Well, she has been for some time. He does eventually land Land, so to speak, but she is too slippery a fish for him to hang onto. Fundamentally, Land is a serious person and our Logan really isn't. On the rebound from Land (or was it from Tess? or Anna?), Logan marries an Aristocrat's daughter, Lottie - a bad mistake which he recognises as such almost immediately. This is when the drinking starts. And the affair with Freya. Freya is the main event, the true love. Shortly Logan is blessed with a divorce and a daughter, Stella, by his new wife, Freya, to add to his son, Lionel by Lottie. Amongst these events Logan manages to take a journalist's role in the Spanish civil war and write perhaps his most significant work, *The Cosmopolitans*, a work of terrifying *recherché* erudition.

And so to Logan's return home from Switzerland after his two years in solitary. He is expecting to find his wife, Freya, and daughter, Stella, where he left them. But no. You see, Freya was informed of Logan's death some six months after his mission went wrong - and subsequently remarried. Clearly she was not as distraught as he was to be when he discovered that both wife and daughter - and dog - had been blown to pieces by a V2 rocket. What followed was not a good time for Logan. Eventually, with help from his friend Ben, he resurfaced in New York, helping to run (well, running, actually) Ben's new art gallery there. Somewhere along the line Mountstuart had absorbed, by osmosis it would appear, a professional's knowledge and eye for art. He did well at the job. Logan's time in New York comes to an abrupt end when he accidentally commits statutory rape. It's easily done, you know how it is. He had to flee back to Blighty, fast. In New York we see Logan leave behind a whole trail of ex-lovers, too numerous to mention by name - even if I could remember them all - oh, yes, and a third ex-wife. What a busy boy.

At various times Mounstuart owned a Modigliani, a Klee, a whole bundle of Miros and a Picasso drawing - of himself. The latter he has hanging on the wall of his small London flat whilst dining habitually on dog food. A nice touch, that, I thought. He is desperately poor in his last twenty years. Despite that he looks after Gloria, one of his many ex-lovers, now also near-destitute, housing her in his small flat whilst she dies of cancer. Then comes his period as socialist newspaper seller, for £5 a week, which leads, as these things do, to becoming an explosives smuggler for Bader Meinhof. It happens, it does. Luckily he has been bequeathed a ramshackled but serviceable house in the French countryside. Here he ends his days, with enough from the sale of his London flat to live quietly and happily for his finally years. He dies reading Chekhov, half way down a bottle of wine, sitting in the late summer French sunshine. A happy ending of sorts.

The vanishing of all trace of his last novel, *Octet*, apparently because he burnt it, echoes the fate of Nat Tate's art, Boyd's own creation by the way (not, as you might have imagined, a real person).

Mountstuart informed us of the three true loves of his life; we already know who they were: Freya, Stella and his step daughter, Gail, by his third wife, Alannah. Rather hard on his son, Lionel (or Leo), I thought. But Logan was never a man-loving man. Few are.

Mountstuart became a man out of his time. He remained a man of cultural depth, if also of some occasional depravity, but the contrast with an increasingly bland society of cultural shallows and no great moral worth is to his benefit.

So what are we to make of it all, this rag-tag tale? Essentially the same that we make of our own lives? Is it refreshingly or distressingly free of sentiment? There is no appeal to the transcendent, the numinous. He lived, he loved, he died. C'est tout.

Score: 90010, brilliant.