

VIVIAN SMITH

AUSTRALIAN POETRY IN THE '60S:
SOME MID-CENTURY NOTES

Introduction:

First published in *Balcony / The Sydney Review* number 4, (Southern) Autumn 1966. Provenance: Scanned and edited by John Tranter, 30 September 2010.

Quote:

“What is most likely to strike the viewer of the Australian scene is the prevailing conservatism of most of the poetry written here.”

Paragraph 1 follows:

AUSTRALIAN POETRY OF THE 'SIXTIES has been marked less by the appearance of new talent than by the consolidation of their work and reputation by the senior Australian poets. The publication of A. D. Hope's «Poems» (1960), Judith Wright's «Five Senses» (1962), and James McAuley's «Captain Quiros» (1964), together with a first book, Gwen Harwood's «Poems» (1964), have been the outstanding events, while a number of other well-known writers from Alexander Craig to Francis Webb have brought out books which have confirmed and advanced their positions.

What is most likely to strike the viewer of the Australian scene is the prevailing conservatism of most of the poetry written here. This is perhaps not so surprising if one remembers that, as Donald Hall recently pointed out, modernism really only entered English poetry in 1936 and that Australian poetry has always leaned more heavily on English poetry than on any other. But it is surprising if one recalls the various changes that have occurred in recent English and American poetry to note how powerless their influence has been here. There is little experiment either with freer or, except for Gwen Harwood, the more elaborate and involved forms of the Americans. There is little poetry of social concern or comment, little poetry inspired by a visionary feeling for the country or its future. Except for poems on the themes of the explorers or the discoverers of the past, there is, in fact, little written that is uniquely Australian. Most local poems still tend to be modelled on something written abroad, and Australia, unlike the United States, has not developed a poetically viable language which would make variations or adaptations interesting on their own account. A.D. Hope said some time ago that Australian writing today stands very much where American literature stood in the early nineteenth century. It might be truer, if less accurate, to say that Australian; poetry now stands where American poetry stood in 1914 – without a nineteenth century behind it.

Compared with the contemporary Americans or English there is a slightly anachronistic quality about Australian poetry which is a feature of it from Brennan on. This isn't just a question of the "time

lag". Being fully informed and in touch with what was happening in the best of contemporary literature didn't make W.J. Turner a better poet. But just as Brennan's style is nearly twenty years behind the time in which he wrote, so most Australian poetry even today is strangely old-fashioned in style, in spite of certain superficial immediate influences. Australia's old isolation has broken down since the war — but many poets here still write as if there had been no modern revolution in poetic outlook or the use of language, and this may simply be because no local poet of genius has fully reflected these changes.

4

One of the most extraordinary poems written in Australia recently is James McAuley's 'Captain Quiros' — a poem which, in its static hieratic remoteness and its religious preoccupations, reads almost like a 17th-century translation from, say, Corneille. One cannot imagine such a poem being written in England or America today, and it is perhaps a measure of the real isolation in which McAuley's style and ideas of poetry were formed that such a poem should appear now. There aren't any Australian poets one would care or be able to read just for their use of words — in the way one might read Marianne Moore, for instance. Even as finely and as overtly "Australian" a poet as Irishman Roland Robinson suffers from using a Georgian diction to write of the Australian desert and outback — poeticisms take over where a hard visionary clarity should be. What is true of Australian architecture is true of its poetry: it has not yet achieved that most elusive and unmistakable quality — a style of its own. The state of Australian poetry is such that Australian poets could not have developed, like the Americans,

a stream of elegant, highly polished, dandified poets, nor anything as extreme as the Beats. (Neither have much influence here.) But far too many Australian writers have still not passed over the Georgian threshold.

5

There are several reasons for this. Hope and McAuley have been the dominating critical figures in Australian poetry for several years and both have always violently attacked experimentalism in all its forms. Both have always rejected the Modernist revolution, both have consistently attacked Eliot and Pound. McAuley's Ern Malley hoax and Hope's attacks on the young Max Harris inhibited experiment for years — inhibited it in a country where the relationship to the arts has always been timid, uncertain and conservative. There has been a certain amount of resentful and helpless opposition to their attitudes, but still no criticism intellectually forceful or coherent enough adequately to challenge their supremacy. Neither Hope nor McAuley can ever again in the nature of things exert the influence they wielded in the late 'forties and early 'fifties. McAuley's interests are increasingly political; Hope's apparent indifference to the new strains in Australian writing has robbed his criticism of much effectiveness. No one has yet arisen to take their place, though perhaps Vincent Buckley and Chris Wallace-Crabbe, both of whom have written fine criticism, will yet do so.

6

But even though Australian writing is still in some ways immature, it has nevertheless produced a small number of Australian-born writers who command world attention and

interest. Foremost among the poets are, of course, Hope himself and Judith Wright.

7

Hope's «Poems» (1960), something of a 'musée imaginaire' of world poetry, is the greatest single book of poems published by an Australian: it has a range, an energy, a fullness of response — even a certain opulence of feeling — without parallel here. Misanthropic, highly romantic in their view of the poet as an exceptional being set apart from the rest of humanity by his vision and calling, despairing in their vision of human isolation relieved only by the momentary ecstasy of sexual contact (the title of Hope's first book, «The Wandering Islands», 1955, seems to be an ironic reference to and rejection of John Donne's "no man is an island"), these poems, for all their literary effects, their occasional archaisms and poeticisms, are deeply rooted in the real world of humanity and sensations — "dung, dirt and dead men's bones". Hope's latest poems show him entering a phase of baroque virtuosity, far in advance of any of his early pieces — and if he no longer publishes the scatological Rochester-like pieces that first brought him into prominence, a recent poem like "The Martyrdom of St. Theresa" shows that his challenging vision has lost none of its savagery.

8

If Hope's recent work shows an increasing abundance, variety and versatility, Judith Wright's «Five Senses» (1962) has something of the finality of a "collected poems". It brings together poems selected from work written over the last twenty years. She is more uneven than a major poet can afford to be; but her strength is her vision, and she needs to be read in toto rather than judged on

separate pieces, somewhat in the way that Sidney Nolan's paintings need to be seen as a series rather than as isolated pictures. Thus, her book «Birds» (1962) gains enormously by being read as a whole. Suffused with the values of natural piety, as is all her work, «Birds» is a search for a finer understanding of what is involved in the “reverence of the heart” which her dying and extinct fabulous creatures are seen to inhabit. Judith Wright is at her best in the rapt contemplative mode and in her apocalyptic poems on the modern world.

9

Critics have complained of the gradual elimination of the human form from her poetic universe — but her vision has led her through a search for origins back to the biological beginnings of life. Where Hope's Australia is: “the last of lands, the emptiest, A woman beyond her change of life”, for Judith Wright the rain forests of Queensland become the image of an Australia where all is beginning and growth in primal slime.

10

THE ANCESTORS

That stream ran through the sunny grass so clear —
more polished than dew is, all one lilt of light.
We found our way up to the source, where stand
the fern-trees locked in endless age
under the smothering vine and the trees' night.
Their slow roots spread in mud and stone,
and in each notched trunk, shaggy as an ape,
crouches the ancestor, the dark bent foetus;
unopened eyes, face fixed in unexperienced sorrow,

and body contorted in the fern-tree's shape.
That sad, pre-history, unexpectant face —
I hear the answering sound of my blood, I know
these primitive fathers waiting for rebirth,
these children not yet born — the womb holds so
the moss-grown patience of the skull,
the old ape-knowledge of the embryo.
Their silent sleep is gathered round the spring
that feeds the living, thousand-lighted stream
up which we toiled into this timeless dream.

11

Judith Wright has been influenced to a certain extent by Edith Sitwell and by Kathleen Raine — on the one hand, an abuse of abstractions, on the other the dedicated pursuit of a vision at the expense of poetry and purely poetic concerns. But in her best poems she has written more tellingly and more authentically of Australia than any other poet of her generation. I believe that her stature will increase with time rather than diminish.

12

James McAuley's «Captain Quiros» (1964), a condensed epic based on the voyages of Quiros, is the most ambitious poem he has written. In spite of its passages of lyrical beauty, it has been seen by some local critics as little more than a prodigious exercise of will. The poem certainly lacks epic plenitude, but its strength is its structure. A clear narrative line holds together entranced lyrical, visionary and ecstatic moments, and the whole is arranged like a triptych: the first voyage represents Quiros' descent into Hell; the second has purgatorial aspects; and the last panel consists of an apocalyptic vision of the future of the South Land.

13

Although McAuley has gone on experimenting and extending his range with narratives, epics and satires, he is essentially a lyric poet and his finest poems are those gathered together in «Black Swans» (1956) and in his «Selected Poems» (1964). They have an extraordinary purity and mellowness of tone. Recent verses suggest that his danger is to become exclusively a poet of knowledge, but this may be a transitional phase.

14

Among poets of an older generation who first achieved prominence in the forties, Douglas Stewart's recent work has shown remarkable development and change. «Rutherford» (1962) now makes it likely that he will be remembered more for his lyrics than his plays. Written in a loosely strung, low-pitched line, the monologues in «Rutherford» explore the inner worlds of scientists whom Stewart sees as the modern equivalents of the explorers. Shorter lyrics, too, like "The Garden of Ships" and "Silkworms" are amongst the best things he has written, and are free of the whimsy which has marred some of his shorter poems in the past.

15

While Robert Fitzgerald's most considerable achievement is still his long narrative «Between Two Tides» (1952), «Southmost Twelve» (1962) showed a certain increase in lyrical intensity and grasp – notably in poems written under the stress of increasing age and fears of death and disease. It has always seemed to me that Fitzgerald's poems do not resist the intelligence successfully enough (in the sense of Wallace Steven's "Adagio": "Poetry should

resist the intelligence almost successfully”); but his recent work has a remarkable sparseness and firmness of edge.

16

Rosemary Dobson and David Campbell are not prolific poets and neither has had much attention locally, perhaps because their work doesn't lend itself to the elaborate investigation that would make it academically respectable. Both are lyricists of great purity: Rosemary Dobson's poems based on paintings (Breughel, Vermeer, Crivelli, Verelst's portrait of a child with a cockatoo in the Bedford Collection) and Campbell's "outback" poems of life in the Monaro are written with a rare delicacy and fineness of feeling. Both are now exploring new territory and extending their technical range.

17

As well as having seen the consolidation of the work of a number of senior poets, the early 1960s have seen the appearance of an outstanding first book — Gwen Harwood's «Poems». Gwen Harwood belongs to the generation of poets that includes Vincent Buckley and Geoffrey Dutton, but she did not bring out her first book until 1962 — by general agreement the most exciting to have appeared in Australia since Hope's «The Wandering Islands» (1955). Her technical range is perhaps greater than any other Australian poet's and along with deeply personal poems on experiences of grief and of pain in hospital that recall some of the American women poets, she has written poems — rigorous, dense and cerebral — grouped around the figure of Professor Eisenbart, who stands somewhere between Morgenstern's Palmstrom and Eliot's Prufrock.

Francis Webb, who Sir Herbert Read has claimed is the most important poet at present writing in English, published «Ghost of the Cock» in 1964, though his outstanding book still remains «Socrates and other Poems» (1961). Webb has written much of historical figures and a number of poems on music and musicians, notably on Bruckner, for whose symphonies and masses he has a great love. But his truly unique poems are those in which he explores the minds and feelings of men like Leichhardt and Eyre. His poem “Eyre All Alone”, with its Biblical repetitions and overtones, probably remains his finest achievement in this field. Webb is a frequently obscure and difficult poet, both Baroque and surrealist. While language has other ranges of possibilities than those which Webb sees it in, he is one of the few Australian writers whose concern is language and a truly creative use of words. “Most Australian poets,” as D. J. Enright said on a recent visit, “are too concerned with metrics.”

Australian poetry has only recently come of age and it is natural that in any survey attention should be given to the senior poets who are still writing. There are, however, a number of younger poets who have written work of promise and distinction, and one can, I believe, divide them usefully into two groups — the urbanites and the exotics.

The urbanites are mainly centred in Melbourne and they include Chris Wallace-Crabbe, Vincent Buckley, Alexander Craig, R.A.

Simpson, Noel Macainsh and Evan Jones. While all are different as poets they have certain group characteristics and as a group they represent one of the most interesting developments in Australian poetry since the war. Many of their attitudes are derived from post-war England in spite of their professed anti-Englishness. They aim at urbanity of tone, the ironic stance. Auden remains the figure who has most influenced them all, though all have also been influenced by recent American poets.

21

Both Alexander Craig and Evan Jones have lived and studied in America, and written about it. Craig's sequence, "Collegetown: Eastern U.S.A.", is one of the best poems by one of the younger writers. Craig's output is very slight, and his work lacks "the reek of humanity", but he is technically perhaps the most accomplished as Vincent Buckley is the most substantial of the Melbourne poets. But if one thinks of the influence America has exerted on English writers as different as Thom Gunn and Charles Tomlinson, then one realises that its effects on Australian poets have been marginal. The influence of Robert Lowell on Vincent Buckley (whose style tends to be an amalgamation of Matthew Arnold and David Gascoyne) W. D. Snodgrass on Evan Jones, and William Stafford on Alexander Craig, does not change this situation.

22

The Melbourne poets bear certain resemblances to what used to be called the "Movement" poets in England – and are, in fact, the closest thing we have to a group. A striking feature of their work, however, is their absorbed involvement in the European tradition. Two of the best poems written here recently are R. A. Simpson's

“Religious Procession, Florence”; and Alexander Craig’s
“Laurenziana Chapel”.

23

The rest are outsiders, exotics, perhaps, who have been more directly influenced by European poets than by contemporary English writers. They are more concerned with defining the texture and quality of their own highly subjective experience than with stating their moral attitudes or deliberated stances. A few of them tend towards surrealism. If the “Melbourne poets” run the risk of turning out neat willed stanzas on set themes and are threatened by a certain aridity, the exotics run the risk of lushness, disorder and pointless eccentricity.

24

Randolph Stow, the most professional writer of his generation, whose work as a novelist has overshadowed his achievement as a poet, is foremost among this group. His first book, «Act One» (1957), an astonishing performance for a person of his age, was somewhat literary, though it contained several beautiful poems on childhood and children which drew their vitality from their origins in local experience and environment. Stow’s latest book, «Outrider» (1963), which reveals a definite continuity of preoccupation with «Act One», is the most experimental book written by an Australian poet since the war. Along with delightfully warm and humorous pieces like “In Praise of Hillbillies” and “The Utopia of Lord Mayor Howard”, «Outrider» contains a number of surrealist poems – perhaps owing something both to Saint-John Perse and Leopold Senghor – centred around memories of childhood and experiences of personal crisis in the tropics and

the outback. There is a sense of great tenderness and languor at the centre of these poems, resulting from their paradoxically controlled listlessness of rhythm which suggests both a state of dissociation and the trance-like contemplation of states imperfectly understood, the understanding of which remains constantly out of reach.

25

Charles Higham, an expatriate English poet, highly romantic in sensibility and in the diction and tone of his poems, has been admired for his treatment of Australian themes, though his recent poems on Japan seem to me his best. A new sequence of surrealist war poems shows a remarkable advance in his range of imagery.

26

The young Queensland poets Rodney Hall and Thomas Shapcott would also certainly belong to this group. But labels like “exotics” and “urbanites” are used for convenience; most poets would rightly reject them.

27

While most influences are still imported, several younger writers have been influenced by senior local poets. Judith Wright's influence has been widespread and most of the Australian poets associated with the Universities have swum at one time or another with the tide around «The Wandering Islands». An amalgamation of local and imported influences may be the beginning of a truly Australian poetry.

28

There are, of course, a number of very capable younger poets writing in Australia today. Vincent Buckley and Geoffrey Dutton are now writing at their best – notably in poems about their families where their engagement with the real world is closer than it has been in the past, while Buckley's Catullus imitations seem to me one of the richest recent poetic developments; and Bruce Dawe looks as if he might emerge as a significant political poet. But, on the whole, there simply are not enough poets of quality and ability writing in Australia for anything like notable cliques, fashions, groups or schools to form. The important work is being done by those poets who are now in full control of their talents and these are poets already in their early forties or thereabouts.

29

If one compares any of the books written in Australia by poets under 35 with those published recently in England – say, Anthony Thwaite's «The Owl in the Tree» or Geoffrey Hill's «For the Unfallen», to take two very different kinds of achievement – then one has to face the fact that we simply haven't yet produced young poets of such quality here. Poetically, this seems to be a country for the slow developer.

30

Since the above article was written, R. D. Fitzgerald has published «Forty Years Poems»; Rosemary Dobson «Cock Crow», and J. R. Rowland «The Feast of Ancestors». These books do not change the general nature of my comments. ◆ END