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Book Reviews

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Book Reviews

Abstract

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and *Its Social Context*, the proceedings of the Fourth Annual Conference on West Indian Literature, which includes papers on Naipaul, De Lisser, Lamming, De Boissière, Rhone, and Lovelace.

Several journals produced issues focussing on Caribbean writings. The *Journal of Caribbean Studies* (Fall) has articles on Austin Clarke, Caribbean-Canadian writers, calypso, and a short story by Jan Carew. *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* (20, 1) carries pieces on Cyril Dabydeen, the Naipauls on Africa, the aboriginal in *Palace of the Peacock*, and C.L.R. James's barrack-yard. *Komparatistische Hefte* (Bayreuth) devotes Number 9-10 to European-Caribbean literary relations; it includes an essay by Carew and an interview with John Hearne. *Wasafiri* (Spring), the journal of ATCAL (London), has an interview with Selvon and an article on Indian-African relations in Caribbean fiction. And finally, John La Rose, the publisher-bookseller, has started a new periodical, *New Beacon Review*, which has a few pieces on Caribbean literature. The first issue, July 1985, includes poems by Brathwaite and Salkey.

VICTOR J. RAMRAJ

Book Reviews

Stephen Gray, *Douglas Blackburn*. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1984. 158 pp. No price given.

Douglas Blackburn (1857-1929) was a British journalist, writer and novelist who spent a large part of his grown-up and working life in South Africa — more specifically the Transvaal and Natal. He produced journalistic books on topics like *Thought-reading, or Modern Mysteries Explained* (1884), *The Detection of Forgery: A Practical Handbook* (1909) and *Secret Service in South Africa* (1911) as well as a biography of Edith Cavell (1915), wrote articles for such diverse journals as the *Johannesburg Star*, the *Standard and Diggers' News*, the *Daily Mail* and the British humanitarian and pro-Boer *New Age*, and edited a series of short-lived one-man magazines of his own in both England and South Africa, from the *Brightonian* to the *Transvaal Sentinel* and *Life: A Sub-Tropical Journal*. On top of this he published seven novels dealing with South African themes, the two best-known of which were probably *A Burgher Quixote* (1903) and *Richard Hartley, Prospector* (1905) that were brought out by William Blackwood and Sons in Britain.

By now, however, the literary work of Douglas Blackburn has been almost completely forgotten and with it a whole important phase in the history of colonial South African literature. The reasons for Blackburn's works having been excluded from the canon of literary history seem to have had less to do with their value than with their controversial contents and style, and in order to redress the balance and bring Blackburn back to the attention of readers, Stephen Gray, who is professor of English at Rand Afrikaans University in Johannesburg, has produced this short monograph for Twayne's World Author Series.

Reconstructing Blackburn's biography has not been easy. Not only was he an extreme individualist, who kept crossing the borderlines that divided the ideological universe of his period, particularly and most interestingly the one that separated the Boer world of the two old republics from that of British civilization — Blackburn also continually and habitually lied about his life and exploits and made up disguises and masks for himself. Consequently, the initial part of Stephen Gray's job, which he describes as that of 'a sleuth on the track', was to get the record of Blackburn's life straight and clear away the accumulated misinformation.

The most important part of Gray's book consists in his re-introduction and interpretation of Blackburn's seven novels, which he considers 'landmarks in the development of South African fiction' and which he divides into three groups: *Kruger's Secret Service* (1900) and *Richard Hartley, Prospector* (1905), which are both in a sense 'antinovels', the satirical Sarel Erasmus trilogy, comprising *Prisloo of Prinsloosdorp* (1899), *A Burgher Quixote* (1903) and *I Came and Saw* (1908), and finally the two 'antiromances' *Leaven: A Black and White Story* (1908) and *Love Muti* (1915).

The prefix 'anti' is central to Stephen Gray's interpretation which sees these unusual texts as basically ironical and as parodies of stereotypes of colonial fiction. Thus *Richard Hartley, Prospector* turns the typical Rider Haggard plot-pattern upside down by letting its group of white heroes embark on an expedition into the interior, not to explore and civilize barbarism, but with the purpose of selling a Maxim gun and ammunition to Chief Magato and his rebels against Boer rule in the Zoutpansberg. The heroes are not Quartermain-like paragons of moral uprightness, but fortune hunters who have failed in their quest for a bonanza on the Rand and for political power in Pretoria respectively and 'are tied together by no ideals other than economic expediency'.

In a parallel way *Love Muti* answers and overturns John Buchan's imperialist allegorizing of the suppression of the Bambata rebellion of 1906 in *Prester John*. Blackburn's version of David Crawford, Charlie Rabson, who arrives in Natal 'to prove himself' eventually does this by giving in to subversive passion. He reconciles the dualism between 'civilization' and 'savagery' by marrying 'coloured' Letty and settles down with her in a Johannesburg that Blackburn turns into a utopian rather than prophetic 'vision of a harmonious and productive golden land of opportunity, in which differences of colour, gender, and of class are subsumed within a greater whole, for a greater common good'. One of the important points of the interpretation is that the text only acquires its meaning through intertextuality — through its dialogue with another text: Like *Richard Hartley* it 'could not exist without its forbears in the tradition'.

Irony and parody are also central in the novels Gray points to as Douglas Blackburn's masterpieces, *A Burgher Quixote* and *Leaven: A Black and White Story*. The former is a picaresque saga of the Boer War — Stephen Gray calls it 'the only novel of stature to have emerged from the South African War' — and its Cervantes-like protagonist is the uprooted Afrikaner Sarel Erasmus who is trapped between the two worlds that seem to be at war, the 'old' one of the Boer republics and the 'modern' one of British and mining

capitalism. The action takes the hero through a series of dramatic episodes on both sides of the battle front, and 'like Cervantes before him, Blackburn exposes the defects of the former system in the light of the barbarities of its successor'. At the end of the story Sarel is in a British prison, the war is coming to an end, and the world has changed without the hero having realized properly the issues that were at stake and that were to determine his fate. What comes out underneath all the irony, however, is a certain 'elegiac tone' that bemoans the passing of the old Z.A.R. world, which in spite of its ridiculous and backward features and its suppression of black Africans to Blackburn like other eminent pro-Boers of the period remained 'a fine example of a socialist society in principle and in action', as Stephen Gray puts it.

In *Leaven: A Black and White Story* the reader is again presented with a view of South African society from beneath. This time the *picaro* is a black African, the Zulu Bulalie, who commits patricide in order to be allowed to leave his traditional *kraal* and try his luck in the industries and cities of white modernity. Once more the plot is a careful reversal of colonial stereotypes: Instead of a civilizing venture into the heart of darkness *Leaven* traces the development of a 'savage' character's odyssey through a capitalist and Christian world that is exposed as one of greed, exploitation and hypocrisy. Bulalie is cheated, he is exposed to the hysterics of colonial morality when falsely accused of sexual assault and consequently flogged in the most vicious manner, he is dragged off by a labour agent and becomes a mineworker and a compound resident on the Rand, and finally he dies after an attempt to save the life of a naïve British missionary, who has tried to convert him. Altogether an impressively comprehensive catalogue of central aspects of black, proletarian experience in South Africa in the late 1890s, and *Leaven* is a much more 'serious' work than Blackburn's earlier novels in the sense of its irony being much more grim.

The moral of the story seems to be — and here Stephen Gray elaborates on the earlier analysis of the novel by Isabel Hofmeyr in her thesis from 1980 on 'Mining, Social Change and Literature' — that the collision of the worlds of 'kaffir socialist' tradition and white capitalist modernization has catastrophic effects. Where Hofmeyr saw this as Blackburn's contribution to the build-up of segregation and 'separate development' ideology, Gray attempts a more positive interpretation: though Blackburn does romanticize traditional African society as 'socialist' and extols the virtues of the 'raw' Africans as opposed to those 'corrupted by civilization', he is primarily concerned with the destructive, exploitative and decadent nature of white capitalist existence. In contrast, 'Bulalie's type contains the inner resourcefulness and smartness to outlive his master in the end'.

Clearly this is all fascinating stuff, and Stephen Gray has made a very valuable contribution in digging out Blackburn's seditious novels from the slag heap of historical oblivion and cultural repression. Since Blackburn's works have been so successfully lost from memory, Gray's rather short book is necessarily taken up to a considerable extent by introductory presentations and paraphrases, and in a few cases one would have liked the interpretations to be more systematic and thorough and for Gray to have been more specific about the cultural and political contexts of Blackburn's writing. In what sense of the word, for instance, was Blackburn — as Stephen Gray asserts — a socialist? The period in the 1890s and 1900s when Blackburn was active as a novelist saw the rise of a wide variety of socialist groupings and shades of socialist thought, both in Britain and in South Africa, and the South African War — the central topic of the Blackburn novels — provided a main focus for the spelling out of their differences. Stephen Gray does not situate Blackburn's socialism within this spectrum of debate. Nor does he come to terms with the striking ambiguity of his romantic anti-capitalist idealizations of the Boer republics as 'socialist' or of 'kaffir socialism'. How do Blackburn's pro-Boer idylls relate

to those of Keir Hardie and Edward Carpenter or to the line of the *Standard and Diggers' News*? Where does the message of *Leaven* stand in comparison with that of Dudley Kidd's vulgar *Kafir Socialism*, which came out in the same year? Is Blackburn's contrasting of 'raw' with 'civilized' Africans different from that of Olive Schreiner in *Undine*, or are they both expressions of the same paranoid stereotype? And is it not an identical stereotype that forms one of the basic themes in Buchan's *Prester John*?

Stephen Gray says that one of the reasons why Blackburn's novels have been so effectively forgotten and neglected by literary historians may be their topicality and close relationship with journalism. And he argues very plausibly that the orientation of the texts around specific contemporary events and discussions adds to rather than detracts from their literary merit. But this then calls for a critical approach which is both cogent in its analysis of themes and structures in the text and directed towards a reconstruction of its political and historical context. To a certain extent Gray's book is aimed at such a reconstruction — primarily in the form of his attempt to produce a coherent outline of Blackburn's biography. But in the first place he does not get to the bottom of the life history — apparently the available material has been too scanty for Gray to be able to produce a clear and faceted picture of the person and his development, and one does not feel that the code to the 'hidden' Blackburn has been broken definitively. In the second place the book does not give its reader a precise understanding of the social world in which Blackburn moved, and in which his writings were interventions. Gray stays quite cautiously within the limits of his discipline and does not, for instance, venture far into the exciting world of Witwatersrand social history in the period, which Charles van Onselen and others have recently helped to open up — van Onselen's *New Babylon* and *New Nineveh* are not even mentioned.

Stephen Gray's primary purpose has been to make readers aware of Douglas Blackburn's existence as an author who should be taken seriously and to point to his literary production as an important object for new research. As a re-introduction and an inspiration for further investigations his book is most welcome, and it is not surprising that it perhaps raises as many questions as it answers.

PREBEN KAARSHOLM

Richard Corballis and Simon Garrett, *Introducing Witi Ihimaera*.
Auckland: Longman Paul, 1984.

A useful, unassuming introduction to the work of Witi Ihimaera, one of New Zealand's leading writers and the author of the first collection of short stories (*Pounamu*, *Pounamu*, 1972) and the first novel (*Tangi*, 1973) to be published by a Maori writer. Based on careful personal analysis of Ihimaera's writing, backed by references to previous criticism and, extensively, by explanations and comment provided by the author himself, *Introducing Witi Ihimaera* is a balanced and intelligent presentation of the author's production up to *The New Net Goes Fishing* (1977), with brief references also to his libretto for *Waituhi*, which has since been performed in Wellington, and to *The Matriarch*, the novel the author is still engaged in writing. Probably due to space restrictions, the book contains no reference to the other novel, *Maui/Mauri/Maori*, that Ihimaera has planned as the first of the two novels

that are to complete the series on the life of Maori in urban areas initiated by *The New Net Goes Fishing* story collection, but which are still, as yet, unwritten.

The major defect of *Introducing Witi Ihimaera* is indeed its brevity. Although the examination of individual works is sensitive and stimulating, the introductory section on the author's life and background seems inadequately sketchy, particularly with regard to Maori life and culture. The purpose of this chapter seems to be mainly that of indicating the principal biographical elements in Ihimaera's novels and stories, pointing not only to similarities but also to differences, and warning against too easy an identification between the two. Although this is undoubtedly useful, elements which may not be directly present in the author's creative work, but which have considerable bearing upon it, could have been presented in greater detail. The brief description of the Ringatu religion, as also the information that the author was himself brought up as a Mormon (his grandfather and parents having been converted to the Mormon faith, when and how we are not informed), while occasionally attending Ringatu services which 'made a vivid impression on him, which remains to this day', is frustratingly scanty and the bibliography, restricted to a selection of works by and on Ihimaera, provides no indications as to where to seek further information. Again, while the description of Rongopai and its history is illuminating, particularly for its emphasis on the syncretic aspects of the meeting-house and on the 'ambivalence' and 'tension' that characterized the environment in which Ihimaera grew up and that was to be a prominent feature of his creative work, the reader feels the need for a wider frame of reference. Published in New Zealand, the book is probably intended for a mainly local public for whom many of the references need little or no explanation. As, however, readership is likely to include others besides New Zealanders, further information and, most particularly, a glossary, would be welcome. Although Witi Ihimaera is notoriously opposed to glossing the Maori terms used in his own work, the case of a book intended to 'introduce' his work to 'students and the general reader' is surely different.

Separate chapters are devoted to *Pounamu*, *Pounamu*, *Tangi*, *Whanau* and *The New Net Goes Fishing* and each, in its turn, is subdivided into lesser units in order to scrutinize more closely the inner articulation, whether structural or thematic or both, of each work. The attentive comparison and analysis of different versions of single stories (the three versions, for example, of 'Tangi' — the short story, not to be confused with the novel of the same name, which constitutes yet another version) is particularly successful, providing concrete illustration of Ihimaera's constant search for more and more effective means of expression. The structure and symbolism of his stories and novels are examined in depth, with particular attention to his complex time schemes, his use of interior monologue and his alternation of passages in the habitual past, the simple past and the present. Although more attention could, it is felt, have been paid to the musical element in Ihimaera's work and his adoption of musical paradigms, Corballis and Garrett provide a lucid explanation of how the various strands of narrative interweave and acquire significance and how the particular forms of characterization, plot and setting are dictated by the nature of the world the author is depicting and constructing and by the notion of community on which it is founded.

Despite his predominantly Maori subject matter, his emotion, lyricism and avoidance of individualistic characterization (although the authors note that the characters of *The New Net Goes Fishing* tend in fact to be less 'allegorical' and more individualized than those of *Pounamu*, *Pounamu*), Witi Ihimaera is not, we are reminded, simply a 'Maori writer'. Pointing to some of the European and Pakeha influences and analogies present in his work (from *The Wanderer* to *Madame Butterfly* to Katherine Mansfield's use of symbolism), Corballis and Garrett emphasize his liking for the kind of cultural synthesis or dual

heritage sketched out in 'Return from Oz', the final story of *The New Net Goes Fishing* collection, noting how the desire for synthesis seems to underlie the subject and style of the novel on which Ihimaera is currently working.

JANE WILKINSON

W.J. Keith, *Canadian Literature in English*. London and New York: Longman, 1985. 287 pages. £14.95 hardback, £6.95 paperback.

W.J. Keith's book is the first in the Longmans Literature in English series to treat Commonwealth Literature and will be followed by similar volumes on Indian, African, Australian and Caribbean literatures. It looks like a valuable model for the others in the way Professor Keith tells the story of the emergence and development of a distinctively Canadian tradition of writing in English. He does it with authority; who better to write such an Introduction than the former editor of the *University of Toronto Quarterly*, who is also a teacher, critic and reviewer actively engaged in trying to improve the quality of critical writing in Canada? Keith's characteristic preoccupations with tradition and the necessity for evaluative criticism inform the shape of this history.

In his Preface, Keith points out how slow a Canadian literary tradition was to develop; as he says, 'it is a literature most impressive in its contemporary achievements', by which he means since the 1950s, and the design of the book reflects this. There is a brief Introduction on Canadian history and geography, followed by a four-part structure: Part One treats Canadian writing from the eighteenth century to the early twentieth century and takes less than a quarter of the book, so leaving space for discussion of the twentieth century development of major genres, Poetry, Fiction and Others (Drama and non-fictional prose), in Parts Two, Three and Four. There is a Chronology at the end which visually demonstrates Keith's argument about late flowering, also a short general Bibliography and very useful Notes on Individual Authors.

The emphasis on contemporary writing is part of Keith's historical argument and he pays most attention to those modern writers whose debt to the past is most obvious, for he is interested in showing how a 'Canadian literary and imaginative tradition gradually but doggedly became recognised and established'. This approach discerns distinctively Canadian traces from early on, when writing in Canada consisted of the reports of travellers, explorers and early settlers — very much the mapping of a new country and 'the naming of parts', confrontations with strangeness, vivid regional awareness, and writing by women out of small isolated communities. These features together with ambivalent responses towards Britain, Europe and the United States, constitute the Canadian literary inheritance, and Keith shows how present-day writing in Canada sustains these continuities. Not surprisingly, much Canadian writing is characterised by its eclecticism as much as by its nationalism. True, there are so many interesting writers since the 1960s that no history format could allow enough space to treat them adequately, but Keith manages to make a dash through a host of contemporary names feel like an intelligently ordered itinerary, ending his account with emphasis on women's writing, experimentalism and post-modernism. He also maintains his evaluative principles in his short critical discussions, and one is grateful to have literary values so privileged over historical interest.

I must say the section on Canadian Drama is the least satisfactory in the book. Probably

the most exciting work has been French Canadian, but Keith sees 'healthy native drama' as still in the future while ignoring the activity of theatre workshops, the annual Stratford Drama Festival, and some new names.

The story of Can Lit has already gone beyond these pages (written in 1982-3) but with Keith's book as guide we shall better recognise historical continuities through individual differences as new Canadian books appear. This is a valuable study for everyone interested in Canadian Literature, Canadians and non-Canadians.

CORAL ANN HOWELLS

Polanki Ramamoorthy, *Rangoli*. Sankramana Prakashana, Dharwad
580.008 (India). Rs 20.

During the past few years Polanki Ramamoorthy has contributed poems to *New Quest*, *Modern Trends in Indo-Anglian Poetry*, *New Letters*, *India*, and similar journals that are given to publishing the work of writers who are not yet established and recognised. More recently, some of his work was selected by Chinua Achebe for inclusion in *Okike*, and Edward Brathwaite commended many of the individual poems that have been gathered in this first volume of the writer's work. Now, with sixty poems as a basis of judgement, it is possible to make a reasonable assessment of Ramamoorthy's position in English-language poetry in India.

Most noticeable is Ramamoorthy's outlook: at times cynical, at times stoical, he constantly presents the reader with examples of the futility of most endeavours and the ironies of religious pieties in a culture divided between superstition and humanism. Occasionally he can be fanciful and lighthearted, but mostly he is droll, serious, and even pessimistic. The title poem, 'Rangoli', provides a good introduction to his work:

Crawling out of a mudhole
an old man stood, bowed,
hands folded in greeting

Too old to cobble or carry night soil
the untouchable kept watch
while others went out for work

Beneath his trembling knees
his splayed feet bared
on the smooth cowdung-pasted floor
arabesques of rangoli.

Most of the poems are about the disparities of life: in India, of course, but (by implication) also throughout the world. The characters (untouchables, the uprooted, beggars, scavenger girls or woodchoppers in many of the poems, and ants, bees, snakes, cows, crows, snails, cats, and rats in others) are essentially interchangeable: all are subject to the same ironies of life, the same ineffable laws of being, the same general anonymity in cosmic movement; all can, with justification, repeat the words of 'Elemental Thorn':

I am a snail in the shell
whose only daring is the horn
which sucks the air it stabs
and hangs out naked in a teat.

'The Uprooted' reminds us that man is not beyond using 'the bait/ of a father's wheedling call and outstretched arm' to entice a bone-thin child to stumble on and so die — just to get a memorable photograph. 'What's the time?' impresses us with the meaninglessness of time in a world of endless struggle for underfed child-labourers, children to whom the evangelist of another poem would comment, 'Rejoice that the lord has chosen you for this grief'. And repeatedly the poet reminds us that 'Pity is in exile ... and must visit only as an exile'.

At times the fatalism of Ramamoorthy's outlook becomes oppressive, but this is just one aspect of his cultural inheritance, which has instilled a clear acceptance of 'such finalities/ of life and death'.

A.L. McLEOD

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