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Book Reviews

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Abstract

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AUSTRALIAN POETRY SINCE THE 50s

Review article based on *The Penguin Book of Modern Australian Verse*, ed. H.P. Heseltine, 214 pp, 1981. A\$5.00.

H.P. Heseltine's anthology of *Modern Australian Verse* offers the reader a chance to evaluate the last 25 years of Australian poetry.

Its title is a little misleading. This is *not* an anthology of the best contemporary work; for as Professor Heseltine explicitly states, he has excluded 'all those poets who had established their reputations by the middle 1950s, no matter how well and how often they have published since that time'. Poets being a late-maturing breed, this means some notable omissions — A.D. Hope, Judith Wright and Peter Porter, to name only the most notable. He has also restricted major recent poets like Murray and Dawe to representative samples, the better to show the range and variety of lesser or younger writers.

The result is an anthology of the Vietnam and post-Vietnam, rather than post-World War II strains in Australian poetry. In particular it aims to chart a general movement away from formal verse and academic standards, a movement that is clearly visible when Silvia Kantarizis (b.1936) writes

Some poems fall anyhow,
all of a heap anywhere, dishevelled,
legs apart in loneliness and
desperation,
and there's talk of standards.

The abandonment of formal verse seems to have been permanent. But the rejection of standards leads, by the early 70s to the cult of impressive statements for their own sake as in Robert Adamson's

Does it grow from self-importance.
One thing I shall continue for you
are my *strange writings*,
putting each word down, into place, I hope for —
coming back to where I began then,
I hope for coherence of what I do understand.
Though slogans and banter pour forth.
It all returns to the idea of a Capitol with a grip
on those of us who cannot,
or choose not, to resist.
A demoniacal intelligence
feeding on poetry,

and is effectively over when Vicki Viidikas (b.1948) remarks

I know you still say
the perfection of the language
is the point of being a poet —
the skill of a mortician?

A phenomenon that complicates, but in another sense necessitates this anthology is the '70s Bubble' in Australian poetry. This was a confused and frightened period which is difficult to explain briefly to those who were not in Australia at the time.... One of the sad things about poetry is of course that people spend years trying to trap in words their innermost feelings; yet when they finally pluck up courage to place their words under a second person's gaze, those words shrivel on the page into a string of clichés and ill-assorted images. (The lucky few to whom this doesn't happen are the true poets, one presumes.) Telling people that their poems don't work for others is a thankless job, as all editors know; but it is essential. There is nothing sadder than the position of a poet who has been falsely encouraged.

Somewhere between 1967 and 1977 false encouragement happened on a massive scale in Australia. The Vietnam War, opposed by the whole literary community, had destroyed all confidence in authority or established 'standards'. Poetry was a matter of protest, not quality. Co-incidentally, the appearance of small backyard presses, whose only real cost was labour, enabled every man to be his own or his neighbour's publisher. So for about 10 years no one had the confidence to tell anyone that he or she couldn't write. 'We are all poets now', as Michael Dransfield put it. Hundreds published — and not only in magazines. Well over 100 books (often unedited) were produced in a nation which had previously averaged 3 or 4 books of poetry a year.

The rapid emergence of the new Australian drama of Williamson *et al.* added to the excitement. Though the drama was popular and nationalistic, and the poetry the reverse, the poets did not scruple to claim that their prolific productions were an equally historic breakthrough. The Australian intellectual ever since colonial times has had a sense of isolation and a fear of being behind world trends. The Bubble Poets used this to sweep away the last remnants of established 'standards'. Their ever-changing schools were always presented as the latest in European or American fashion. Thus their main magazine was called *New Poetry*, and John Tranter's anthology of Bubble poets was arrogantly titled *The New Australian Poetry*. Poets who would not have reached print a decade earlier now not merely published their own or each other's works, they then set up as critics or reviewers and exchanged extravagant commendations.

The result of this easy coinage of reputations was, as an economist might have predicted, a massive inflation of literary currency. Anything less than stupendous praise came to seem like contempt. By 1976, one minor poet, reviewing in *The Australian* newspaper, could describe another's latest book as 'the greatest literary masterpiece since Dante, with of course the possible exception of Bob Dylan's *Desire*'.

The term '70s Bubble', with its stockmarket associations, tells the story. The boom in the reputation-market involved both genuine euphoria among many and cynical manipulation by a few who became the 'underground' promoters and power-brokers. The upward spiral couldn't last. By 1978 the poetry market, which had soared on the hopes born with the drama, slumped. The pro-Bubble editors, hastily installed two years earlier by such conservative bastions as *Meanjin* magazine and Angus & Robertson, were

as hastily replaced, and dozens of 'great poets' were left to discover that they were at best very minor ones.

By 1979 it was clear that the vast promissory notes of the Bubble period could expect to pay only a few pence in the pound. Yet there was no dramatic Ern Malley hoax, such as had ended a previous bubble. The let-down was fairly gradual, partly because the easy publication-conditions of the mid-seventies *had* brought on a number of talented poets, but mainly because so many members of the establishment had made embarrassing compromises with the Bubble during the 70s.

The shrewder of the undergoing promoters had already dug in for the lean times ahead. One of their new tricks was a kind of vanity-publishing in which the publisher took his reward not in cash but in grateful disciples who would maintain his reputation.

Sometimes these maneuvers extended well outside Australia. Once at a literary conference in Europe I was introduced to 'the famous Australian poet X', of whom I had never heard. X turned out to have published only half a dozen poems in magazines. He had been accepted as a major poet on the basis of an impressive-looking book of his verse titled (let us say) *Later Poems: the 70s Decade*. It was in fact his only book, and had been published with his own labour on a highly suspect press and without any editorial procedures. Asked at the Conference to give a talk on recent Australian poetry, he read a mixture of one-third of his poems, one-third his publisher's, and one-third by others who had published on that press. Some of these later helped his publisher to a series of grants on the grounds that he was an important underground leader....

Clearing out this Augean stables of moribund and decaying reputations is a formidable task even for an experienced anthologist like Professor Heseltine, previously the editor of *The Penguin Book of Australian Verse*. But it is made timely by the rush of some better-known Bubble poets recently to produce 'definitive' anthologies of the period.

Reviewing several such anthologies in a recent article in *Island* magazine, Les Murray remarks that they 'devalue Australian literature in the eyes of students and readers alike by the indulgence, frequently together, of mediocrity, hype, and local literary clout'. An anthology of recent poetry by a non-partisan critic of known integrity is long overdue; and it is for this reason Professor Heseltine states that his aim is to offer 'a sufficient sampling of modern Australian poetry to allow the interested reader to gauge its kind and quality for himself, unprejudiced by an *ex parte* introduction or an obviously partisan selection'.

Even so, Murray finds fault with the standards of selection, accusing the anthology of 'indulgence of rubbish'; but this is perhaps to confuse a *representative* anthology with a long-overdue anthology of the *best*. (The forthcoming Gray-Lehmann anthology of recent verse, with its motto *sola qualitas*, may give us that.)

In general I think that Professor Heseltine's anthology threads its way with great skill through the minefield of the 70s Bubble. Like a good editor, he states his contributors' aims in positive terms. But he passes over in merited silence such dishonesties as their claim to be connected with the Australian *La Mamma* movement in drama, and he also states quite explicitly that 'the phenomenon has run its course'. The only one of their promotional terms which he consents to use is 'the generation of '68' tag (there *were* some links with West European radicalism), and even then in inverted commas and with the remark that the notion 'seems as true to me as most such notions'.

Certainly there are risks in even the most cautious academic summation of a movement whose claims, like Hollywood alimony-suits, were often cunningly based on the hope of being beaten down from the absurd to the merely outrageous. And it's true that a lot of

second-rate poems get into the anthology, though none that have not some literary merit and representative interest. It is after all the function of the academic not just to evaluate but also to collect material, and one could hardly wish the net to be cast, at this point, any less widely than Heseltine has done. The ordinary poetry-reader, like myself, who could scarcely hope to plough through the endless poetry publications of the 70s, will be grateful that the job has been done.

Assuming that Professor Heseltine's anthology is fairly representative, I think five major conclusions can be drawn about the development of Australian verse since the mid-fifties.

1. As expected, the major talents are pre-eminent. There are some gems from less-known names; but Murray, Dawe, Beaver, Buckley, Lehmann, Page and Dransfield tend to stand out like raisins in a rather floury pudding. There is much mediocrity (as several reviewers have complained); and many examples of that irritating sort of poem whose odd usages and erratic images just *might* be evidence of an unusual and interesting sensibility, even though one is 50% to 90% sure that they are due simply to incompetence and to straining after effect. By international standards many pieces have what the car industry would call a low power-to-weight ratio. Thus despite its convenient format and price, the Penguin anthology is not easy reading. You need to be something of a poesisophile to get through it.

2. For those who count the sexes: — it's mainly a male affair. There is no female writer of Judith Wright's pre-eminence in recent generations; though Gwen Harwood, Grace Perry, Judith Rodriguez and Sylvia Kantarizis have their moments, and Rhyll McMaster's 'The brineshrimp' is a 19-line jewel.

3. There are some surprises in quality, especially among the Bubble poets. Relative to reputation and number of publications, Barry Breen, Richard Tipping, Tim Thorne and Rae Desmond Jones come up better, and Bob Adamson, John Tranter and Rodney Hall worse than expected. (Though I fancy I could have picked a livelier selection from Tranter.) Martin (son of George) Johnston's 'Gradus ad Parnassum' effectively dramatises at length the quandary of an intelligent poet defeated by prolixity and lack of standards:

...I'm not sure that it's much of a poem
but it'll have to do. I'm thirsty to start with
and the pubs have opened, and besides I think deep down
I'm hoping
that someone will try to pinch *my* poems, and much good
may it do them: each one the precise, the only possible
delineation of a complex of thinking and feeling;
the explanation of each poem
precisely the poem itself.
Sometimes it's hard to repress a snigger....

Tom Shapcott, sometimes criticised as the easily-pleased reviewer (of a slightly older generation) whose permissiveness encouraged the inflation of reputations, emerges as a surprisingly substantial and varied poet.

4. Vicki Viidikas and Michael Dransfield come surprisingly late in this order-of-age anthology, reminding us just how precocious they were. (Both were born in 1948: Dransfield died of tetanus/heroin in 1973.) Viidikas shows honesty and a touch of class in everything she writes; though her main talent may be for prose. Dransfield is far the most talented of the Bubble poets. He expresses (and parodies) their lax standards in lines like:

i'd woken early
worried about some
obscure matter

decided to start a new school of poetry

something to do with temperature.

yet he rarely fails to find poetry in even the lightest forms:

...i went to see the holy lands
i had to pay to get inside
a war was going when i left
with prizes for the church that won

i went to see a girl i knew
i had to pay to get inside
but when i left she gave me love
as if it were of value.

5. The poems show a steady movement from formalism to freedom. Bruce Beaver shows the advantages of syntactical freedom:

Pain, the problem of, not answered
by dogma, orthodox or other-
wise...

Dawe moves to the vernacular, Hall towards the quirky, and Shapcott introduces the looseness of discursive prose. Then on page 96 Sylvia Kantarizis demands release from standards, and the Bubble proper is on. It continues (with the notable interjections of Page, Lehmann and Murray) until page 148 when Robert Gray (b.1945) marks the first of a series of talented younger poets who resisted or ignored it. These include Peter Skrzynecki, Rhyll McMaster, Alan Wearne and Kevin Hart (born 1954). Alan Gould whose second book *Astral Sea* won last year's Premier's Prize is perhaps the most unfortunate omission from this group, though most of them, as Heseltine says, are too young to be assessed yet. It is clear that these poets have inherited a tradition of total freedom of thought and expression, but are returning to more tradesmanlike standards of construction and communication. (The poems suddenly get much easier to read.) Where they, and other young Australian poets will go from here remains to be seen.

MARK O'CONNOR

'THE COMMON DISH' AND THE UNCOMMON POET:

Les A. Murray's *The Boys Who Stole the Funeral*.

One of the major problems for the modern poet is how to break free from the tyranny of the lyric; how to enlarge his scope to include the amplitude of narrative, and so regain for poetry something that was effectively lost to prose fiction in the nineteenth century. The problem is, in the end, one of style. English poets from Chaucer to Browning had at their disposal a middle style for narrative poems, a flexible medium distinct from prose in its surface tensions and underlying rhythms, and capable of embracing the racey colloquialisms of low-style comedy as well as, when occasion demanded, the more elaborate rhetoric of a formal high style. But Browning was the last poet to write in this medium successfully: since then poetry has come to mean, overwhelmingly, lyric poetry. It is almost as if the poet, faced with the usurpation of his traditional rôle of teller of tales by the novelist, has lost nerve and given up the struggle.

Not quite, of course. Robert Frost made an attempt to haul Victorian verse-narrative into the twentieth century, though many of his poems only serve to draw attention to the problem; for it is often hard to see what is gained by his use of blank verse, which frequently gives the stories a quaint and outdated air. In the end, Frost's achievement lies in his lyrics and shorter poems such as 'After Apple-Picking', 'Birches' and 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening'.

Poets who wish to write more expansively on religious or philosophical themes are confronted, of course, by a similar predicament: what was once a traditional area for poetic composition has been usurped by expository prose. Even more urgently, modern poets have felt the need to challenge this ascendancy of the prose writer, but the problem on which so many poems have foundered is once again that of style. The later poems of Wallace Stevens illustrate this very well where poetry and sense are often sacrificed in favour of abstract philosophical speculation. *The Necessary Angel* (Stevens' collection of essays on reality and the imagination) is far more readable and says much the same thing as the obscure, abstracted verse of 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction'.

Faced with this apparent impasse, the most successful poems have been those which operate within the lyric genre, but which give the *illusion* of a longer, narrative work; that is to say, the linked sequence of shorter poems. Eliot achieved this in *The Waste Land* where a comparatively short sequence of just over 400 lines nevertheless gives the reader the feeling of having read a much longer work of epic proportions. The illusion is produced by the range of styles and verse forms Eliot uses, and by the web of allusion, literary, historical and mythological, as well as religious, which he orchestrates in his 'heap of broken images'. So the reader moves not only in a linear direction but, as it were, three-dimensionally through historical and mythological time, as the poem sweeps from contemporary London to Carthage, from Dante's Hell to the Chapel Perilous.

The strategies used by Eliot have been amongst the most effective in extending the lyric form in our century — though the way is littered with failed attempts, as *The Cantos* of Ezra Pound bear witness.

At first glance, Les A. Murray's new book *The Boys Who Stole the Funeral*¹ may seem a long way, stylistically and structurally, from Eliot's poem, yet similar strategies underlie this sequence; just as Murray's vision, like Eliot's, is religious and universal, as well as contemporary and personal. *The Boys Who Stole the Funeral* is subtitled 'a novel sequence', and in fact the book does tell a story, meeting several of the demands of the novel form: the main characters are fully realised psychologically, for example, and they

act within a recognisable and finely drawn social context. It is also 'novel' in another, important way, for *The Boys...* is a sequence of 140 sonnets — a sonnet being understood in its looser modern sense of a 14-line poem comprising a range of metres and rhythms from ballad metre and free verse to rhymed iambic pentameters, the lines being grouped in any number of combinations to meet the demands of the moment.

Other poets have experimented with this form in recent years, most notably Robert Lowell in *Notebook* and *History*. Lowell, however, tends to accept the traditional notion of the sonnet as a closed form. His poems often gain by juxtaposition with other sonnets on similar themes, but there is no sense of a linear, *narrative* progression. Like the Elizabethan sonneteers, his sequences centre on a theme or group of themes: they do not tell stories. This, so far as I know, is Murray's own contribution to the sonnet sequence — at least as far as English goes.

The story of *The Boys...* centres on Kevin Forbutt and Cameron Reeby (the boys of the title), each in his way dissatisfied with modern society, each, in the language of the sixties, a drop-out. The plot hinges on the death of Kevin's great uncle, Clarrie Dunn, whose wish to be buried among his kin in the farming community where he was brought up, is deftly ignored by his surviving relatives in the city. Kevin Forbutt, motivated by what is at first no more than an obscure feeling of propriety, steals the corpse with his friend Reeby, and drives it the hundreds of miles to Dark's Plain, where the old man wishes to be buried. Their action is not understood in the city, where the boys' sense of decency and right is seen as bloody-mindedness, a sentimental gesture, or sheer atavism.

As they drive through the suburbs and then deeper into the country, the old man's corpse propped on the back seat, the journey takes on the character of a journey through the hell of joyless life in the modern city. In an all-night café, snatches of conversation are overheard: two characters discussing the failure of the Welfare State — the paradox that State concern for the welfare of its citizens has lead to a selfish isolationism:

*'There's a mean spirit in the cities.
We didn't do affluence very well.'* (10)²

That spirit is manifested in many ways: in the extremes of the feminist movement with its explodable, unpredictable rage and anger:

*its a mask when you cant get a mask off it makes you murderous
weve tried to believe the opposite of everything too quickly* (11)

muses Reeby. It's there too in the encounter with the Hell's Angels at another truck stop, 'collecting taxation of fear' (13) and humiliation.

But as they drive deeper into the countryside and nearer their destination, the boys stumble into a world with different values, where people are not (by and large) at war with themselves and their surroundings. This is suggested first in the encounter with Athol Dunn, one of Clarrie's kinsmen, and the first person the boys meet to understand the motives behind their action. The kitchen of Athol Dunn's farmhouse represents the countryman's (as opposed to the city-dweller's) pragmatism and practicality in dealing with change.

The kitchen's not urbane. The past has not been excised here
or wittily selected. It has gradually shifted outwards
from the centre. Or held. The blender on the laminex

reflects timber, and a tea caddy. (24)

There is a rightness about Athol Dunn's world: 'An understood world is a tuneable receiver' (27).

At first the boys are wary, not at their ease, in these unfamiliar surroundings; just as they themselves are looked on with suspicion and something approaching hatred by some of the country people, who watch closely for signs of city condescension. But Forbutt especially, is not an ordinary city type, and his experience in the farming country becomes a kind of education through example and contrast. Here Forbutt has confirmed what he had already intuited from watching and listening to his father, the university intellectual who fends off experience by means of abstraction and fashionable stance: — learns that it is class-consciousness and class-talk which abstract and divide people from one another. The country is not immune from such ideas (there is the 'Burning Man' with his obsessive talk of union organization and his abstractions and his hatred (33)), but such intellectualizing is seen as essentially a city phenomenon. Out among the scattered farms and hamlets what the boys experience for the first time in their lives, is the cohesiveness of a community, not the divisiveness of 'class consciousness'. Not that the country community is idealized (though some will no doubt think it is). Pettiness and thoughtless cruelty exist here too, symbolized by the snake which has been caught and tormented by children and left to struggle and die in the road (51).

An important character in the story is the dead man himself, Clarence Dunn, who speaks in a kind of after-death reverie. Dunn is important because he focusses one of the recurring themes of *The Boys...*, the impact of Gallipoli and the First World War on the Australian consciousness. For Clarrie the War was 'Literature' (54), it was his education in humanity which forced him to the recognition of fundamental truths. But it also destroyed him, or at least left him with a wound that would not heal. As in *The Waste Land*, historic past and the present co-exist in this sequence; for Clarrie's own musings on the War are juxtaposed with the violent rejection of the 'Digger myth' by ultra-feminist Noeline Kampff and Forbutt Sr. By them, Clarrie and his kind are dismissed in fashionable clichés ('Murder in uniform' (65)), serving only as a butt for their own political and social abstractions. At the same time they are irrelevant to them as people, just as the country people are irrelevant — not part of the programme and therefore 'obsolete', 'deaf' and 'blind' (63). So Kampff and Stacey Forbutt feel free to talk rudely and insultingly before them, as if they did not exist. As indeed, for them, they do not.

But Clarrie Dunn's life is presented in other terms, by the narrator, through the reminiscence of those who knew him, and in his own reverie. After the War he could not settle back into civilian life, but drifted from job to job, searching for the fellowship of the lost platoon, 'wedded' to the dead men he left on the wire and in the trenches. His life remained incomplete and unfulfilled as a result of his suffering in war. For Murray rejects sharply the patriotic idea that war can be ennobling in itself, and the cynical one that it is a necessary blood-letting.

The poem is nevertheless deeply sacramental in its view of human life and suffering. Shortly before the funeral service, as the procession winds toward the church, we are given an eagle's-eye view of the scene. This is an imaginative stroke on Murray's part. Clarence has become flesh, part of the process, of which the eagle too is a part:

Human meat went into the pointed house
today, as a log with blinding silver crustings;
flesh, like she (the eagle) found once underneath a tractor. (67)

But for Murray a human being is more than flesh, more than a part of the natural process (though he or she is that too). The funeral is a Roman Catholic one, and in his address to the congregation, Father Mulherin penetrates to the heart of this story. Clarence, he reminds his listeners, was a soldier. As such his 'singleness', his integrity of body and spirit, was ruined, since all soldiers put 'part of their trust in what they died fighting'. Such a man's integrity is inevitably compromised. But 'a godless integrity' is a form of ruin too, so that 'We may end, either way, sacrificing everything to anything'. To turn from the source of 'human grace', which the soldier may experience in battle, 'is to enter death's arena'.

There follows the celebration of the Mass, which re-enacts God's self-sacrifice. The ritual is exact: 'the priest does measured things/ with cruets and with cups and blessings'. But although the coffin 'points/ like a long bomb at the altar', as if in accusation, 'the menaced Mass-bell rings', and 'food that solves the world is eaten'. The moment achieves a stillness and a centrality which is in and outside of time; which unites the here and now of the communicants' lives, the pain of human suffering, and the mystery of God's sacrifice:

humans are stilled, the worlds are linked
and the centred Mass-bell rings.

The action revolves around this key sonnet (70), which is appropriately, though unobtrusively, placed at the centre of the sequence of 140 sonnets.

The moment is not one of peace, however, for Reeby and Kevin Forbutt. As the congregation emerges into the sunlight, there recurs to Reeby a waking nightmare which has haunted him all day, of escaped lions roaming the streets: 'who would hunt them down (he asks himself) we are burying the riflemen' (71). Kevin has a similar vision of random violence, imagining his father and Noeline Kampff

moving among the unfashionable and the old
and killing them, with neat blades and with sexy
brushed-metal submachine guns...

We are not doing this! they cry with sudden anger,
We are bringing the future! (72).

The boys (I think) have not partaken of the Mass, they have only witnessed it and have not entered its peace. The images of violence that come to their minds outside the church stem from this.

As the burial ends, the police arrive, and the boys escape into the forest. There they meet a group of local men around a fire, and the poem shifts from the plane of religious mystery to the hard facts of everyday life. The men are in varying degrees bitter and resentful at the changes that have overtaken them whether they like it or not. City ways and attitudes have penetrated deep into the country. They take their revenge on Reeby and Forbutt: '*Can you sing a song [asks one] Or do you trip and bridge/with a dummy in your earhole, clicking with your fingers?*' (79). But the men are deracinated in their way too. They have no songs themselves, for the old songs have passed with the old way of life. When one of them does eventually sing, it is a bitter, self-ironic satire about how the countrymen have been cheated of their inheritance by the sharp operators from the city (81).

Reeby thinks he could nevertheless be 'free' if he stayed on in the country, odd-jobbing. Freedom needs space, he decides. But that is the city-dweller's, Bob Dylan, sixties'

abstraction of freedom. Freedom, as the bitter farmers' union organizer knows, means association with a particular patch of land:

How can you be free? snaps the Burning Man,
You haven't got a place. And sips hot tea. (83)

From now on events move fast. The boys become involved in the running of illegally-killed beef, learning of yet another inroad of an impersonal officialdom on the true freehold of the small owner-farmer; men who co-operate with Cotton, the illegal slaughterer, even though they dislike him, partly because he is one of their own and partly because they hate the city-based 'Sir Angus Beef-Bayonets' who are slowly forcing them off the land by imposing on them impossible rules and regulations (85).

Like Eliot, Murray puts to good use the technique of interfacing the contemporary with historical, religious and mythological layers of experience in these and the following stanzas. Kevin's growing involvement in the community and its problems causes him to think back to an earlier conversation with his uncle. Clarrie, musing on the Great War, recalled that it was more than 'Literature' and patriotism, it was also 'the common dish' of human suffering, which all are offered and which transcends class: 'long-handled spoons, gold spoons, poor spoons of tin —/ Starvation and shame not to eat. Yet it's difficult food' (91). It is also the food which Jesus blessed and 'devoured...whole'. You need not go far to find it, Kevin is beginning to learn; it is all about you; but it is there significantly in the sacrament of the Eucharist which celebrates and enacts the moment when the god himself tasted human suffering. Kevin however has yet to perceive and understand this.

This important stanza is followed by a conversation with the living dead. Kevin comes across his father and Noeline Kampff on a picnic. Forbutt Sr. cannot see anything beyond his own carefully approved (because fashionable) stances. He is, it becomes clear, unable to give himself, because he has nothing to give (92-4). This is the hell of Eliot's 'hollow men', where Noeline Kampff walks with 'her haunted, measuring eyes' (99). She, unlike Stacey Forbutt, suffers, but it is not the suffering that refines and purifies, for she is unwilling or unable to eat at the common dish. Mary Moorman's comment on Wordsworth's 'ethical discovery that suffering, when illuminated by love, creates its own nobility of heart',³ seems relevant here. When burdened with hate and self-disgust however, suffering creates an enclosed hell.

These scenes with Kampff and Forbutt Sr. are interlaced with the gradual growth of adolescent love between Reeby and Jenny Dunn, Athol Dunn's daughter. For Reeby, though, there is to be no salvation. As the boys drive a consignment of illegal meat to the city, they are stopped by the police. Reeby's suppressed fear and rage well to the surface, and he is shot after a meaningless altercation with the patrolman (116-18).

Forbutt escapes into the forest where he eventually collapses in a state of exhaustion and delirium. Only now, at the limits of his being, is he initiated into a new way of perceiving and understanding. In a world which is both dream and real, he meets 'the Njimbin' and 'Birrigan' (or Berrigan/Birrigan — the name keeps changing). They are black men, though Birrigan introduces himself as Irish, and they talk in the racey idiom of the swagman:

My name is Birrigan; I'm Irish, says the black man,
this here's the Nimbin: a dreadful snob, this bastard.
Njimbin, says the diamond-patterned man. Fuck but you're ignorant! (121)

The dialogue continues in this way, and only gradually does the reader realize that they are in fact Aboriginal deities, and that Forbitt is to be initiated by them.

The idiomatic language, larded with expletives, and the often comic edge to the dialogue, is a stroke of genius on Murray's part. One of the most difficult things in modern poetry is the use of myth belonging to another culture, or myth from the distant past of our own. Too often the result is pointedly academic, or reverts to nineteenth-century romantic fantasy: either way the poem becomes overloaded with significance and lies dead on the page. But the Njimbin and Birrigan are earthed in the here and now by their witty, contemporary speech. They *are* swagmen as well as deities; and a kind of modern high comedy develops as they prepare Kevin for ritual circumcision and sub-incision (122). Because of this, the ritual is given a kind of validity grounded in everyday experience; it is not forced upon the poem; it is not a learned abstraction.

Forbitt's initiation is excruciatingly painful, but nevertheless, the spirit suggests, it is preferable to the solutions of modern society; 'humane' psycho-therapy, for example, or war:

War's the very wasteful way of doing this, says the Njimbin,
it kills too many novices, stuns more, exceeds efficiency. (122)

Forbitt is given the gift of a crystal which is a refractor and reflector of light and a 'gyro-scope of balance' (124). He has been illumined, and granted a new clarity of vision. This is then put to the test as he is taken up, like Scipio, to a great height to view Australia, the island-continent, spread out beneath him. Here his instruction is continued. 'Human life', says the Njimbin, 'isn't in government, it is in holdings/ of literal and spiritual farming', or else (and here Clarrie and Forbitt Sr. and Noeline seem to meet) 'it's in platoons, reminiscent, cheerful, deadly dangerous;/ denied singular work, we're drawn to them' (127).

At this point Clarrie enters the clearing bearing the 'common dish', dented and encrusted. It is the dish of willing surrender to a full humanity that will involve much suffering and bitterness; and will demand much humility; but which is the only way to fulfilment and the wisdom of fulfilment:

You may scorn your nation, eat well, consume approved objects,
you may talk screw-language: Rights — Relationships — Consensus —
Accept, and you'll know the pride of lifelong frustration,
of cutting your childhood forest to feed your children —

Refuse, and the depths of your happiness may be spared you.
Taste, and you'll taste the blood in your adventures. (130)

Forbitt's father and mother, and Noeline Kampff, all failed in one way or another. Kevin's 'kind act' to his dead uncle, which went against the grain of contemporary society with its insistence on abstract entities instead of the individuality of personal response — this one act was the spring which released him into levels of experience and illumination that come to fulfilment here.

Kevin is eventually found, delirious and semiconscious, in the hills, and is returned to the rural community and time present. There things have been happening too. Jenny has scalded Noeline horribly in the face with boiling water, in revenge for Reeby's death which she believed Kampff had indirectly caused. Jenny's action closes her off for ever

from the community and she prepares to leave for the city:

*For my punishment
I'll go where she came from.*

*My friend and I never made love.
Other men will take me. (135)*

The action of the boys brought tragedy and death into the community — part of the bitterness of the common dish. Others (Forbutt Sr. for example) remain unchanged. Kevin however has been initiated; he remains behind to farm the small-holding Clarrie had refused after returning from the Great War.

The Boys Who Stole the Funeral is an achievement. Not only has Les Murray reintroduced the art of story-telling into poetry, he has extended the possibilities of the sonnet sequence, and evolved a robust, versatile style which can encompass the vigour of colloquial speech and plain narrative as well as lyric grace. Even more, he has created an Australian myth that successfully fuses Christian and Aboriginal religious traditions which meet on the common ground of human suffering and how it may be transcended; and all within the flux of modern life with its urban centering. So politics, agriculture, war, violence, city deracination and class against community are threaded through the poem like strands in a tapestry, to be given final significance in the universal symbol of the common dish. This book places Les Murray among a handful of poets writing in English today who need to be read.

JOHN BARNIE

NOTES

1. Published by Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1980.
2. Numerical references are to individual sonnets in the sequence.
3. Mary Moorman, *William Wordsworth, A Biography: The Early Years 1770-1803* (Oxford 1957, repr. 1969) p.500.

David Malouf, *First Things Last*. University of Queensland Press, 1980.

David Malouf is a not-quite expatriate novelist and poet who divides his time between Tuscany and Australia. In recent years his novels have won a wide international following; and his poetry has also been closely watched since his impressive third collection *Neighbours in a Thicket* (1974), which marked the maturing of his powers. Less lucid than A.D. Hope, less concrete and less obviously Australian than Les Murray or Bruce Dawe, he excels in the delineation of subtle emotions and intuitions, backed by a cosmopolitan culture.

Reviewers in Australia have been divided over whether the current collection is a

consolidation or a disappointment. To my mind it passes easily a fairly strenuous assay which I call 'the Nabokov test': that is, that any good poem should contain three or four sentences as felicitous as one might find in an average paragraph from Nabokov's novels. Malouf excels in evocative phrases.

Thus his opening poem, 'The Wild Lemons', speaks of 'a scent of lemons/ run wild in another country, but smelling always of themselves...their sunlight...sliced/ for drinks', and evokes evenings when

a flute tempts out a few
reluctant stars to walk over the water
and a famous beard, benignly condescending,
looks on.

Often the images derive from his love of music:

As when a songbird sketches
three notes on the air: one
then another at a tangent,
then the first found new again.

He can restore the freshness, too, to a jaded city-scape as in

Dawn flares along the edge of an office block: knife
-like unseals an envelope
the new day delivers.

or can conjure up the nightmares of women in time of war:

A single shadow
sways over our heads, dropping
dead leaves into
the hands of all those women:
a tree of telegrams.

But the Nabokov test has a corollary. The author of *Lolita* did not merely collect his immaculate sentences on handwritten filing cards: he later sorted and arranged those filing cards into coherent novels. Malouf is not so invulnerable on the issue of coherence. Far more often than I think wise, he leaves the reader wondering whether he or she has stupidly missed a connection — or whether the author simply has a lax notion of what sorts of diverse materials can be mingled in a poem.

➤ What holds his best piece together is a mystical vision of the Earth in its simplicity:

The world as if
after rain. Things wear their instant
original sheen.

or

More worrying still are certain slick literary tricks that erode belief in the emotions Malouf asserts. In fact several poems, including 'The Carpenter's Shed', 'The Ladders', and 'The Martyrdom in Room Fourteen', conclude with assertions of transcendent emotion that seem ill-justified by what goes before.

For me the turnaround point was a long sequence called 'The Crab Feast', apparently about the mangrove crabs of Malouf's native Brisbane. It has a fine opening, but overall the mudcrab proves a diffuse and watery fellow.

First-rate poetry makes, *and justifies*, surprising connections of thought. Sometimes Malouf gets the mix right, as in

Among mangrove trunks the fire-
flies like small hot love-crazed
planets switch on

switch off.

but mostly the connections in this poem veer between the unsurprising and the unsustainable. One of numerous examples of the latter is when the view of crabs performing a ritual battle like 'soundless tank engagements' provokes the comment

you might be angels
in the only condition
our senses reach them in.

The later poems in this book struck me as far less satisfying than the earlier ones. They not only do not add to the value of the collection, but actually send you back to re-read in a more querulous mood poems that had seemed genuine enough on a first reading. To read the second half of *First Things Last* is to realise how much our tolerance of certain eccentricities in major poets like Eliot and Auden depends on our belief that these eccentricities are genuinely part of the poet's nature.

The problem is that so many of these poems suffer from the dominance of *words* over *things*.

To lie tight-wrapped in butcher's
paper and bleed
events: you all know this one:
it's *Learning from History*.

This is clever, but highly derivative writing. It has, as the Leavisites would say, no pressure of felt experience behind it. By the second half of the book one starts to hunger for something real. A prose poem titled 'A Poor Man's Guide to Southern Tuscany' raises delusive hopes. But it opens: 'There are many voyages to be made in this room. It is an air-balloon, a yacht, an island among other islands, hot on occasion as Sumatra, when...' — and the reader realises with a sigh that he is in for lots of literary cleverness, and precious little Southern Tuscany.

It is evident that Malouf is having trouble finding — or perhaps hearing — his own voice. The lyric simplicity which is his real strength sometimes gets in the way of his intellectualising tendency (which can also be a strength), and both are seriously corrupted by some unfortunate fashion-following that leads him into those surreal regions

where words become their own referents. And yet how good Malouf can be at his best:

A voice wading
adagio through air, high, clear, wordless, opens perspectives
in the deepest silence.

MARK O'CONNOR

THREE CANADIAN POETS

Kenneth Sherman, *The Cost of Living*. Mosaic Press/Valley Editions, 1981. 55 pages.

Mary Di Michele, *Mimosa and Other Poems*. Mosaic Press/Valley Editions, 1981. 46 pages.

Andy Wainwright, *After the War*. Mosaic Press/Valley Editions, 1981. 65 pages.

Kenneth Sherman's second collection is divided into two sections, 'History' and 'The Cost of Living'. 'History' begins with a reworking of Genesis in which the myth of the Fall is reduced to a bad joke, God is demythologized, and the serpent presented as an innocent victim. Ted Hughes's Genesis poems in *Wodwo* and *Crow* come to mind, but Sherman does not have control of the material in quite the same way; his versions are merely debunking, the language too slangy ('The news God laid on the serpent/ was bad and was forever'), giving the poem a contemporaneity which will soon seem dated.

As the sequence develops, though, through poems on Cain, Lot's wife and Joseph to modern times, the tone changes. Lot's wife turns to question God about the suffering she hears in the burning city; Joseph reflects that slaves are 'the anonymous pages/ history turns'; and in the poem 'History' the narrator prays for release from the world and from redemption as set out in Christian terms. Life is not like Plato's cave with its shadows promising something other and perfect, it is a pit or a grave where suffering human flesh is tossed — Polish Jews, Nagasaki, Japanese atrocities in the Philippines are invoked. The poet emphatically rejects this God and the path to salvation 'where the body is roasted/ on the spirit's spit'.

The meaning of the title of this section now becomes clear. The inexorable demands of God as imaged in the Old Testament, the lost innocence, the endless slaughter and cruelty, all come to a head in the Second World War for Sherman, in the obscenity of the camps which makes language inadequate ('Gutenberg', 'A Christmas Song'). From a weak beginning this sequence is refined into such hard-edged poems as 'Ghosts' where the poet, haunted by the ghosts of the three million Jews killed by the Nazis in Poland, knows that even the memory of their suffering will eventually fade:

In Spain, where the ghosts
are 500 years old,
their faces are less definable
their screams fainter

and by the ruins of the Second Temple
they are simply light
upon stone.

The second part of this collection continues the frightening and frightened modern sense that innocence is over, that we live in an unredeemed and unredeemable world, trapped like the bear in 'The Sun is Chained to the Sky':

All night I'll hear his groans
as he widens his wound
to tear himself free.

There are good poems here too — 'A Shape of Hook', for example, where the poet as a boy hooks a fish through the eye, and experiences for the first time the horror of suffering inflicted on another living being. *The Cost of Living* ends with a series of satirical pieces on lawyers, hack teachers, the idle rich. This is light verse, attractive enough in itself, but attacking easy targets. The collection, which contains some strong poems, would have been better without these.

Mimosa and Other Poems, Mary Di Michele's new collection, opens with the title poem which explores the relationship between an Italian immigrant father and his two daughters who have grown up in Canada. 'Mimosa' is in three parts, an indirectly related account of the father's hopes and disappointments in his daughters, and a monologue each by the two women. Marta remains closest to the traditional Italian model of womanhood, bound by family pieties and the church, yet dissatisfied with her lot and envious of her sister Lucia who is the modern, aware woman trying to define herself anew through experience, *not* through the imposed images that society forces in various ways on women.

This is an ambitious poem, almost 16 pages in length, but like so many longer modern poems it fails ultimately at the level of style. Mary Di Michele has not succeeded in developing a middle style which could carry such an extended sequence, and the result is too often a rather thin, unmemorable prose disguised as verse. For example:

He tries to improve the English he learned in classes
for new Canadians by reading the daily papers. (p.2)

So much of my life has been wasted feeling guilty
about disappointing my father and mother.
It makes me doubt myself.
It's impossible to live my life that way. (p.13)

In great poetry the reader is stirred by the language, by rhythm, sound and image, below conscious perception. So much modern verse does not even attempt this but remains merely a vehicle for the expression of ideas or experience, so that this primitive, elemental quality is lost. For me this is the case here. The language of 'Mimosa' is anchored in the commonplace, and it is difficult to see why it was set out as verse.

With this style there goes, in the post-war years, belief in a certain kind of confession-alism; belief that the incidents of our daily lives are somehow of significance in themselves, rather than the raw material which has to be refined and metamorphosed into

poetry. Vito, the father, in near old age, is a sad, interesting man, but no more so than others we know from our own lives. Too few poets in recent years have taken Eliot's advice that 'Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality'.

The second part of this collection consists of shorter, lyric poems. Many deal with marriage and the bitterness of failure in marriage. 'The Story of a Marrying Man' is a good poem on the theme of dominance in men-women relationships, centering on the fine image of the woman as fruit to be eaten, to be consumed in various ways. 'Ice' is an even better piece about the failure of marriage, where the image of eating occurs again: this time an evening meal, which is a strained, frigid occasion, not the celebration it should be. Ice is at the heart of this relationship which exists without love, while longing for it:

Later we sleep in the bed we love
and I dream of white glaciers
like needles given to the blue arms of the sea,
and he dreams of blue waves breaking
into white foam.

Inevitably the spectre of Sylvia Plath haunts these poems on divorce and failed marriage, Plath at her most intensely personal and bitter, not the Plath who subsumed her experience into something deeper and universal. Too often there is a sense of *déjà vu* (in 'Bitches and Vampires' for example, or 'White Lies' and 'The Germination of Envy'); a sense of Plath's mastery of this theme and style lying uncomfortably behind Di Michele's work. She needs to break this spell and mature a style of her own. There are indications in several of the poems here that she is more than capable of doing this.

Andy Wainwright's *After the War* comes out of the same stable as the work of the Liverpool poets, Leonard Cohen and Bob Dylan, international in style, often witty and light in its handling of themes, the kind of verse that goes down well at readings. The opening poems relate to the Aegean islands, especially Lesbos. They are mostly tourist poems — postcards home — existing on the outside of the community, culture and landscape they describe. This comes over at the level of language. The opening verse of 'Yannis' Song', for example, which is put in the mouth of a Greek fisherman:

I plied my nets without regret
before the moon was full
nets filled with fish
that shone beneath the moon
the fish of all my years...

Here the use of the archaic 'plied' sets the tone. It is a false note, as is the clumsy-'profound' metaphor of the last line.

There is in fact little sense of place in these poems or in the two concluding stories set in Ibiza and Lesbos. Rather we have the free-wheeling international youth cult of the late 60s — a world of endless travel, casual sex (to be boasted about afterwards), spear-fishing, drinking in tourist village cafés and playing out the role of 'poet' — more brash and out of place than the tourists themselves.

Other poems reveal a similar 60s Liverpool/pop cleverness. 'In the Quiet Morning' is a

play on the idea of waking up at dawn, waking into your life again, as if it were a story being written by someone else. You have to wait and watch the writing to see how it will unfold. Art and reality, art and life. But there is little more here than the clever manipulation of an idea:

you want to tell these people
of your freedom
wherever it is
you are this character
in this story of a life...

Several poems are about teenage love, the experience of outliving a relationship, and memory of the beloved (pp.28-33). They use the I-you form of address which does not make the experience universal, but merely anonymous. Too often in this collection the poems deal in poses and are written in a mock-serious tone which suggests a certain kind of knowingness rather than profundity. 'Resistance Poem' begins:

O lord
I want to assume nothing
teach me
to assume nothing...

The language echoes that of Eliot in 'Ash Wednesday' and 'Four Quartets', but here it is a piece of mock religiosity. Wainwright doesn't believe in God (or god); it is merely a clever opening to a fashionable appeal to pacifism.

JOHN BARNIE

Abraham Sutzkever, *Burnt Pearls. Ghetto Poems*, trans. from the Yiddish by Seymour Mayne, introduction by Ruth R. Wisse. Mosaic Press/Valley Editions, 1981. 51 pages.

Seymour Mayne, *The Impossible Promised Land*. Mosaic Press/Valley Editions, 1981. 123 pages.

Abraham Sutzkever wrote most of these poems while trapped in the Vilna ghetto between 1941 and 1943. His experience there would have destroyed the creativity of many poets; in Sutzkever it brought to maturity a remarkable talent. 'In the Cell', the opening poem, begins with the near-despair of someone isolated and in darkness: 'Is there something human here or familiar?' he asks. Then he finds a fragment of glass, 'chipped by someone's hand'. For a moment he considers whether this is a sign to commit suicide: 'I stroke the sharp lunar edge and ask:/"Do you want me offered up as a gift?'" He answers his own question however, in a direct and typical way: 'But blood is hot, the glass — cold,/ and it's a shame to take the sliver to my throat.' Sutzkever here, and in poem after

poem, chooses life; just as he was later to break out of the ghetto and fight with the partisans rather than submit to a passive death at the hands of the Germans. In 'A Voice from the Heart' the poet keeps alive his belief in justice by reminding himself that 'Death pardons every error./ but slavery it never forgives'.

An important way of keeping faith with his humanity was the affirmation of life through his art. To avoid a Nazi round-up he lies in a coffin's 'stiff wooden clothing' where he is able to assert — triumphantly, as the poem itself bears witness — that 'my speech/ still moves into song' ('I Am Lying in this Coffin'). Taking a piece of bloodstained bread from a fellow-Jew shot on the barbed wire — one more necessity which might lead to despair — is turned again into a rite of consecration and affirmation by Sutzkever:

If I fall as you fell
at the barbed wire
let another swallow my word
as I, your bread.

(*'For a Comrade'*)

In 'Mother', a sequence on his murdered mother, love triumphs over fear and outrage and hatred. The poem has at its centre an almost unspeakable suffering, yet it affirms a humanity which cannot be destroyed by Nazi atrocity. The last poem in the sequence is spoken by the dead mother, persuading her son to accept their separation as 'just':

If you remain
I will still be alive
as the pit of the plum
contains in itself the tree,
the nest and the bird
and all else besides.

Deeply rooted in these poems is a sense of nature as a restorative force. This is profoundly present in the imagery. His mother, stripped naked and chased by the German tormentors through the fields, becomes 'a beam of sun in the mirrors of snow'. His murdered infant son's body he bequeaths to the snow:

and you will sink
like a splinter of dusk
into its quiet depths
and bear greetings from me
to the frozen grasslands ahead —

(*'For My Child'*)

A neighbour, whipped by the Germans for trying to smuggle a flower into the ghetto, has no regrets: 'spring breathes through and colours his tortured flesh — / that's how much he wanted it to flourish' ('Flower').

I regret that I cannot read Sutzkever's work in Yiddish. Seymour Mayne's translations are true poems in themselves, however. The collection is prefaced by a fine introduction by Ruth R. Wisse.

In *The Impossible Promised Land*, Seymour Mayne's tenth collection, there seems to be

an abstract quality to many of the poems. The imagery itself is somehow faceless, as if trying to identify someone or something from its abstract parts. So the sea, a lover, a friend make their appearance without the reader ever feeling that they have a reality, anchored in the blood and sinew of particular imagery, and in the tensions and rhythms of an individual poetic style. 'Vernal Equinox' is typical of what I mean. It begins:

For stems of light
hold out your hand
O hand with spokes
Speak
of the needles
of sun piercing
the center of palm
Psalm, balm
of sound, prayer...

Elsewhere the language is flat and chatty: 'David, I ate at your place/ years ago when I had next to nothing' ('David'). The language of poetry should be tighter than this, and at times Mayne does reach out into a greater precision of imagery and rhythm, as in 'Skull Tower, Nis', a poem on the tower of Serbian skulls built by the Turks:

Gaze gaze
battered Serbs
You ended serving the Turks well
who decapitated
skinned and scraped off
the fleshy faces
and cemented you all
to hold up these exemplary walls...

Many poems in Part Two are about Jerusalem and about his own feelings and reflections as a Jew. There are, too, poems of memory, the memory of the older generation's tales of suffering and hardship in central Europe. But it is hard to handle this sort of material when it has only been experienced at second hand. Somehow many of these poems lack the conviction of felt experience. Historically they are true; poetically they do not come alive. There is a suspicion that for Mayne and perhaps for his generation of Jews in Canada, the faith which was so deeply rooted for their grandparents in the Yiddish culture of central Europe, is something learned and set at a distance. Mayne writes in English and in an international style with its roots in North America. Behind him lies, not hundreds of years of Yiddish literary tradition, but W.C. Williams and the Black Mountain poets. Yiddish and Hebrew words and rituals are liberally sprinkled through the poems, but have to be explained in a page of notes. This gives many of them a slightly strained quality. Poems such as 'City of the Hidden', a sequence centred on Jerusalem, do not seem to come out of a lived Jewish culture, but out of the longing for one. As an outsider I may be wrong in this, but compared with Sutzkever's poems, the result in Mayne's work seems all too often a simulacrum of the real thing.

JOHN BARNIE

Stories from the Raj. From Kipling to Independence, selected and introduced by Saros Cowasjee, London: The Bodley Head, 1982. 272 pages. £7.50.

'This anthology...has been put together to question the oft-repeated assertions by critics that Anglo-Indian fiction has little of literary value outside Kipling, Forster and Orwell,' writes Saros Cowasjee in his introduction to this collection of short stories. In order to challenge these assertions he has cast his net very widely indeed. In time it spans some seventy years, from the Kipling era of the last century to just after Independence in 1947. The setting ranges even more widely, moving from the North-West frontier right across the sub-continent to Burma. Cowasjee's haul of writers includes amongst it such well-known ones as Kipling and Orwell (two stories from each for good measure) as well as many others like Maud Diver, Sara Jeanette Duncan and Lionel James, whose names will probably either be completely new to many readers or, at best, half-forgotten. It is, in fact, no small part of the value of this collection that Cowasjee has brought these writers out from the shadows and helped focus our attention on them once again. Moreover, and perhaps most welcome of all, he reminds us that Anglo-Indian fiction was not something only written by men — almost half of the stories included here are written by women. Consequently he brings home to us the fact that, although the memsahibs of the Raj have often, in recent times, been a much reviled species, they did nevertheless make a substantial contribution to its literature.

Diversity, then, is one of the key-notes of this anthology, and consideration of the literary merits of each of the stories has been the principle guiding his choice of what to include. This has been carried out, inevitably perhaps, at the cost of some consistency. Thus these stories from the Raj include Orwell, even though both of his stories are actually set in Burma. However, Burma, as Cowasjee says, was very much a part of the British Raj and was for a long time even administered from Calcutta. The term 'Anglo-Indian' also affords him some slight local difficulty. He uses it in its original sense of the British in India, though this merely compounds his problem: all of the writers, he remarks, are British — except three. (Actually, there are four, if one includes Sara Jeanette Duncan, who was born in Ontario.) The problem is solved by a fairly deft sleight of hand when Cowasjee adds that, though these writers are not really British, nevertheless 'they are in their attitude and approach to India completely un-Indian'. Consequently, he concludes — by now quite superbly — 'their inclusion in this anthology poses no problems'.

An editor must nonetheless be allowed some considerable latitude, and faced with the very real merits of this anthology few readers will quarrel with his refusal to be restricted in his choice by narrower questions of geography, birthplace or nationality.

What then *are* its merits? They can perhaps be singled out when Cowasjee reiterates that 'the stories have been selected primarily for their literary qualities and only secondarily for their social importance'. Here in fact Cowasjee does himself, as editor, and many of his stories, less than justice, for it is surely precisely in the way that many of the stories combine literary value with social significance which provides much of the interest of and even justification for this collection.

The attitude to the British Raj depicted in this volume covers a wide spectrum of opinion. It stretches in fact from the era when India was regarded without question as the brightest jewel in a glittering crown to that time when the setting came to seem a very tarnished one indeed. It moves, figuratively, from all the pomp and circumstance of the

Rajpath in Delhi when surveyed from the elephants' *howdahs* of any Imperial procession to the 'labyrinth of squalid bamboo huts' in 'Shooting an Elephant' where Orwell is shame-facedly forced by the imperial creed to kill his defenceless animal.

At one end of the spectrum represented here, then, stands Orwell. For him the imperialist system is quite unequivocally an evil institution and the only thing his job in Burma as part of the system does for him is to give him the opportunity of seeing, as he remarks in 'Shooting an Elephant', 'the dirty work of Empire at close quarters'. In this story the narrator describes an incident that seemed trivial in itself, 'but it gave me,' he remarks, 'a better glimpse than I had had before of the real nature of imperialism'. He is forced into killing the animal, he now regards as harmless, simply because to draw back will entail an irrecoverable loss of face before the crowd of Burmese villagers watching the encounter. 'I perceived in this moment that when the white man turns tyrant it is his own freedom that he destroys. He becomes a sort of hollow, posing dummy, the conventionalised figure of a sahib... He wears a mask, and his face grows to fit it... A sahib has got to act like a sahib, he has got to appear resolute.'

At the other end of the spectrum looms — inevitably — Kipling. His commitment to the British Empire is total. The English are in India to rule — and to serve. Through unswerving devotion to the Imperial ideal and by facing the challenge it presents, Englishmen are given the opportunity of fulfilling themselves, of showing strength of character and self-development. Orwell's hollow dummy in fact reveals his true stuffing. The sahib does indeed wear a mask in Kipling's stories, but it is not only his face that grows to fit it, so too does his whole stature as a man. And the features that mark the sahib for Kipling are resolution, unflinching self-sacrifice when called for, an unquestioning devotion to duty without thought of reward or ulterior self-interest.

In 'The Head of the District', one of the two stories by which Kipling is represented here, a Bengali, Mr Ghrish Chunder Dé, M.A. has been sent, on the recommendation of an 'enlightened' Viceroy, to take over the post of Deputy Commissioner of a district, formerly held by an Englishman. A local Pathan leader, Khoda Dad Khan, protests against the decision vehemently to the Bengali's chief assistant, an Englishman: '«O Sahib, has the Government gone mad to send a black Bengali dog to us? And am I to pay service to such a one? And are you to work under him? What does it mean?» «It is an order,» said Tallentire.'

A local blind Mullah, arguing that because a Bengali has been sent to govern them they need no longer fear British rule, incites the local tribesmen to attack and plunder some villages. The attack is warded off by a British detachment, many of the tribesmen are killed, and Khoda Dad Khan seizes the opportunity to pay off some old scores against the Mullah. The passage is worth quoting at some length:

Then began a game of blind-man's-buff round and between the fires.... They tickled him gently under the armpit with the knife-point. He leaped aside screaming, only to feel a cold blade drawn lightly over the back of his neck, or a rifle-muzzle rubbing his beard. He called on his adherents to aid him, but most of these lay dead on the plains, for Khoda Dad Khan had been at some pains to arrange their decease. Men described to him the glories of the shrine they would build, and the little children clapping their hands cried, 'Run, Mullah, run! There's a man behind you!' In the end, when the sport wearied, Khoda Dad Khan's brother sent a knife home between his ribs. 'Wherefore,' said Khoda Dad Khan with charming simplicity, 'I am now Chief of the Khusru Kheyl!'

The game of blind-man's-buff described here with such delighted gusto appears at first

sight a very far cry from the Great Game dealt with in Kipling's other works, but it has a connection, nevertheless. This single story in fact speaks volumes about the real state of mind underlying Kipling's attitude to the Raj. Perhaps, though, this is revealed most tellingly in the unmistakably vindictive note of approval which greets the final dispatch of an enemy of the Raj. Charming simplicity! Yes, indeed; Orwell's experience of a sudden insight into the true nature of imperialism is one that need not only be confined to him. A similar opportunity is offered to the reader by the fact that Cowasjee includes these two stories in the same volume.

Nor is Kipling's story the only one that acquires an added significance by being included in this collection and seen in the context of the whole. Many of the others afford the reader a fuller understanding of what life was really like under the Raj and of how many different facets it had. Katherine Mayo, Maud Diver and Flora Annie Steel bring home to the reader the often tragic fate of Indian women. Through these stories we are also reminded that the Raj was not solely responsible for all the ills. Katherine Mayo's 'The Widow', for example, is the victim of the fanaticism of Gandhi's supporters despite their code of *satyagraha*. Maud Diver shows in 'The Gods of the East' that these can be cruel and jealous gods demanding a blood sacrifice for the payment of a debt — a practice that still held sway even though it was 'long since made punishable under the British penal code'. In Leonard Woolf's 'Pearls and Swine' the depths of degradation to which the English in India could sink is clearly revealed. Perhaps, in fact, only too clearly, since this is surely a story that hardly deserves reviving. Cowasjee comments in his introduction upon how closely this is modelled upon 'Heart of Darkness' both in its narrative method and in the depiction of its central character. This is true, unfortunately, since it only serves to bring out even more sharply the comparative weakness, the crude lack of subtlety and of insight, and the factitious quality of Woolf's story.

But of all those writers who have been thus brought out of undeserved neglect the one who stands out most prominently is surely Sara Jeannette Duncan for her story 'A Mother in India'. Full of vivid domestic detail, here we are taken straight into the home-life of the mem-sahib. The mother is a splendidly drawn character, practical, forthright, eminently sensible and clear-sighted; her daughter, brought up in England, is prim, prosaic and prudish, she possesses, her mother says truly, 'a frugal mind'. The relationship between them is treated with a completely controlled, subtly poised comedy (at times strongly reminiscent of Henry James), but it is a comedy that does not preclude more serious undertones. A summary, however, cannot do it justice; it must be read in its entirety.

So too must this whole anthology. Saros Cowasjee expresses a hope that the stories chosen for inclusion will lead to a renewed interest in their authors' work in general. One shares his hope — he at least has very ably done *his* part.

DONALD W. HANNAH

Francis Ebejer, *Come Again in Spring*, New York: Vantage Press, 1979. 196 pages. \$7.50.

Francis Ebejer, *Requiem for a Malta Fascist*, (or *The Interrogation*), Malta: A.C. Aquilina & Co., 1980. 243 pages. No price given.

Francis Ebejer, who is probably the best-known contemporary Maltese writer, has here written two strikingly different novels.

Come Again in Spring is set in America and centres upon Miguel, a young man who has left his home on the Canary Islands to live in San Francisco. The novel records his encounter with an America that, inevitably, threatens to undermine and destroy his basically European cultural identity. The theme is a not unfamiliar one, although Ebejer does succeed in investing his account of Miguel's adjustment to America, his new-found-land, with a marked degree of vividness and freshness. These qualities are also enhanced by the pace of the narrative. Miguel's reactions to his new environment are conveyed moment by moment as they are experienced, and, in general, the reader is swept forward on the headlong torrent of his impressions. But pace also exacts a price, for vividness and immediacy are gained at the expense of solidity of background and depth of experience. Both America and its inhabitants really only exist in the novel as figments of Miguel's consciousness, and, in turn, his character is not at all one that has been sharply etched in. As a result his impressions are like the colours in a kaleidoscope which are ceaselessly running together to form new designs, but never come to rest to make any lasting pattern of significance. As a result we are left in *Come Again in Spring* not so much with the description of a firmly defined cultural identity confronting all the challenge of a strange environment, but rather with the account of a host of fleeting experiences all of which turn out to be fairly ephemeral.

This forms a very striking contrast with *Requiem for a Malta Fascist*. It is also narrated in the first person, but the experiences of Lorenz, the main character, are utterly different. The novel sketches in his early childhood in a small village on Malta, his school-days and his time as a student during the 1930s in Valletta, his experiences on the island during the Second World War, and his career is then followed until 1974.

The story of Lorenz's life on Malta during these years is in the foreground of the novel, but equally prominent are the main events of Malta's history during the same period. These extend from the pre-war period, when the country was under British rule and wracked by Fascist intrigues, through all the rigours of the siege of Malta — the George Cross island — during the war, and on to the establishment of Malta as an independent state. All this background to Lorenz's life is filled in very solidly indeed, and the prose, in which this novel is written, gives itself plenty of time to establish, firmly and surely, all the changing scenes of Malta's life during these times. Perhaps most memorable of all are the descriptions of life on the island, torn and devastated by war, with Valletta bombed again and again by the Axis powers. A woman tells Lorenz:

'We never miss going down to the shelter. Not once. I even leave the shop open. And I'm always first up here again, before the customers. I've seen some changes these last few months. Who would have thought? Lost a few customers, too. Sa Elvira the latest. She lived in that house with the high trees in the garden. With her old man who is a scholar, her Angora and Siamese cats. She was in the garden looking for one of her kittens that had strayed up from the shelter when the bomb fell. Her husband, too, had been in the shelter, writing a big book about lizards, skinks, geckos, newts and things like that. He rushed out, but his wife was little pieces, and you know what he did? He went back in, brought out his book, tore it up and threw the pieces on the little fires that were still burning around what was left of his wife. He stood there in his pyjamas bare-headed, sobbing and singing our National Hymn over and over again. He was still singing it when they took him away.'

All these events do, however, only form the background against which the main relationship is played out — that between Lorenz and his closest friend, Paul, the Malta

Fascist, for whom the book is meant as a requiem. And here, in the description of this relationship, the novel is much less satisfactory. The early stages of the friendship between the two is described in this encounter:

'Your politics disgust me,' I told Paul one Spring day in 1938. In my extreme youth.

My first skin still encased me but it was aglow with the need for the sight of a face, eyes, mouth, sound of a chuckle, a voice (Paul's), without which I could truly see myself unable to live.

'They disgust me because I've seen them turn friends against each other. Only friendship (such as ours) is real and important. Politics (such as yours) debase it. They threaten us like man-eating tigers (they surround us at dead of night). Don't let them.'

He looked resplendent in his fascist uniform.

Paul may well look resplendent in his fascist uniform, but a major flaw in the novel is also suggested here. Although Lorenz's belief that 'only friendship...is real and important' is constantly asserted — and indeed must be, since it provides the pivot around which all the events in Lorenz's life are made to revolve — nevertheless the passion with which this belief is held remains much less convincing. It is, in fact, considerably easier to believe in the smouldering hostility Lorenz feels towards Paul's fascist convictions than to credit the strength of his affection for Paul as a friend. 'If I had to choose,' E.M. Forster once wrote, 'between betraying my country and betraying my friend, I hope I should have the guts to betray my country.' Lorenz's decision, finally, is the opposite of Forster's — but it still remains difficult to believe, in spite of all his protestations, that the necessity of choosing really causes him much agonized soul-searching.

To find the strength of this book, then, one must look elsewhere than in its account of the personal relationship between the two major characters. And the direction is one that is indicated by the main difference between this novel and *Come Again in Spring*. If in the previous novel America is reduced to a series of transient impressions, in this book the description of Malta is given a durable quality that will ensure it surviving long in the reader's memory. Essentially what it amounts to is that the main character here is neither Paul nor Lorenz, but Malta itself. Thus, despite its title, the book is not so much a requiem for a Malta Fascist, but instead affords a vivid and absorbing glimpse of the life of the island and its stormy existence over the last forty years. And that, after all, is no mean achievement.

DONALD W. HANNAH

Brian Turner, *Ancestors*. Dunedin: John McIndoe, 1981. 62 pages. NZ\$6.95.

Ancestors continues and develops the themes from Brian Turner's first collection *Ladders of Rain*. He is at his best when he describes the hilly, wet, windy, and somewhat bleak countryside and sea around Otago. Blended into this landscape is a feeling for the past, almost as a living presence and at times with a slightly supernatural slant. The tone is often melancholic, but never despairing. What saves it from despair is a low-keyed and very genuine pleasure in simple living and everyday connections. Although his world is beneath lashing rain

Nothing is left untouched by sparse sunlight,
slanting rain, fists of wind punching

the ribs of the land....

it is an Arcadia of provincial living, of grass-root lives and obscurity made significant, but not idealized beyond credibility. At its most successful the poetry combines the landscape and emotions into a very genuine kind of beauty:

Coming home late through the smoky
fuzz of late autumn, winter rackety
on the elbows of birch trees,
a storm of finches pecking an apple,

I feel some things are never
lost in the conspiracy of evening,
the garnered and gathered
puddling silences of chill air.

The poetry seems less successful when it tries too hard for some kind of 'message', a meaning which in some cases is too ostentatiously tacked on to the end of the poem. An example of this tendency is the poem 'Kites'. It is a light, delightful poem about kites, seen from the point of view of the kites themselves:

Artists like us, and so
do the sober middle-aged,
and the spartan elderly.
We are a favoured lot.

But the last line, 'Such free spirits are never grounded for long', forces a message on to the poem which it cannot and should not carry. This tendency, however, is the only flaw in an otherwise thoroughly enjoyable book of poetry. It is the sort of book one would wish to give to a good friend whom one knew would have no need to discuss it.

KIRSTEN HOLST PETERSEN

X S.H. Burton and C.J.H. Chacksfield, *African Poetry in English. An introduction to practical criticism*. London and Basingstoke: The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1980. 154 pages. £5.95 h/c, £1.95 ppr.

This is a very thorough and detailed introduction to the art of poetry reading, aimed at A level students, teachers' college students, or first year university students. The authors describe the various tools of poetry and illustrate their points with detailed analyses of poems, all of which are chosen from African poetry. Each chapter also includes questions and suggestions for further analyses of poems. The book thus serves two purposes: it introduces the student to poetry as a form, but seeing that it does so through the medium of African poetry it also becomes an introduction to that particular field. The authors have emphasized this last aspect by adding a short chapter on the development of African poetry to the end of the book. In this double purpose lies the book's uniqueness in the sea of introductions, and it does seem to me to make sound paedagogical sense to introduce a new and much feared field through a medium which has the advantage of being concerned with a world familiar to the student, and in this sense African students have until now been disadvantaged. This introduction could rectify that, and with its heavy emphasis on the enjoyment one can gain from reading poetry, rather than exam cramming, who knows, it might even win some converts to a much maligned genre.

KIRSTEN HOLST PETERSEN

A Kenjo Jumbam, *The White Man of God*, London: Heinemann, 1980. 160 pages. £1.40.

When a Catholic priest (the white man of God) assumes duties at a Nkar parish in Bui, Cameroon, the family, the compound, the village authority, and the narrator are permanently disturbed. A double-consciousness breeds a double participation; the parish catechist serves the *Nwarong*, the tribe's most powerful institution, as the *Kibarankoh*, its leading juju (in the West African sense of 'masque'). As the narrator, Tansa, develops this simple autobiographical narrative, the parish priest's assistant dies while he himself barely survives the discovery that Matiu, his catechist, is the *Kibarankoh*. Meanwhile the now divided Nkar crofters and the narrator must cope individually with the paradoxes they see in Christianity — especially in the relation of its God and his sinners.

Jumbam's use of a child narrator allows him to indulge the bonding emotions of the tribe and to bring out the texture of the Nso style family and village life. These home scenes are very well done indeed. However, the juvenile perspective is somewhat costly since much must be compressed within the ten years that take Tansa into his teens. Jumbam succeeds even here by carefully admitting Tansa into, or dismissing him from, the presence of more experienced adults. Tansa is thus used occasionally as a probe into the history of the earliest contacts between white travellers and the Nkar folk. This eaves-dropping technique is very effectively employed throughout *The White Man of God*.

Much of the comedy that partially sustains the novel accrues from the flavour of the Nso language audible in its 'English'. Matiu is actually a stock character from West African anglophone lore, but he is nevertheless well integrated into this novel as he

translates the New Testament 'robbers' as 'rubber trees'. Jumbam excels in this art of Africanizing English. His perfect balance of humour and tragedy accounts for much of his success. The African English conflict novel is already well established by the likes of *Things Fall Apart*, but *The White Man of God* is clearly a map of future directions within the genre: less epic and more inward.

TAYOBA NGENGE