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Book Reviews

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Abstract

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Janet Frame, *To the Is-Land: An Autobiography*. New York: George Braziller, 1982. 235 pp. \$US10.95.

To the Is-Land is the first of a planned 3-volume autobiography by New Zealand writer Janet Frame and covers Frame's early years up to the time that she completed high school and left home for Dunedin teachers' training college.

The title *To the Is-Land* refers to a book of the same name that the child Janet read and pronounced as 'To the ISland', thinking of that land as different from the Was land and the Future. In recreating the world of her childhood, Frame relives a continuous present, when everything in one's waking life is or is becoming. The title can also imply the world beyond the islands of New Zealand that keeps asserting itself in New Zealand consciousness. For Janet Frame, always, there has been no removal of herself to another world of the imagination, simply the other world's arrival into the world of everyday routines. The other world is one of imagination, poetry, and romance, but also one of brutality, even horror. Frame herself shows its two sides in the chapter where she tells of her most extended venture into that world through writing a number of poems: she concludes the chapter with the news of the outbreak in the other world of World War II.

It is doubtful that either of the later two volumes will deal with 'The Making of a Writer' (as a series is called in the *New York Times Book Review*), a process that is a mystery to the writer as well as to everyone else. This first volume shows Frame's interest in literature, especially in poetry, and records with an amused indulgence her schoolgirl's attempts at writing, but it does not attempt to explain the creative impulse that led her to produce thus far nine novels, four books of short stories, and a book of poetry. Perhaps

because her creative gift makes her different in New Zealand society, a society that has less tolerance for difference than almost any other Western culture, Frame is concerned with stressing her ordinariness and her immersion in the practical world; and her style is accordingly concrete and conversational, quite unlike the evocative, poetic style of her fiction. Her childhood was a pretty normal one, apart from the poverty that constantly beset her parents; nevertheless she emphasizes that the family had plenty to eat in that rich agricultural land, even eating luxuriously by most standards. There is little sign of the woman who was to emerge as New Zealand's most important novelist to date; that development seems to have surprised Janet Frame as much as anyone.

Although she does not raise the question of where her creative gift came from, Frame clearly ponders it throughout this volume of her intended trilogy. To some degree, she implies, the creative impulse was engendered by her mother, who wrote poetry and encouraged a love for poetry in her children. But Frame seems to look upon creative inspiration as in the main a sort of 'fit' sent by God. It is linked in her mind with the epilepsy of her brother. She herself never directly makes that association, but she is so preoccupied with her brother's epilepsy in this volume that one gradually comes to see the parallels she has perhaps sensed between creative inspiration and epilepsy: both seem to come from outside, beyond one's control or choosing, and remove one for a time from the ordinary world. Creative activity, like epilepsy, brings the intrusion of 'that' world into 'this' (to use the terms that have become standard in literary criticism of Frame's writings).

The appeal of this first volume of Frame's autobiography lies not in what it tells us of the future writer, though her self-portrait is engaging in its candor, but in the recreation of childhood in rural and remote New Zealand in the late 1920s and early 1930s and in the portrait of her mother. The account of her childhood is simple and unpretentious, with a good deal of charm; and if one was born before, say, 1955 (before the onset of the affluence which, in spite of its comings and goings, has transformed Western lifestyles), one will no doubt find oneself reliving one's own childhood along with Janet Frame. The 30s and 40s were the period of Hollywood-inspired dreams and ambitions; they were the years of Saturday afternoon movies. The portrait of Lottie Frame, Janet's mother, is like a Rembrandt portrait in that her warm tones take on a more intense quality because of the dark background against which she is seen.

Because it is more straightforward than any of Frame's works of fiction, *To the Is-Land* is likely at first to seem slight, but it is in fact a well proportioned and carefully considered work. For instance, it is exactly halfway through the book that she records how she gained admission to the world of books, with the tremendous new stimulus they offered for her imaginative development, when she received a library subscription as the prize for being the top student of her school. Every so often, too, Frame offers an arresting perspective upon life, like her image of Time from early childhood to adolescence as being first horizontal (progressive), then vertical ('with events stacked one upon the other'), then a whirlpool (when memories do not arrange themselves for observation but whirl around, different memories rising to the surface at different times). This distinction is not only fascinating in itself: it illuminates a central problem of organization that writers of autobiography have to contend with as they offer their memories and experiences, and explains the blurring that commonly occurs as they deal with their adolescent years.

The Janet Frame who emerges from this volume of the Autobiography is a very practical person, closely involved with her family and the family animals. This portrait of herself is a healthy corrective to those who would think of her as torn by *Angst* and living in a world of the imagination rather than the world of reality. It is mostly a happy book; if there are any indications of trouble lying ahead, they may be in her intimations (still at

the edge of her consciousness) of the creative spirit growing strong within her like a malady — like her brother's epilepsy — that will seize her and control her life, setting her increasingly apart in a society intolerant of the different and uncomfortable with the creative. The outbreak of her creative spirit lies ahead, in the second volume of her autobiography, which is now near completion.

JOHN BESTON

Fay Zwicky, ed., *Quarry*. Freemantle Arts Centre, 1981. \$6.00.

If little of the writing in this anthology of poetry by 26 Western Australians has the charged excitement of the genuinely first-rate, there are nevertheless other, by no means inconsiderable virtues on display. Most poets gain from exposure in this kind of useful showcase, and the interest of *Quarry* is not restricted to residents of W.A. because Fay Zwicky has rightly avoided any temptation to select stereotypical 'regional' writing. (There are also good photographs by Susan Eve Barrow.)

There's a fair variety here of theme and personal response, if not of poetic tactics. Physical and mental landscapes are in creative relationship; the firm sense of Western Australia's hard terrain (both rural and urban) is rarely unaccompanied by the potent grip of memory, feeling, history, or geographical displacement (several of the poets are British or American immigrants). Murray Jennings pays sensitive tribute to Tom Roberts, the Victorian-age painter of 'The Golden Fleece, Shearing at Newstead', but it's the life which art represented that engages him rather than the painting, and beyond that the death of those who lived that life. In 'Ballad of Glad Women' Alan Alexander too looks back, beyond the page where he read of them, to 'Cathleen / The Deport Workhorse',

Edna,
The Liverpool Swan,
From the parish
Of cold dockland
Cast into
The venereal sun

and Tobacco Mary who

With her children
Made the wild bush
Her garden.

Jenny de Garis registers the shock of Australia for an English 'Migrant' but learns to open her heart and finds

Sudden great constellations were burning the night,
and I saw the world turning and singing
in a rainbow aura of light.

Nicholas Hasluck contrasts a modest awareness of natural mystery and non-human time-scales in his group of poems on 'Rottneest Island' with a sharply funny poem on flat-dwelling. Hal Colebatch also introduces a welcome satirical note in 'Over-exposure To Social Realism (a poem in the manner of Bruce Dawe)'. Wendy Jenkins in her fine group 'Names' shows she has a good ear, and seems one of the most promising younger poets. I liked, too, Fay Zwicky's extract from *Ark Voices*, which shows a talent for asperity informed by judicial passion. She has assembled an interesting and intelligent collection.

RODNEY PYBUS

Mark O'Connor, *The Fiesta of Men*. Hale & Iremonger, Sydney, 1983. \$11.95 cloth, \$5.95 paper.

Mark O'Connor has been on a Grand Tour round the sites of Graeco-Roman civilisation. He's also been to Spain, Yugoslavia, Holland, Norway and England, before returning to Australia. The itinerary gives his new collection structure and coherence up to a point, but that point is unfortunately where the poetry should start but too often doesn't in the European part of the book. Many of these are tourist-poems: while the genre has sound Romantic precedents (though *pace* O'Connor Keats didn't go to Italy to *live*), he has stayed too close to the Baedeker. With one or two exceptions, like the spirited 'Riding a Hired Lambretta in the Fifth Lane of the Autostrade to Visit the Underworld...' where Fellini and 'the Stygian Tomato/ Co-op' keep us rightly with at least one foot in the 20th century, these poems about Greek islands, ancient monuments, Atlantis, etc. fail to engage with sufficient conviction, authority or originality their theme of the relationship between present place and past culture. The views are closely observed but they remain views. The uncertainty in his reactions to antiquity comes through in odd ways: Greek cliffs are 'baked like fissured scones' and 'cracked and crusted like meringue', while on Patmos the land has become 'as holed as Swiss cheese' with 'gruyere strata' in the hills. And his ear seems as unsure as his 'appetitive' imagery. The majority of these poems are in inconsistent iambics, the rhythms veering from mellifluous to lamely flat, so that they are, finally, a disconcerting distraction. It's almost as if he felt his themes and (mainly) decorous diction demanded traditional blank verse but didn't quite dare to take the plunge.

While I'm not suggesting that O'Connor shouldn't have used his travel award, a remarkable change for the better comes over his Australian poems. The writing has more celebratory vitality and less worry, there's a captivating variety of tone, and he seems altogether more at home with his medium. Particularly good are poems about Dunk Island off Queensland (especially 'Planting the Dunk Botanic Gardens', a brilliant bravura piece of botany-in-verse), and 'The Island Wife', a taut 9-line erotic tribute to Papaya, whose sensuous compression is a virtue O'Connor could have employed more often in some of these 'strange scrappy chattings with the Muse'.

RODNEY PYBUS

Ian Stephen and Sam Maynard, *Malin, Hebrides, Minches*. Dangaroo Press, Geding Søvej 21, 8381 Mundelstrup, Denmark. Dkr 65/ £4.95.

In *Malin, Hebrides, Minches* Ian Stephen, poet, and Sam Maynard, photographer, explore 'some of the experience, as well as the images, of life on «The Long Island» of Lewis and Harris'. The two were drawn to each other's work by a recognition of 'shared themes in our different mediums', a recognition which led to a close collaboration, sometimes a poem inspiring a photograph, and vice versa, while at others 'this poem and that photograph, independently done, seemed to belong together'.

'Frontispiece', the opening poem, proclaims the poet's area of concern and by implication that of the photographer. Had he been born elsewhere he might have explored classical myth in a high style, or written lyrics out of lush (but tame?) buttercup fields,

But I come from Western Isle
and do not sing but speak
on words that are the breeze
of harbour and moor
and corner of street.

So, language is to be restrained, severe even, but the language nonetheless of speech, dealing with nature and men in the one environment he knows. The photographs offer a parallel visual restraint, emphasised by a retaining, black line frame.

Living in the Hebrides, as in all the Celtic countries, one can't help being aware of the present lived out in the context of the past — the immediate past of an almost timeless way of life, destroyed this century by modern civilization, and behind that a prehistory merging with the landscape and geological time. Stephen and Maynard are well attuned to this, and it provides the unifying principle of the present collection.

'May Hiortach' tells how May would like to go back to her old home on Eilean Hiort (St Kilda),

the habitated place at
the edge of the lesser Atlantic fathoms
before the drop

— if it had a roof, any kind of roof. But she lives next door in a cul-de-sac 'and seems/sure-settled'. The facing photograph shows a delicate, thin, ageing woman, hands resting on the edge of a modern stainless steel kitchen sink, with teacups and a stainless steel teapot on the draining board. She gazes out of the window with almost a smile.

Poem and visual image combine perfectly here, and set the tone for much of the book. Those who think of the Islands as a place of retreat from industrial civilization are suffering a Romantic delusion. May Hiortach has stainless steel kitchen units; a noisy helicopter lays power lines to a remote hamlet approached only by sea; the rotting hulk of a car has been dumped in a beautiful estuary; Stornoway has a brash new council housing estate; there is a NATO base nearby, and so on. Many of the poems and photographs force home these facts: opposite the poem with the laconic title 'Oil Associated Industry' is a murky photograph in close up of a welder at work, 'U.F.O.' painted on his vizor. A photograph entitled 'Manor Farm housing estate, known as «Colditz', shows a drab cluster of modern houses, dirty with smoke, and in the foreground the ragged ends of

fields staked out with barbed wire — a scene that could be on the edge of any new housing estate anywhere. The poem 'Airigh na Beist' (a note tells us that this was 'a once-rich place of summer-pastures, outside Stornoway') tells how the white hare has been driven from the pastures, to be replaced by a midden and a television mast, twin symbols of modern living. The accompanying photograph shows a Singer sewing machine dumped in a pool, and the upside-down reflection in the water of a man striding quickly by. As the title implies, the old language has been pushed aside too, and the poem ends by reiterating (though less certainly than before) 'it may be good/ that we are gone from here'. I am not sure who 'we' refers to, but the poem suggests to me that it may be the voice of those who once pastured their animals here on Airigh na Beist, and who needed no footnote to tell them what these beautiful words meant.

Maynard and Stephen are careful to avoid romanticizing the past: May will never go back to Eilean Hiort, roof or no roof, because (the implication is) life with its modern conveniences is easier in Stornoway — she 'seems/ sure-settled'. The past, however, is continually present to us in the poems and photographs, a celebration and a warning of something important we may have lost, for all that life is more convenient now. 'Laxdale Autumn' is about the disappearance of the salmon and the old fishing ways; but the poet goes to the estuary anyway to fish for eel or flounder,

if not for market by cart or string,
then only now to know they live
on or under the wet flat of mud.

Everywhere there are the ruins: a derelict whaling station, the photograph showing broken timbers, abandoned buildings, and cows grazing in the tall grass — nothing left, as the poem reminds us, of 'sea-bulls and calving mammals' (or by implication of the men who slaughtered them) except

Seeped traces ... [that] sank to fertilize
this broken slope
of incidental grass.

A ruined Baptist chapel on a headland draws the dry conclusion:

some congregation
either went adrift
or further afield.

('Baptist Church: South-East Ness')

And behind the recently lost past of the whalers, the fishermen and the chapel communities is the ancient and hardly known culture of the Picts. A photograph entitled 'Stone Detail, Broch, Dun Carloway' shows a close up of the dry stone work of a broch, as sharp and fresh as the day it was built. The stones were given shape and significance by humans, but humans who have long since disappeared with their culture and their language. In the photographs of deserted whaling stations and chapels you can imagine still the kind of life lived by those who built and used them; but in the photograph of the broch it is the stone which dominates now with its whorled grain, and the imposed pattern, the human intention, is all but lost. It is this prehistory of the island which dominates the end of the collection. In the poem 'Satellite Stone Circle: Isle of Lewis', the

religious purpose of the stones has not merely been forgotten, but has been subtly changed by the chemistry of time and the elements, so that now the stones seem 'shaped more by winds/ than by hands'. Even the modern surround of fence and gates seems to be trying to efface itself, trying to 'merge in' with the earth.

'Rowan and Hawthorn' is spoken by an anonymous voice from the distant human past of the island, begging the living to plant a rowan 'For my imagination now', and a hawthorn 'for healing': 'Root that for me/ and for us all.' It is faced by a photograph showing what looks like an ancient dry stone enclosure in the foreground, with a stunted, leafless tree; while across a narrow straight, several crofts stare from a dim stretch of bleak, hilly ground. It is the landscape that dominates here — bare hills, inlets, moorland — and human habitation is a small, integrated part of a greater whole. The last photograph, 'Cliffs & Sea: Valtos, Uig', shows a line of waves shining in bright moonlight, reaching towards utterly black, featureless cliffs. The accompanying poem, called simply 'Lyric', turns away from humanity, or at least the modern Western version of it, and in a kind of love song celebrates the basic colours of sea, sky and shell:

Look wider than the broadest bay
yet give me blue of mussel shell
and yellow of the winter sky
but grudge the garish red of
lobster, highly served.

Turn to the horizon edge
but be with me.
We will kiss the salty tongue.
Give and keep the mollusc blue.

In the poems, Ian Stephen has developed a spare, pared-down style, and a voice which is deliberately non-emotional, describing in a matter-of-fact way (for the most part) what he hears, sees, remembers. In this way he achieves a verbal equivalent to Sam Maynard's striking and austere camera work, and the result is a close and usually successful interdependence of poem and photograph. A collection of poems alone, though, would demand a modification of this style, so that more of what is contained visually in the photographs would be present in the words through a more powerful use of image.

Malin, Hebrides, Minches is very well produced. Its large format and sewn pages, with poems sensitively spaced to enhance their austerity and a high level of reproduction in the photographs, make the book a pleasure to handle. I hope Dangaroo Press will continue to support poetry, and photography, in this way.

JOHN BARNIE

Shirley Neuman & Robert Wilson, *Conversations with Robert Kroetsch*. NeWest Press, Edmonton, 1982. 246 pp. Can.\$ 7.95 (paper).

This is the third volume in the Western Canadian Literary Documents Series whose general editor is Shirley Neuman. The inaugural volume was Robert Kroetsch, *The Crow Journals* (1980). Volume II: *Essays By and About Rudy Wiebe*, edited by W.J. Keith (1981). Along with the present volume the series offers an insight into the works and the ideas of two of the most talented and exciting writers not only in Western Canada, but in the entire country.

Shirley Neuman and Robert Wilson are not only interviewers, they are also constructive contributors to the discussion as well. Throughout the volume the flow of conversation is broken by quotations in italics that substantiate and sometimes also contradict what is being said. These quotations come from Kroetsch's own work and from fellow writers, critics, linguists, anthropologists and others who have been important to his development.

The conversation is divided into four sections: 'Influence', 'Game', 'Myth', and 'Narration'. In 'Influence' Kroetsch discusses his affinity to Spanish and Latin American literature ranging from Cervantes to Borges, Marquez and Neruda. In 'Game' the idea of literature as a game based on a set of rules is explored, and Kroetsch's favourite motif of the labyrinth ('culture as a labyrinthine godgame', p. 78) is drawn into the discussion. One has never been in doubt that myth is central to Kroetsch's work; this section reminds one of the fact that Kroetsch is a Western Canadian writer who, along with e.g. Margaret Laurence and Rudy Wiebe, has found a discussion of the myth/history relation particularly urgent. One of the many topics discussed in 'Narration' is an attempt to define the difference between Canadian and American writers. At the end of this section the interviewers push Kroetsch towards a definition of his concept of post-modernism. At the centre is his emphasis on 'the act of narration over signification' and his idea that 'mimesis becomes what I call the refusal of meaning; through our recognizing it as refusal of meaning, it in turn starts to become meaning' (p. 199).

This is an extremely useful volume which makes interesting reading not only for the academic but for anyone interested in Canadian literature.

JØRN CARLSEN