

2008

Syd Harrex: Retrospective for an autumnal poet

Anne Collett

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Collett, Anne, Syd Harrex: Retrospective for an autumnal poet, *Kunapipi*, 30(1), 2008.
Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol30/iss1/15>

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: research-pubs@uow.edu.au

Syd Harrex: Retrospective for an autumnal poet

Abstract

With the publication in December 2007 of Dougie's *Ton & 99 Other Sonnets*, Syd Harrex's sixth volume of poetry, the time seems right to mount a retrospective. Retrospectives are common in the world of visual arts, but not something 'done' in the literary world, except perhaps in the form of a festschrift – a form more generally reserved for retiring scholars. Aspiring young poets and their more practiced peers find publication space in journals like *Kunapipi* that provide a place for the cohabitation and intercourse between new creative and scholarly work, but these journals could do more for the established poet.

ANNE COLLETT

Syd Harrex: Retrospective for an Autumnal Poet

Encore, the west wind iterates, *encore*,
 under the eaves of the house of the heart
 and in the cavern of the pulsing ear
 until – come the somersault of the year –
 it's time for fluttering wings to rehearse
 the oldest journey in the sky of verse.
 (2007a 99)

With the publication in December 2007 of *Dougie's Ton & 99 Other Sonnets*, Syd Harrex's sixth volume of poetry, the time seems right to mount a retrospective. Retrospectives are common in the world of visual arts, but not something 'done' in the literary world, except perhaps in the form of a *feschrift* — a form more generally reserved for retiring scholars. Aspiring young poets and their more practiced peers find publication space in journals like *Kunapipi* that provide a place for the cohabitation and intercourse between new creative and scholarly work, but these journals could do more for the established poet. Scholarly essays might engage with a poet's oeuvre (although the word-limit of an article is often insufficient to do justice to the work's entirety), but rarely is space given or allowed for the exhibition of that work. Copyright permissions and costs are often prohibitive, but more, a tradition of the retrospective has not been established in the literary field (except perhaps in the form of a publisher's reprint [often posthumously] of an author's works, or a volume of collected works). So before Syd Harrex, and other poets of his generation, 'gratify some undertaker' (1994a 25)¹, I thought it timely to institute such a tradition.

The retrospective gives readers an opportunity to (re)discover a poet whose work does not have the kind of reach afforded by the big international publishing houses. Harrex's first volume of poetry, *Atlantis and Other Islands* (1984), was published by Dangaroo (Mundelstrup, Denmark) — the press founded by Anna Rutherford in tandem with *Kunapipi*. Dangaroo books were often distributed at conferences of commonwealth writing and book fairs, having arrived at the venue in the back of Anna's four-wheel drive or in her backpack; and although Anna delighted in telling me that she did not really like poetry much (knowing how much I did), she managed to publish and sell quite a bit of it. Harrex's next two volumes, *Inside Out* (1991) and *Dedications* (1999), were published with Wakefield Press, an independent book publishing company based in Adelaide,

South Australia. The fifth and sixth volumes, *Under a Medlar Tree* (2004) and *Dougie's Ton* (2007), were produced by Lythrum, another small publishing house, also based in Adelaide.

All five slim volumes have been designed and produced with an aesthetic eye — they look and feel ‘good’ as a book should; but the fourth volume, *No Worries, No Illusions, No Mercy* (1999), is an *objet d'art*. It is a ‘Writers Workshop Book’ published by P. Lal (Lake Gardens, Calcutta). The book is a beautiful limited edition: ‘gold-embossed by hand, hand-stitched & hand-bound by Tulamiah Mohiuddin with handloom sari cloth woven in South India’. Lal’s credo is printed at the back of the volume. Here he notes that ‘[a]lternative publishing is desperately needed wherever commercial publication rules’ because of the nexus between ‘high-profile PR-conscious book publishers, semi-literate booksellers, moribund ... libraries, poorly informed and nepotistic underlings in charge of book review pages ... of most national newspapers and magazines, and biased bulk purchases of near worthless books by bureaucratic institutions...’ (np). This credo sounds more like a diatribe than a statement of belief; but although this might be Lal’s (biased) perspective on the book trade in India, much of it sounds all too familiar to the Australian editor of this journal. However, whilst I believe that independence is something to be valued, the difficulties of distribution attendant on cottage-industry publishing is in part reason for my decision to institute the new tradition of a literary retrospective in this journal; the inherent irony is of course that *Kunapipi* too is a cottage industry and its distribution and accessibility is dependent on the loyalty of friends and colleagues, the inclination of individual subscribers and the buying policies of libraries. Yet whilst independent publishers allow copyright to remain with authors, the retrospective does not come at any cost. ‘All copyright,’ Lal notes of Writers Workshop publications, ‘remains with the writer’ (emphasis his) as of course it should if respect for the author’s intellectual property rights is to be honoured.

Perhaps my introduction to Syd Harrex’s work is too much of an introduction to the publishing industry and the publication of poetry in particular, but then, this is the first retrospective I have mounted and it seems it must come with the usual explanation of *raison d’être* and indeed, something of a credo. So to the poet and his poetry, and my selection of poems.... I have titled this piece ‘Retrospective for an Autumnal Poet’, not so much to indicate that the poet is in the Autumn of his life (although he is that), but to suggest something about the mediative quality of Harrex’s poetry that tends, even in its earliest incarnations, to nostalgia — by which perhaps I mean an awareness of, even a dwelling on, mortality and the inevitability of loss. This is an inevitability tempered by a faith in life, love and beauty. Keats is never far away (as acknowledged by Harrex in the epigraph to his first volume, *Atlantis*, and carried by the west wind of ‘Encore’ into his latest volume, *Dougie's Ton*).

An overt example of Harrex's nostalgic tendency is the poem, 'All a Green Willow', included in the volume *Inside Out*:

A boy's year like mine
had just two seasons:
Aussie Rules and Cricket.

The discovery of girls
and swimming after tennis
also glowed with summer good,

but the time on which I gloat
is saturated by the smell
of linseed oil in willow wood.

Rich then and complex now
the leather rush of red, the race
across the stain of green:

They helped me read a poem's
beauty through, see its stumps of birth
and death, with life running in-between.
(1991a 19)

To describe a poem like this as nostalgic is a bit misleading, for unlike Keats, Harrex does not dwell in, or feed on, melancholy, rather, the place where he is now is constantly evaluated in light of where he has come and what brought him here — the experience of a life that gives precedence to the art of friendship (a green willow). 'And that's how death should be / the past nurturing the future' Harrex writes in 'The Rain it Raineth Every Day'. 'So be yourself,' he enjoins:

So be yourself . . . once insignificant
now a chiseller of messages
on headstones (a dying art you say)
but a decent way of making a living.
(2004a 15)

A warm sense of humour and an (extra)ordinary humanity, pervades Harrex's poetic observation and reflection. The poem as a cricket pitch, or indeed, life itself as a cricket pitch, is a metaphor that might seem either forced or clichéd but Harrex manages to avoid both pitfalls. The poet is well-aware of the dangers, remarking in the sonnet, 'Surviving Clichés', that:

Some simple words refuse to serve our needs
without banality, while true and tried
experience decays to platitudes.
(2007c 53)

But some simple poems do not refuse to serve the poet's needs. 'All a Green Willow' retains a simple integrity — it carries the aura of being truly felt. The achieved effect of 'truth' is the poet's craft — an art so skilled that it gives the appearance of artlessness. Perhaps this is just an indication of my personal

preference, but for me Harrex's best work is that which is not asked to carry too great a burden. Some of his more recent work feels too weighted with words, too baroque for my tastes; and sometimes I find his poetry too male, even too 'Aussie' in that 'true-mateship' (2007b 100) style that has the effect of excluding women merely by being male.

Cricket here is a good example, his latest work being titled *Dougie's Ton & 99 Other Sonnets*: I did not know what Dougie's 'ton' was, and on enquiry I was told that it was obvious I was not a true-blue Aussie — but then I am not sure what that is, or even whether Harrex himself would qualify. The poem makes all clear; a 'ton' being a century, 'Dougie's ton' is placed at the end of the volume, on page 100, the 100th of 99-plus-one sonnets. The poem is about cricket and not about cricket: it is a dedication and a memorial to friends and heroes, not only those of the sporting world, but those met through literature. 'Doug's genius for timing' is a thing akin to 'Pound's "Make it new"; Eliot's *Observations*; / Our undefeated '48 side'. I like the way Harrex is unafraid to put together the ordinary and the extraordinary, or to find the extraordinary in the ordinary; and I like the way so much of his poetry is about poetry.

For Harrex, poetry is a lived experience — it colours who he is, the way he sees the world and the way he gives that world back to himself and his readers in his poetic art. 'Walking Out in the Clare Valley'² is a perfect example (but then so are all the poems I have chosen for this retrospective). In a poetic exemplar of the Romantic ethos (whose title calls to mind the Romantic poet John Clare) Harrex wonders as he wanders in nature: writing is mind-walking that takes its pace and rhythm from the body. Stanza six reads:

A large log
across your path
invites you to sit
a while and rest
between stanzas.

Like your last footsteps,
your thoughts are melting...

Limb, eye and mind are as one with, and yet distinct from, the world through which they travel:

But suddenly I shudder
in my tracks, stopped by an idea
that all I breathe.
touch, taste, see, hear,
is only magic waiting to vanish,
as men ordain,
in everlasting death.

The 'ritual of renewals' after bushfire, as 'secure as the sun is secure', reminds the poet not only of the cyclic nature of life in which death never has the final word,

but of the singleness, the solitariness of human life, divided from the natural world by consciousness:

Winter rains raise the word
of death to speech of seed and leaf;
the single human has only one
life's chance of being heard.

Syd Harrex has taken his chance, and like Li Po, has flexed his kite's finger string and palmed poems out of skies³:

So perfectly lazy is this windless
honey-smooth winter's room that the crows' cries,
normally belligerent as saw screams
in a mill, are slipper-quiet like slow
motion images in a sky-blue day-
dream when the most leisureful place on earth
is the Australian bush; its charade
silences, its bird palpitations, the
insect treks like corpuscles through the veins,
delivering a solace message short
as a telegram used to be, yet long
as ancient day or night in a haiku
read in the glow of a full moon, and rain
splintered sun-signs, hieroglyphed in stone.
(2007d 51)

NOTES

- ¹ See p. 33 of this issue for the poem in full.
- ² See p. 73 of this issue for the poem in full.
- ³ A slight misquotation of the last haiku of 'Four Haikus' from *Medlar Tree*, p.31 (a poem by the way in which cricket insinuates itself in artful manner yet again, the third stanza / haiku reading: 'Like a Chinese scroll / the willow of Lara's bat/ unfolds boundaries'.

WORKS CITED

- Harrex, Syd 1984, *Atlantis and Other Islands*, Dangaroo, Mundelstrup, Denmark.
- 1984a, 'Egina', *Atlantis and Other Islands*, Dangaroo, Mundelstrup, Denmark, p. 24–25.
- 1991, *Inside Out*, Wakefield Press, Kent Town, South Australia.
- 1991a, 'All a Green Willow', *Inside Out*, Wakefield Press, Kent Town, South Australia, p. 19.
- 1991b, 'Walking Out in the Clare Valley', *Inside Out*, Wakefield Press, Kent Town, South Australia, pp. 10–18.
- 1999, *No Worries, No Illusions, No Mercy*, Writers Workshop, Calcutta.

-
- 1999, *Dedications*, Wakefield Press, Kent Town, South Australia.
- 2004, *Under a Medlar Tree*, Lythrum Press, Adelaide.
- 2004a, ‘The Rain it Raineth Every Day’, *Under a Medlar Tree*, Lythrum Press, Adelaide, p. 15.
- 2007, *Dougie’s Ton & 99 Other Sonnets*, Lythrum Press, Adelaide.
- 2007a, ‘Encore’, *Dougie’s Ton & 99 Other Sonnets*, Lythrum Press, Adelaide, p. 99.
- 2007b, ‘Dougie’s Ton’, *Dougie’s Ton & 99 Other Sonnets*, Lythrum Press, Adelaide, p. 100.
- 2007c, ‘Surviving Clichés’, *Dougie’s Ton & 99 Other Sonnets*, Lythrum Press, Adelaide, p. 53.
- 2007d, ‘Time’s Timeless Art’, *Dougie’s Ton & 99 Other Sonnets*, Lythrum Press, Adelaide, p. 51.