

THE HISTORY OF AUSTRALIAN POETRY from 1965–85 can be told through the anthologies published in that time. Rodney Hall and Thomas Shapcott's *New Impulses in Australian Poetry* (1968) signalled a change but was overtaken by events to such effect that Shapcott's *Australian Poetry Now* (1970) included sixty or more poets, most of whom had not been heard of before by the reading public. Shapcott's later anthology *Contemporary American and Australian Poetry* (1976) found itself flanked on either side by *Applestealers* (1974), the Melbourne salute to 'the generation of '68', and later by John Tranter's *The New Australian Poetry* (1979).
— James Tulip, in *The Penguin New Literary History of Australia*, October 1988, pp.491–2

ROBERT KENNY 'WELCOME STRANGER'

Introduction to *Applestealers* poetry anthology, 1974

Introduction:

First published in *Applestealers* — is a collection of the New Poetry in Australia including notes, statements, histories on La Mama, selected and introduced by Robert Kenny with Colin Talbot, Outback Press, North Fitzroy (Melbourne), 1974

Notes are given at the end of this file. Click on the link to be taken to the note; likewise to return to the text. This piece is 3,500 words or about eight printed pages long.

See also Kris Hemensley's piece from the same anthology.

Paragraph 1:

(For the reflections, opinions, suggestions, pleas etc. expressed below I must take full responsibility. Very few of the poets represented here could be expected to support all that I say, some may even object to all that I say, but nevertheless... I would particularly like to thank the following people whose conversation and writing have been of great help while writing this: Kris Hemensley, Ken Taylor & Jim Hamilton.)

1:

Twentieth Century Australian poetry has not a history that sparkles, at least not with heroes, movement or 'Great Works'; the one quality that stands out when reading the bulk of Australian Poetry written prior to the sixties is an abnormal mediocracy; its content concerned with the pretty aspects of Greek mythology (nymphs and the like), a futile searching for national identity or characteristics, pastoral description (the key here is description — great reams of it) or an iconoclasm that at times seem indivisible from iconism. [\[Note 1\]](#) Its form: multiple adjective, labored images and full of 'meaningfulness': academic in the worst sense: safe: one could sit back and study it for years, and that seemed its sole point. As witness, no doubt unwillingly, to this mediocracy, Clement Semmler, in his introduction to Kenneth Slessor's *Poems*, writes, 'Certainly by this time he (Slessor) had securely established his individuality as a poet — so much so that it can be said that of all Australian poets who have written during this century he can least be confused with any other'. The fact that Semmler did not realise the poetic limbo he had sentenced the others to is the saddest part of all. But Semmler is being unintentionally unfair — there are a

handful of poets who stand out with individuality (Brennan, Slessor, Hope, Wright, Webb). Yet the ones of main interest stand outside the general run of Australian poetics, as do their influences. Brennan, the French Symbolists; Slessor, the imagist Pound and Eliot (and I would suggest here that the influences of Pound on Slessor has never been truly discussed); and Webb: music, significant when we consider Webb as the most accomplished. Mostly it is poetry controlled [[Note 2](#)] by academics and readers in publishing houses to whom Twentieth Century poetry meant Eliot, Auden and Lowell with the likes of Pound, Cummings and Williams merely acknowledged and an almost complete ignorance of such people as Zukofsky and Bunting and also, but more understandable [[Note 3](#)] the newer Americans (Olson, Duncan, Creeley, O'Hara, Ashbery, etc., etc.). Almost all the magazines publishing poetry in this country prior to 1967 were connected with Academies. (The notable exceptions: *Poetry* magazine and *Poetry Australia*; rival magazines coming out of Sydney. *Poetry Australia* was formed [in 1964] when Grace Perry broke away from The Poetry Society of Australia – publisher of *Poetry* magazine [which she had edited until then.]). The rivalries have since died; *Poetry* magazine is now *New Poetry*, a far more serious magazine than *Poetry Australia* and one of the best in the land edited by Robert Adamson. By the mid-sixties this situation had led to a poetry that was more than ever marked by its mediocrity; safe conventional and tied completely to the page, far from the voice and its cadences; it sat still without emotion and devoid of any real intelligence. What else could it be when its poetic was based on schooltextbook analysis of such people as Eliot. Pound's dictum 'Poetry atrophies when it gets too far from the music' could never have struck more alien ears.

But why? Why indeed! One could go to many reasons: the academicism a reaction to the anti-intellectualism of the Australian Nineteenth Century etc, etc, etc: but they are only minor matters, or perhaps just minor manifestations of the main problem: this country's isolation. If, as Olsen suggests, space was the prevailing factor in the moulding of the American consciousness — what was it here, where the majority of the continent stretches out as dry flat and at least in the beginning, useless land and the main centres of population were cornered on the South Eastern Coast where the homeland of England was three continents away — and a third of that distance was only to get away from this hulk of land. If space in America made adventurers, in this land it was space felt more as distance; distance that created apathy. An alienation from the civilisation that these people had come from (an alienation not helped by the land's convict history) and still belonged to. Take this to any intellectual activity and it manifests itself as an ignorance that attempts to tie in all that is known as if all things supported each other. (Those who say that there was an alive Australian poetic tradition before the sixties are ignorant of the facts; every generation of Australian poets has had its outside stimuli). It follows international trends as seen from this land and without a serious (dare I say professional) attitude; it does not go into what is behind these overseas trends; it is a fashionableness that is all the worse because it tries so hard not to look fashionable. And its main method to achieve this is to take note of only the conservative elements in what it finds of overseas material. Thus Slessor, takes in the twenties, from Pound a superficiality of language, the top of the

word and ignores Pound's dictum of precision and the result is Slessor's 'best' poem, 'Five Bells'. A poem hailed by many as the best poem to come out of this nation. Yet it is a poem that could be half its size were all its useless verbiage thrown into Sydney Harbor — a poem filled with what Pound called 'ornate' adjectives.

3:

And this semi-informedness is particularly apparent in Australian criticism: it takes work in isolation from the rest of the world, even in isolation from the work that is happening around it or immediately before it. John M. Wright, in his essay on Vincent Buckley's 'Golden Builders' — a fine poem — (*Westerly* No. 3, 1973) states that 'Golden Builders' offers 'the world itself' with an admiration that implies that Buckley in doing this has achieved a major breakthrough — yet, if Buckley does create a world (no writing is ever the world), what does John Ashbery do in *The Skaters* or Paavo Haaviko do in *The Winter Palace*? or more obvious since we are talking of City, where does 'Paterson' come or 'The Maximus Poems'? And why not relate Buckley's mapping to the mapping that went on amongst the La Mama poets? (Same city, even the same suburb). But the only poet Wright cites is Eliot, even while talking of Buckley's newly-found 'spontaneity'. (This essay is also interesting as an example of the 'schooltextbook style' mentioned earlier) — witness this: 'Interestingly, sentimentality in 'Golden Builders' is often accompanied by obscurity. 'Will I find my soul here,/ my Irish soul, as in my schooldays?' Unless the reader knew that, as a child the poet attended a bluestone school, which was largely demolished to make way for more 'modern' structures — and most readers could not know this — he must remain

absolutely lost. The [a]llusion is hopelessly obscure'. From here the only hopelessly obscure thing is Wright's remarks. (Readers in Dublin would not know about Lygon Street either, but does that matter?) Whether it is the ignorance of this, or the well intentioned mis-informedness of Andrew Taylor's article on [Michael Dransfield's collection] *Drug Poems* [\[Note 4\]](#) the effect and cause are the same: an alienation from the world. And it is precisely this small-part-informedness that made the Ern Malley hoax possible – not from the point of McAuley and Stewart, but from the point of Max Harris. If Harris was informed of Overseas' scenes in 1944 why did he not just shrug McAuley & Stewart off as 'poor fools' and ignore the Australian Literary Scene since it must have shrunk into insignificance against the greater world? Instead, he promoted the whole thing, begging the question until it became the Ern Malley's Journal of the early fifties, until it was Ern Harris or Max Malley. Perhaps it is 'max / wallowing in the milk / & honey of his own / sold out sad ego', as Michael Dugan suggests in *Contempa* 3. After all, his whole career now rests on Ern Malley, and negates whatever small achievements *Angry Penguins* may have made. My point: no amount of encouraging letters from the likes of Herbert Read could convince Harris to ignore the philistine voices – he played with them. If the Malley incident has, as many claim, retarded the growth of Australian poetics, it is not McAuley and Stewart (who didn't know any better) who are to blame, but Harris (who should have known better, should have known the lay of the land) for his inept handling of the situation. And if in the roneod magazines of the late sixties the older poets tried to have their own Malleys they were doomed to failure; those editors did not care for what the Australian literati thought; a boxer trying to fight fairly by

Queensberry Rules a foe who just stands there and picks his nails. What is happening with the younger poets is not just an acquaintance with contemporary or near contemporary poetry of, say, America (from Olson to Dorn and beyond) but a catching up with the whole tradition of twentieth century poetry from the Imagists to the Black Mountains and the New Yorkers to what is happening now in England and America; a filling in the gaps of such poets previously ignored in Australia – H.D., Bunting, Zukosfsky, to name but a few; and in some cases a re-look or even a first look at English language poetry before this century and seeing a living tradition that stretches from Chaucer all the way up to Dorn and beyond – and a catching up with foreign voices from places as apart as France and Japan, not just the ancients but also what IS happening. For the first time there is a beginning of a modern poetry in this land: a poetry that is within the modern poetry of the international. No mistake, there were voices within these covers that speak in distinctly Australian accents (Ken Taylor and Nigel Roberts spring automatically to mind – similar perhaps to say, the way W.C.W.'s is distinctly American). Locality does and should exert itself – we are here after all, no reason to ignore it. But it would be hoped a locality that acts together with all the other localities that make up the world of writing, that the Australian writers become citizens in the republic of writing. The poets here are some of those who have led the way, it would be hoped that other writings – novel, story, play, etc. – may follow. It's not a matter of saying 'the Americans are best' or 'but look what's happening in England' but a matter of seeing writing as an international activity, something it has been since Chaucer. Not a matter of talking of 'kings' in America – that is precisely what has

prevailed in this country for far too long. There are no kings that need to be followed; it is time for Australian writers to, as I said, see themselves as responsible citizens in the republic of writing. A time for an end to petty feuds – world writing is dominated by friendliness – it is time for this country's writing to become friends with the rest of the world's. As Hemensley says, 'Fanfares in whichever parish are interesting but rather meaningless if the champion does not relate to the wider world of work.' If this does not happen then the 'revolution' that started in 1968 and has its representatives here, will be only a little better than those who came before them.

4:

But the beginnings, more than the beginnings are here, the beginnings are back in 1968 when the poets chose to ignore the Australian literary scene: what happened happened not as a reaction to the situation described above but in profound ignorance of it; it just didn't matter to the poets of La Mama, not to Tipping and Tillet of *Mok*, nor to Roberts, Gillmore and Goodall of *Free Poetry*, the influences and catalysts were elsewhere. The most important thing it did was to stop the need for a poetry licence (see 2) in this country. If the poets could not find someone to publish their work (and they didn't really bother trying), they published themselves: they took the mystique out of publishing; it was no longer the light at the end of the tunnel, no longer the great success but just part of the process of poetry and from that the poem became a living thing: an inter-reaction between poets became possible. Any predictions must be optimistic.

— Robert Kenny

Endnotes

1. Interesting in this context is the following statement by Frances Webb made shortly before his death in December, 1973, and quoted by Robert Adamson in an article in *The Australian* (January 5, 1974):

'The Australian poetic tradition, I shall always feel, is a strangely active and varied and powerful one. And the poetic milieu at this time is quite wholesome. The tried-and-tested poets are perfecting clear communications; and some of the younger are turning to experiment and a conscious widening of frontiers — healthy indeed, provided that we are not infected by that ancient disease, iconoclasm.'

2. To the point that makes Ken Taylor say: 'When I arrived back in Australia (1967) I really felt you needed a licence to write poetry in this country.'

3. Understandably, because Allen's *New American Poetry* (for many years the only collection of this poetry that would have found its way into Australian bookshops or academies) was by the grace of the Australian Government held by Customs for being 'Obscene', and kept on the banned list for too long. Along with works by Ginsberg, Olson, Ferlinghetti, Snyder, Maclure and god knows who else! That some of these works had political content had nothing to do with their banning, of course.

4. 'Irrationality, Individuality Drug Poetry' (*Meanjin* 4, 1972) is, as Kris Hemensley points out (*Contempa* 7/ 8), 'rife with foolish assertions and proclamations and false perspectives'. His linking

Michael Dransfield's *Drug Poems* and Edward Dorn's *Gunslinger* cycle within the ambit 'drug-poetry (that) can be linguistically quite traditional', is a typical disaster in that it gives false witness to both poets staking contemporaneity on a coincidence of content.

Further Reflections

a.5:

To the casual observer the activities of La Mama may have appeared 'dead' in Melbourne circa 1972 but they still lurked in the backstreets of the city; the meeting of Edmonds and Kenny that led to *Contempra* happened at a workshop, was a direct descendent of La Mama (via the Melbourne Arts Co-operative). Jenkins was around and writing. As were Hutchinson, Geoffrey Egglestone and Michael Dugan. Fond dreams appeared, such as the ill-fated *Dark Ages Journal* to be edited by Buckmaster, Hutchinson and Tipping. But there was more talk than action; the two great issues — Vietnam and conscription — seemed solved by the emergence of a Labor Government. Charles Buckmaster was incognito these last months of his life. Ken Taylor and Ian Robertson had retired from writing (in the case of Taylor at least, perhaps not as permanent as some think). Bill Beard had departed for Sydney. Kris Hemensley was in England and had been since late 1969 but was to return in 1972. But slowly new faces appeared: Colin Talbot, Phillip Edmonds, Robert Harris, Walter Billeter (who definitely had been around since 1969 for those few who knew him), and by the end of 1973 you could add these: Robert Hughes, Peter Oustabasidis [also known as Pi Oh], Terry Harrington and Arty Tantrum (an expatriate American). New magazines had begun, Kris Hemensley's

The Ear In A Wheatfield, John Jenkins and Walter Billeter's *Etymospheres* plus breakthrough, as much political as literary magazines like *Fitzrot*, *Parachute*. And two small presses flourishing, Contempa Publications and Seahorse Press. But there is at the time of writing, no really large community of writers as in 1968. Or as there was and is in Sydney.

b.6:

The fact that the stream of new poetry in Australia, or specifically Melbourne, came from a place named La Mama, is significant. La Mama was & still is a theatre. Named after an experimental theatre in New York by its founder Betty Burstall, the La Mama theatre in Carlton had the same ideals. And Carlton traditionally being the haunt of all kinds of criminals and artists, and in the shadow of Melbourne University was the home and reference place for many poets. A lot of artistic interaction took place between poets, painters, sculptors, artists, actors, musicians, playwrights. While this fresh view of poetry was being developed, theatre people such as Graeme Blundell, Jack Hibberd, John Romeril, David Williamson, Jon Hawkes were exchanging ideas. Kris Hemensley wrote plays as well & eventually there came to be collectives such as the Pram Factory & the Melbourne Arts Co-op involved with multi-media events.

7:

Add the Vietnam War, the influx of the mind-benders and all rock & roll music as influences. Garrie Hutchinson is another who used the cultural mix — working in multi-media events with the film-making Cantrills, and working on Collective newspapers such

as *The Digger* and *Source* magazine, (and also Colin Talbot & Jenny Brown) the latter also involving Charles Buckmaster to some extent. Poetry readings were held at the Arts Co-op and Pram Factory, with rock & roll periphery and finally at the T.F. Much Ballroom, the home of Carlton/ Fitzroy rock & roll.

8:

In Sydney, specifically Balmain, there was also a collective tradition, although far more of the literati type, mainly prose writers & poets, not such a mixture of the arts, possibly due to the lack of venues, of which Carlton has many. Bob Adamson has persisted through the years in Sydney with poetry readings & workshops, and his fascination & belief in the writings of Bob Dylan has been known for years.

9:

In Adelaide Richard Tipping & Rob Tillet have been pushing poetry for years with workshops, readings, magazines, and multi-media events, the most recent of which has been Tillet's (and others) Raga Arts Co-op, which breeds poetry with rock and film etc.

10:

It is reasonable to say that this new poetry in Australia has been to some extent brought within the influence of the electric arts and has not suffered by it. Although this is not to say that poetry has been influenced. The possibility is there.

11:

There is also a trend of isolation from city to city, with very little interaction, really, between Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide writers of poetry.

12:

Distance of course is the problem. Consequently each city has its own magazines purporting to be national, which feature mainly work from the home state. It can at times be like writing into a vacuum. However this trend is not so pronounced now, thanks a lot to the efforts of especially Bob Adamson in Sydney and Kris Hemensley in Melbourne who handle the most influential & respected magazines.

c.13:

In any discussion of contemporary Australian Poetic, two poets who do not come within the scope of this book need to be mentioned – Bruce Beaver and Les Murray. Though it can be stated they had no influence upon this period, they certainly stand out as forerunners – if only by a matter of months. They exist as pleasant coincidences, Beaver particularly with his *Letters to Live Poets* which has its terms firmly in the world. But it is only with such later work of these two poets that this shows, the earlier can with hindsight show hints, but little more. *Letters to Live Poets* and *Lauds and Complaints* by Beaver and *Poems Against Economics* by Murray are recommended.

d.14:

As has been said this collection is not meant to be definitive, its purpose is a representational volume, based upon the editors' combined personal judgment and knowledge of the new poetry—that has emerged in this country since the late sixties, and it is not meant to be a collection of the 'best' poets in this country nor the best poems. Thus I have compiled the following list of poets whose work is not represented here for various reasons other than critical judgement (the most damning being space — from the start we decided it would be best to have a representational volume with a generous amount from each contributor rather than a definitive volume with only one or two poems from each contributor), I would refer readers to these poets' work: Tim Thorne, Chris Edwards, Laurie Duggan, Cheryl Adamson, Terry Gillmore, Paul Desney, Phillip Roberts, Allison Hill, Ian Robertson, Jennifer Maiden, Bill Beard (who declined to contribute), and also the work of Bruce Beaver a genuine forerunner (and direct influence upon) some of the poets represented here.

— R.K.

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