1979

The Year that Was

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Abstract

Australia

Knocking on the sides of the rain-tank, you find unexpectedly that 1978's been a good year for Australian poetry. 'Unexpectedly' because you've grown so used to the publishers' dictum that Poetry Won't Sell, and to the rumour that the formerly flourishing small presses have glutted their own market, that it comes as a surprise to find so many books of real significance.
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Certainly the most substantial of those books is Bruce Dawe's *Sometimes Gladness* (Longman Cheshire). His is the poetry that captures exactly the ambivalent, questioning voices of Australia in the television era and at the same time — with an energetic fusion of satiric wit, irony, compassion, bitterness and pathos — revives the vernacular style of Lawson. Dawe is one of the three or four best poets Australia has produced; as a reader, he is unsurpassed. And yet because of the continuing failure of publishers to promote Australian writers, he is relatively unknown outside Australia. Hopefully, the appearance of *Sometimes Gladness* will change that.

Impressive as this retrospective collection is, however, it should not be allowed to overshadow here significant books by Les Murray, Bruce Beaver, Peter Porter and Rosemary Dobson.

Murray is the poet who, with Dawe, most clearly inherits the pre-eminence of Judith Wright and A. D. Hope in Australian poetry — though in 1978 he published not poems, but a lively collection of prose pieces, *The Peasant Mandarin* (UQP). These reviews, essays and, as he calls them, 'raves' show his best and worst aspects but are never dull — his energy, humour, brilliant storytelling and encyclopedic knowledge, as well as his tendency
towards the doctrinaire – and provide an indispensable frame of reference for his poetry.

New developments in books by Geoffrey Lehmann, Peter Porter and Rosemary Dobson show how influential the vernacular style of both Dawe and Murray has become in Australian poetry. These three poets, each with an established reputation, are moving away from the kind of poetry epitomised by A. D. Hope’s in the 1950s: an academic and Eurocentric poetry that digs into Classical mythology or art or history to satisfy its colonial longing for a sense of the past. That poetry has elegance and wit, but has too often been private or lifeless.

Peter Porter in *The Cost of Seriousness* (OUP) evokes a new warmth in a group of poems quite free of the name-dropping that has so often made him seem a boy from Brisbane come to the centre of civilization; Rosemary Dobson, in *Over the Frontier* (A&R) shows a growing confidence in the world outside her painting and reading. Her poems are less private and freer in line than before. But it’s Geoffrey Lehmann who has made the most complete and startling break with earlier work in his new book *Ross’ Poems* (A&R). Clearly influenced here by Murray and Wright, Lehmann evokes not a Classical past, but an Australian rural past of ‘pork chops cooked on a shovel’ and blue and green beetle wings baked accidentally into bread, in poems that are like short stories, accompanied by photographs.

In *Ross’ Poems*, Lehmann shares with Dawe and Murray a robust vernacular that is related, and yet in contrast, to the quiet and subtle freedom of Bruce Beaver’s seventh collection, *Death’s Directives* (Prism). Beaver’s intimate conversational tone, his vulnerability and strength in an honest refusal to strike poses are the features of a distinctive voice whose power gathers surely and unobtrusively. Like Dawe, he deserves to be better known.

The general brightness of the year in poetry is filled out with books too numerous to discuss here, but two particularly: Michael Dransfield’s posthumous *Voyage Into Solitude* (UQP) demonstrates again the strength of a voice lost too soon; David Campbell’s
revised *Selected Poems* (A&R) includes more recent work to show the one poet of the older generation in Australia, already a powerful presence, to become unfailingly more interesting.

The overall achievement in fiction has not been quite as high, although it’s David Malouf’s second novel that is the outstanding Australian book for many years, and it’s the short story that has revealed the best new writer of the year: James McQueen. McQueen comes to a first book fairly late, but with the benefit of an even and mature talent in *The Electric Beach* (Robin Books). In these ‘short fictions’ from Tasmania (along with an increasing volume of work coming out of Queensland) you have the nearest thing to the development of a regional writing in Australian literature. McQueen’s stories tend towards the gothic: a coffin is lowered into the ground and keeps falling; a girl looks across the river at the ugly slag heaps of the zinc works and sees only the pyramids of Egypt; a man worries about how he is going to bury his dead father when it’s been raining for weeks and the ground is heavy and sodden beyond digging. But they evoke a strong sense of place, rather than a literary debt to Poe or Faulkner. Tasmania is a place of slow brown rivers and weed-choked backyards, as well as the tourist’s paradise; the country of Gabbett, the cannibal convict in *For the Term of His Natural Life*. The development of McQueen’s writing will be interesting to watch.

Patrick White remarked in a recent interview that Australian writers tend to trot out a Catholic childhood, the Depression, or an autobiography because ‘they haven’t enough disguises in their wardrobe’ (*The National Times* 30/6/79).

He’s right and wrong of course, for just as several of the poets can be seen moving (albeit late in the piece) towards a less colonial position, the year’s fiction and drama reflect a growing impatience with old definitions of ‘Australian Literature’. Nicholas Hasluck’s impressive first novel *Quarantine* (Macmillan) is a sophisticated intrigue set in the Middle East; C. J. Koch’s *The Year of Living Dangerously* (Nelson) is set in Indonesia during Confrontation; Louis Nowra’s play *Inner Voices* (Currency), the year’s
best new play, is set perhaps in 18th century Russia; Morris Lurie’s novel *Flying Home* (Outback) is about one of the jet-lag generation with a terminal case of Jewish guilt, who travels around the world with the ghosts of his dead parents always in the seats behind him.

The Australian novel and play increasingly refuse to be about life in Australia in subject matter. The publication of the first play by an Aborigine, *The Cake Man* (Currency) by Robert Merritt, and the first novel, Monica Clare’s *Karobran* (Alternative Publishing Co-Op) demonstrate that these genres are no longer exclusively white.

But the ambivalence of categories is nowhere more clearly seen than in the relationship between the year’s two best novels. Winning the premier award for Australian fiction, the Miles Franklin Award, is Jessica Anderson’s *Tirra Lirra By the River* (Macmillan) – a lousy line given by Tennyson to Sir Lancelot, and even more ludicrous used as a title here, incidentally. The novel is intelligent, beautifully written, and evokes with simplicity and economy the artist as outsider (again?) in a society which urges caution and conformity. David Malouf’s *An Imaginary Life* (Chatto & Windus) takes as its narrator the Roman poet Ovid in exile at the edge of the Russian steppes, and tells of his relationship with the frontier tribe there and a feral child who materialises out of the wilderness. It’s a splendid book.

There’s no doubt that Jessica Anderson’s novel is a good one; and there is no doubt that David Malouf’s is better. But because *Tirra Lirra* depicts life in Australia and thereby conforms to the rules of the Miles Franklin Award, it is regarded as book of the year, and not *An Imaginary Life*.

Another problem of definitions arises with books by two of Australia’s best writers for young people: Patricia Wrightson and Lilith Norman. Although each produced in 1978 her finest book to date, both were completely ignored by the award-givers, because they were not exclusively ‘children’s books’. Lilith Norman writes in *A Dream of Seas* (Collins) one of the best short novels I’ve read,
about a boy who with his widowed mother comes to live at a drab flat overlooking Bondi Beach. When he looks out his window one day, he is shocked to see seals bobbing on the swell; but when he races down the beach for a closer look, they are only board-riders in black wet-suits, waiting for a wave. The fantasy life from his window results in his becoming a seal, merging with the water in which his father drowned. It’s an unsentimental story that is both particularly Australian and universal in its dimensions.

More powerful still is Patricia Wrightson’s *The Dark Bright Water* (Hutchinson): completely self-contained, but the second book in a trilogy that deals with a young urban Aborigine who discovers his lost cultural heritage and joins forces with the Old Things of the spirit world unknown to the land’s white inhabitants. This novel explores with a power that is rare in literature for adult or child, notions of heroism, friendship, sexuality, and it proves Wrightson to be the last and strongest of the Jindyworobaks, who tried in the 1930s and ’40s to fuse white and black Australian cultures in their writing.

And its questioning of the old categories that some would like to maintain, added to Malouf’s, Nowra’s, Dawe’s, Murray’s, will not go away.

MARK MACLEOD

NEW ZEALAND

Most important books from New Zealand in the last twelve months are undoubtedly two, the final volume of Frank Sargeson’s autobiographical trilogy, *Never Enough* (dated 1977 but not published until 1978; earlier *Once is Enough*, 1973; *More than Enough*, 1975) and the outstanding new novel by Maurice Gee, *Plumb*. And our leading literary quarterly *Islands*, No. 21 (vol. VI,
no. 3, ‘Spring ’77’ – but so behind-hand that again a ’78 publication) devoted the whole of a 150-page issue to ‘Frank Sargeson at 75’, a fascinating bricolage of comment, memoir, criticism, what-have-you that make this particular issue already ‘a collector’s piece’. Sargeson, our senior fiction writer, pioneer, almost ‘onlie begetter’ of New Zealand fiction has always viewed N.Z. society through (increasingly impish) disenchanted glasses; Janet Frame, very differently indeed, again ‘stands off’ from city, paddock, and suburbia. Maurice Gee, on the other hand, in such stories as in A Glorious Morning Comrade (1975), or his recurrent suburban chronicles either of puritan murder – In My Father’s Den (1972) or of disintegrating marriage – Games of Choice (1976 – much praised ‘overseas’) or now Plumb – densely-penned story of an indomitable nonconformist looking back in his life and its rich familial and ideological vicissitudes through a long and embattled life – in all these Gee writes, sharp-eyed and ironical if necessary, from within the norms of routine N.Z. society. This writing does not lose by this social absorption – yet bookish and aging males are dominant in parts of all these books in a way that brings us back, full circle, to Sargeson’s long shadow.

There are two other recent candidates for prose ‘honours’, Vincent O’Sullivan’s stories, polished and varied, The Boy, The Bridge, The River, and first novel from one of our trio of Maori writers (poet Hone Tuwhare, fictioneer Witi Ihimaera, and herself), Patricia Grace (Waiariki, stories, 1976), Mutawhenua: the moon sleeps, brief but impeccable account, rich in implication, of a young Maori girl growing into ‘two worlds’. Incidentally, both Grace’s titles, along with all so far by Samoa’s Albert Wendt, are in our Longman Paul’s excellent series both cased and paperback, ‘Pacific Paperbacks’.

Perhaps in poetry there have been only three recent titles of consequence: Elizabeth Smither’s You’re Very Seductive William Carlos Williams, Hone Tuwhare’s Making a Fist of It, and C. K. Stead’s Walking Westward. Elizabeth Smither, poetically a new arrival, is wife to one of our best painters, Michael, and has
recently been publishing quite extensively not only in New Zealand but in *Poetry Australia* (which saw the first appearance, incidentally, of Stead's title poem) and also in *The London Magazine*. Hers is unpretentiously low-key, often witty, intellectual verse; Stead's, of course, is more experimental and pyrotechnic; I've not yet sighted Hone's volume but it sounds as if it may ring promisingly true to his role as not only Maori - but Marxist and union man.

For academics, Oxford's local 'New Zealand Writers and their Work' series, adds to these paperbacks titles on Mulgan, Mason, Glover, and Eileen Duggan to those already published on Bethell, Baxter, Sargeson and Brasch. Coming up, threateningly, is *James K. Baxter as Critic*, a selection from his literary criticism by friend and Marxist university teacher Frank McKay (Heinemann G.B.) and also Baxter’s voluminous *Collected Poems*, to be edited by a similar figure, Jim Weir (Oxford). Former Professor Ian Gordon promises *The Urewera Notebook* (Oxford) about K.M.’s final, 1907, N.Z. ‘backblocks’ trip. In University of Auckland/Oxford’s prose reprints (cased and paperback) has come *All Part of the Game*, short stories by A. P. Gaskell, ed. R. A. Copland, which comprises his *The Big Game* (1947) and further stories; just out is J. R. Cole’s *It Was So Late* (1949).

In periodicals quarterlies *Landfall, Islands* move steadily on. *Pacific Quarterly* (formerly *Cave*, then – excessively – *New Quarterly Cave*) has given over its latest issue to Malaysian and Singaporean writing cased in gold – but this is outclassed by the usually thin and scraggy (though quarto) *Pilgrims of the Arts* (sub. NZ$7.20 overseas; Box 5469, Dunedin) of which the latest issue (Nos 5 & 6) blossomed into a 207-page production in silver and black, like a young (N.Z.) telephone directory, calling itself *The Double: Israeli and New Zealand Arts and Letters*. Besides bringing us up to date on the Tel Aviv English poets – elegant and sophisticated prose, poetry, graphics, with translation from Hebrew — the local half has a quite impressive line-up including a generous amount of interesting critical writing and interviews including one with the
quite photogenic and rising poetical star Elizabeth Smither (see above).

Forthcoming in Price Milburn's small paperback short stories series (so far Helen Shaw's *The Gipsies*, interestingly fastidious) is not only a selection from Dan Davin but also what – from her recent appearances in *Islands* and *Landfall* – would be a very interesting volume indeed, from newcomer Yvonne du Fresne, dealing with *Danish* settlers in our North Island's Manawatu region – and the psychic pull between old and new worlds alike in young and old.

PETER ALCOCK

THE SOUTH SEAS

Four or five items here. First Longman Paul (Auckland) advise an anthology of the new South Seas (*not* N.Z. Maori, Papua New Guinea, or Aboriginal) verse will be launched in 1979. To be called *Lali: A Pacific Anthology* (*lali* is the Fijian wooden slit-drum) and edited by Albert Wendt, it should prove an invaluable point of entry into this new world rising.

Second, University of Queensland Press, in their series 'Asian and Pacific Writing', advise that mid-1979 should appear a collection of (now) about thirty (30!) Maori writers – part in Maori, part in English – under the title *Into the World of Light: Contemporary Maori Writing from New Zealand*. It is edited by Witi Ihimaera and *pakeha* N.Z. poet Don Long.

Thirdly – there is currently what can be only termed a *spate* of new literature in English from the *Institute of Papua New Guinea Studies* (Box 1432, Boroko, P.N.G.). These include several new novels (thereby increasing the English novel output of P.N.G.

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several hundred per cent): Russell Soaba, *Wanpis* and from John Kolia, *The Late Mr Papua* (I strongly recommend this!), also (not yet read) *Up the River to Victory Junction, Victims of Independence, My Reluctant Missionary, A Compulsive Exhibition*, also *Without Mannerisms and Other Stories*. ‘The amazing Dr Kolia’ (as he is called by the Port Moresby *Post-Courier*), at time of writing, in place of Ulli Beier, Acting-Director of the Institute, has also published a number of plays, for radio and otherwise, some of which are collected in two Institute paperbacks, *Historical Plays*, and *Awkward Moments*. All John Kolia’s writing I have seen so far is on local themes of cultural clash and is sardonic, witty, off-beat, concerned with situation and ideology. Among the many other publications of the Institute (other than more purely anthropological, sociological, ‘discussion papers’, recordings etc. – a full list is available) are two promising poetry volumes, *Naked Thoughts*, by Russell Soaba, and by Ulli Beier, *The Eye of God Does Not Grow Any Grass*, ‘a series of broadcasts in which P.N.G. poetry is juxtaposed with other poetry round the world’. Among a number of plays one of the most praised is from Nora Brash, *Which Way Big Man*, a sharp look at the temptations for a new elite.

From South Pacific Creative Arts Society and Mana Publications (Box 5083, Raiwaqa, Fiji) has now come the final and *Third Mana Annual of Creative Writing*, and *Mana itself* (formerly *Mana Review*) is now into its second six-monthly issue. It has been joined by the well-produced lively and promising *Faikava* from Tonga (2-3 a year, single issues airmail – Europe – T$3.70, 2nd class T$2.10, from South Pacific Centre, Box 278, Nuku’alofa, Tonga).

Finally, from the newly independent Solomon Islands are available at least two small poetry volumes, *Twenty-Four Poems of the Solomon Islands*, ed. Dennis Lule and others (1977) and *Who Am I?*, by Leonard P. Maenu’u (1978) – both from University of the South Pacific Centre, Box 460, Honiara, Solomon Islands.

PETER ALCOCK
Last year saw the publication of over a hundred books, creative as well as critical, which will be of interest to ACLALS members. The best bibliography of such books continues to appear in the *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, though this still needs to be supplemented by other bibliographies such as the *MLA International Bibliography* (the issues for 1976 and 1977 appeared in 1978). The Accessions List for India issued by the US Library of Congress Office in New Delhi appears each month and is fairly up to date. Other useful bibliographies which attempt to cover all areas of English publication in India (not only literature) are: *Bibliography of English Publication in India, 1977*, (DKF Trust, N Delhi); N. N. Gidwani and K. Navalani, *Current Indian Periodicals: An Annotated Guide* (Saraswati Publishers, Jaipur); and V. K. Jain et al., *Guide to Indian Periodical Literature, 1977* (Indian Documentation Service, Gurgaon). Comprehensiveness is of course what one looks for in such bibliographies and they do a reasonable job, but some books always seem to succeed in slipping the net.

Several Indian academic journals continue to be behind schedule due to the difficulty of attracting contributions of quality. The new *Commonwealth Quarterly* (which brought out a special December issue on Indian women writers), the older *Indian Book Chronicle*, as well as the more established *The Literary Criterion* and *The Literary Half-Yearly*, are important exceptions.

In line with its previous record, Indo-Anglian drama attracted only two contributors of note: Dilip Hiro (*Two One-Act Plays*, Writers Workshop, Calcutta) and Manohar Malgonkar (*Line of Mars*). Hiro had earlier published *To Anchor Cloud*, but Malgonkar is a newcomer to the genre.

In other respects, 1978 was a year of growth: Indo-Anglian literature followed up its recent successes by Anita Desai’s collection of short stories, *Games at Twilight*, (Heinemann, UK, 1977) which won both the Winifred Holtby Prize and an award from the Sahitya Akademi (India’s Academy of Letters).
Short stories seem to be increasing in popularity: Keki N. Daruwalla, better known as a poet, enters the lists with *Sword and Abyss* (Vikas, N Delhi). Orient Publishers brought out Sasthi Brata’s *Encounter*, Saros Cowasjee’s *Nude Therapy*, and Nergis Dalal’s *The Nude*. Ruskin Bond (A Girl From Copenhagen, India Paperbacks, N Delhi), and Kewlian Sio (Dragons: Stories and Poems, Writers Workshop, Calcutta) continue to produce sensitive and fine work which is underrated. Manohar Malgonkar’s *Rumble Tumble*, as the name suggests, includes short stories and social satire of varying quality. And there was a reissue of Raja Rao’s earlier, out of print volume of short stories, with three additional stories, as *The Policeman and the Rose* (OUP, India).

Bhabhani Bhattacharya has, after more than a decade, published *A Dream in Hawaii* (Macmillan, N Delhi), and Malgonkar has produced an unusual fictionalisation of a film in *Shalimar*, as well as a historically well-researched, *The Men Who Killed Ghandi*. R. K. Narayan has published a travelogue, appending a play and a short story, *The Emerald Route* (Directorate of Information and Publicity, Government of Karnataka, Bangalore). What attracts attention, however, is the work of the newcomers (all from Vikas, N. Delhi): Hilda Raj’s *Trail of Evil*; Himmat Singh Gill’s *Ashes and Petals*, a novel of post-partition India; and Shouri Daniels’ *Salt Doll* – the first portrayal in Indo-Anglian as well as Anglo-Indian literature of the Syrian Christian community in Kerala, which claims spiritual descent from St Thomas (the Doubter) in the first century.

Temporarily, at least, Timeri Murari seems to have deserted Indian themes for international ones, and literature for money. He has followed Shyam Dave into writing a thriller: *The Oblivion Tapes* was published by the Berkeley Publishing Corporation, New York; and Dave has produced *The Guru Docket, The Isaac Docket*, and *The Stark Docket* (all Orient).

P. Lal has published his most ambitious poem, *Calcutta*, the sections connected by the locale, and presided over by Mother Teresa. Nissim Ezekiel continues his exploration of religious
themes in ‘Latter Day Psalms’ (Debonair Magazine, volume VII, part 9, pp. 58-60), though whether this brings him any closer than he has earlier been to his Jewish heritage is a moot question. Suresh Kohli has published Since Decay Impairs: Love Poems 1966-1977 (Indian Literary Review Editions, N. Delhi). Other volumes worth noting are Meena Alexander, Without Place; S. B. Lall, Green Thoughts; Vilas Sarang, A Kind of Silence; and M. A. Das Gupta, Hers; Indian Perspectives: An Anthology of Poetry in English by Indian Women (all Writers Workshop); and M. Chatterjee, The Sound of Wings (Arnold Heinemann).

A new publishing concern of promise, New Ground, Bombay, has published Three Poets, (Melanie Silgardo, Raul D’Gama Rose and Santan Rodrigues).

Critical volumes of note include K. R. S. Iyengar, Microcosmography Poetica (Writers Workshop); C. D. Narasimhaiah, Awakened Conscience: Studies in Commonwealth Literature; R. Mohan (ed.), Indian Writing in English (Orient Longman, N. Delhi); R. C. P. Sinha, Indian Autobiographies in English (S. Chand, N. Delhi); G. P. Sharma, Nationalism in Indo-Anglian Fiction (Sterling, N. Delhi); G. A. Reddy, Indian Writing in English and Its Audience (Prakash Book Depot, Bareilly); B. Ramachandra Rao, The Novels of Anita Desai (Kalyani Publishers, N. Delhi); and Jasbir Jain, Nayantara Sahgal (Arnold Heinemann).

PRABHU S. GUPTARA