

INTERVIEW



Peter Porter

Peter Porter was born in Brisbane in 1929. He moved to London in 1954 where, with brief interruptions, he has lived ever since. The author of more than a dozen books of poetry, his most recent are *Collected Poems* (1983), *The Chair of Babel* (1992) and *Millennial Fables* (1994), all from Oxford. Simon Caterson interviewed him for *Metre* magazine in Melbourne on 15 October 1996 on the occasion of the launch of his *Oxford Book of Australian Verse*.

sc: *You invoke Yeats and Heaney in your introduction to your new Oxford Book of Australian Verse. What comment would you make about that Irish-Australian literary connection?*

pp: In some ways it overemphasizes one particular aspect of Australia's history. If you look at the peoples from the British Isles who've settled in Australia, there seems to be agreement that it all happened in such a way that the Irish were the recalcitrant and insurgent element, the English were the administrative, land-owning element, the government element, and the Scots the enterprise element, so that in nineteenth-century Australia you get a curious breakdown with the different parts of the British Isles also operating as different parts of the character of Australia. But because the Irish element was always the more recalcitrant one, and Australia itself got an image of being a rebel state, the Irish element were always the Romantic element which was identified with. I think the people who really founded Australia, were the Scots, because they were engineers and land-owners. I've worked a bit in Scotland, and one of the things I've noticed is that the Scots are the world's most successful people—except in Scotland. The Irish always represent a sort of contrary tradition, though of course contrary traditions solidify into establishments too, and there is an Australian-Irish establishment of which Melbourne is the perfect example.

I have no connection with Ireland at all, but having lived for so long in London I know a great number of Irish writers, and I do have a great admiration for them, but I always feel in some way that the other parts of the British Isles get neglected at their expense. The English literary establishment are always incredibly pro-Irish, which is very distinct from the English establishment politically, so you get the combination of the English esteeming Irish writing but at the same time if there's a fight going on sending the

squad cars up to Kilburn to arrest a few Paddies. There's a distinction between the Irish as they see them as building workers and the Irish as they see them as wonderful *littérateurs*, and they can never make up their minds about which they really are. But I think a great deal of arrogance has grown on Irish writing. For instance, I was at an Australian conference in Dublin and very few Irish writers took part although they were invited to. There was a reading we did at Waterstone's, and there was David Malouf, myself and Katherine Gallagher. Not a single Irish writer I think was in the audience except for Dennis O'Driscoll, and he came up to me afterwards and said "We don't recognize other people's writing in Ireland; we're only interested in our own." Yet the Irish themselves are always in favour. But it's been complicated by the difference between the Ulster writers and the southern Irish writers, since all the recent stars have been from Ulster. You're hard pressed to find a famous writer from the Republic, Thomas Kinsella in poetry perhaps, but still...

sc: *Can you see a distinctive Irish style in the work of the Irish writers you read?*

pp: There's not much point, I think, in pursuing national characteristics, but it's interesting to me that in all world literatures there is always a hangover of the past governing the magnetic field of the present. So how Ireland sees itself, and how the Irish have been moulded by the struggle for independence from Britain has given, at this late stage, the Irish a tremendous lever on the Romantic concept of what a literary movement should be. Whereas the life of Ireland today is changing so much. So that it seems to me, for instance, that Heaney's excellence as a writer is in defiance, really, of the kind of excellence you'd expect in a world-successful writer. Putting it bluntly, he's very old-fashioned. Ireland is one of the very few countries where you can be reactionary stylistically and still be considered absolutely relevant. Muldoon is a different case, because he's a genuinely experimental, amazingly skilful stylist, I think. He has this incredible vision of things. But like everything else in Ireland they advance fast by withdrawing quickly, it's always full of these retractions. Muldoon's *The Annals of Chile* is like Auden's *The Orators* with its large picture of society, but Auden in the end is more accessible, because in the end it's all in the public domain, whereas so much of what Muldoon writes is private mythology. I think the whole idea of the elevation of the private into the public is one of the things that's been achieved by modernism in its later stages, and I think Muldoon has been fairly good at doing that. But I don't know in the end if Irish writing since Joyce and Beckett has contributed a lot to what you might call the more audacious, experimental side of things... despite Joyce, Irish writing is not quite centred in the twentieth century the way a lot of other writing is. Joyce

did what Pound always advocated, to “make it new”, but he made it new out of old ingredients. Ireland of course benefits too from the misunderstandings of the country by the people who are descended from Irish immigrants, especially in the United States...

sc: *They seem to forget everything but the reason why they left.*

pp: And when they do remember it they think of it only in terms of ‘perfidious Albion’. They remember to hate the Brits but don’t remember that when they left Ireland they did so because they could no longer live there.

sc: *Perhaps we could talk a little about the new book. How do you think it differs in terms of content and editorial approach from other anthologies of Australian poetry?*

pp: It’s partly different for not being an insider’s book, more an outsider’s book. Although like everyone else I have strong opinions, I’m not *parti pris* in the sense that I’m not wearing a jersey that belongs to any one camp. This of course may make it less powerful, since in my experience an anthology which is *parti pris* in terms of something to do with style, or epoch, or an attitude towards what is necessary in literature will always have a stronger individual flavour than one which is more of a microbiopsy, taking bits of everything and putting them all together. It ends up that, whatever you choose, the book *will* have a flavour of its own, but that flavour will not necessarily belong to any already recognized knowledge of what’s going on. You have to distinguish between an anthology like Tranter and Mead’s, which is wide-ranging, but does have a bias or a key signature towards modernism and an anthology which is infinitely more unfair like Robert Gray and Geoffrey Lehmann’s which is based on a rejection of modernism. All these terms are hopeless really. What is “modernism”, what is “postmodernism”?

sc: *Arguably all Australian verse is modern...*

pp: Purely in the sense of the passage of time, yes. If you use “modern” as a distinguishing adjective to describe a rejection of some kind of stylistics and an acceptance of another kind of stylistics, then no, it isn’t necessarily so. I mention somewhere that no book was more misnamed than Yeats’ *Oxford Book of Modern Verse*, because Yeats wasn’t interested in reproducing a sort of modernity; he was interested in introducing a general flavour of Yeats, I think. A lot of his choices are very personal and very bizarre. I think that’s how it is with every anthologist. Looking at it now I see there are a lot of people I should have been more careful about. I don’t mean I didn’t put in

the right poems, I mean that I undertook it in the first place not knowing what I was going to put in. I should have known from the beginning the constraints of length, and I didn't. I kept pouring more into the bucket until the bucket was overflowing, which meant that in the end it had to be slopped out. And this produces a different overall picture than if the book had been twice as long as it is, which it probably should be, despite having over a hundred poets in it. I would guess that it will get a good deal of hostility, sensible hostility rather than silly hostility even, not a question of: "Why does he know, he lives in England?", or "Why doesn't he come home?" but "Why isn't he sufficiently engaged to have a point of view?" But I do have a point of view. At one time I would have called myself a conscious reactionary, and then I suddenly I found myself in sympathy with some forms of avant-garde writing, but I've never been able to adopt an attitude completely in favour of one or other position. You can end up everybody's enemy and nobody's friend by not putting on a club jersey. I think for instance one of the strongest poets in the book is the Sydney poet J. S. Harry, whose work I was only slightly acquainted with until I came to read it for the anthology. I'd read her before, but I think a good feature of making an anthology is that when you set out to read in greater quantity your whole attitude can be changed towards the people you read as an on-the-run reviewer or whatever. Normally it's easy to misplace people, to assign individual talents to particular groupings, but when you come to read them for themselves in their entirety some figures go down in your estimation and others go up. Working over a five-year period too, as I did, also meant that the set of convictions you entertained when you began may be quite different from the set you end up with when you finish. One has these pleasant surprises. But frankly I think compiling an anthology is a good way to lead to either a nervous breakdown or incipient suicide.

sc: *Have you avoided producing a partisan anthology then? Is it a representative showcase of Australian poetry?*

pp: Yes, I think so. I often think, though not many people may agree, that I have a very strong sense of fairness. I've sometimes found it hard to be ruthless enough, exclusive enough. There are people who are not in there because, quite simply, I don't like their work, but there are other people in there because I didn't have the courage to cut some people and put other people in. And then there was the fact that I was doing it intermittently, being a professional journalist/hack writer as I am. Assembling a book—like this all had to be done in between the other things I was doing, so to some degree it was sporadic, with periods of intense enthusiasm and then periods when I wouldn't do anything about it for months. But the public has no

interest in this, all it wants the end-product, and quite rightly. You can't be like a pilot saying "I'm sorry I crashed the aeroplane but I was thinking about something different at the time." Now that it's done I stick by my choices, but yes, I admit a person with a very strong bias will produce a more highly flavoured anthology than someone producing a showcase. Though considering how much writing there is in this country (it seems to me there are more poets per capita in Australia than in any other) it's amazing how little is generally known of the overall picture, and I do think the anthologies which precede mine are in no way better than mine, except perhaps Les's big one. But then he goes from the founding days of the colony to the present day, and he's notably stronger in the nineteenth than in the twentieth century. As he approaches the present day his choices are no better than mine, and maybe worse. But he chooses brilliantly in the last century. It's amazing how much he chooses the good things, considering how much fustian there was he could have put in. Time judges everything, so things which seem exciting to you may seem fustian later on, but it does seem to me that one of the curses of Australian literature is the historical approach where you say "This poem isn't any good but it's interesting because of the time it was written." I have no truck with that. I have no problem with posterity being as unfair to me as I have always been to some of our founding writers. I would *never* make a literary decision on historical grounds. Historical precedent just doesn't come into it. As Larkin said, the present is always overestimated. If it weren't that would be stupid, because you *have* to be more interested in your own times, and that's why poets aren't historians. The very fact that this anthology runs from 1945 to the present day gives it an historical perspective, but I didn't want to emphasize that, I can't claim that authority. This book is still a product of the old amateurism which says you do it out of your own time and ability. It is not the product of an institute or a research body. Which is one of the attractive things about Australia, that it hasn't entirely lost its sense of amateurism. It hasn't become professional in the awful American research-academy way. There's a very strong sense of personal opinion and involvement: at its worst it's terrible, at its best it's free of that ghastly institutional spirit.

sc: *Australian cultural life is full of distinctions, between the city and the country, Melbourne and Sydney and so on... Did you feel any of those established tensions informing your selection?*

pp: Not particularly. I think any reader of this book would be aware of these distinctions. They're in my mind too, but not in terms of choosing. There's quite a lot about the country in it though I'm anything but a country boy. I was brought up in the city and until I went west of Sydney in 1975 when I

was visiting I don't think I'd ever seen a kangaroo except in a zoo. Australian cities have a kind of life which is not a country life. The very concept of a barbecue is instantly non-country. It's a bit like Beethoven's sixth symphony with its first movement, "The arousal of pleasant feelings upon arriving in the country", it's that sort of feeling. Pastoral is a townsman's view; country people don't have pastorals, they live them. Les Murray isn't opposed to the city because it has bitumen and high-rises; he's opposed to what he sees as the bad meaning of the word urbanity. When he thinks of the country, he thinks about it in nominal terms, a set of attitudes which he finds superior to the set of attitudes of the people who live in the city. But then he thinks the people who live in the city are Athenian urbane types despising their country cousins, whereas the people in the city, like myself, think the people in the country despise us for not being as close to reality as they are. I remember when I was at school at Toowoomba we city boys were in awe of country boys because they knew so much more than we did, about sex, animals and so on: far from seeing them as hicks we saw them as self-elected praetors who ran the country where we were a sort of slave population who toiled away down in the city mines. This is a view which would seem strange to Les. But when Les arrived in university he was immediately recognized as an intellectual. To pretend that he wasn't would be quite wrong. He has the power to despise intellectuals given him by being one. The difference between Sydney and the bush is an interesting and amusing concept, but it works two ways, it's not a simple matter. I think a lot of Australians like myself grew up resenting the dominance of the bush, as well as slightly fearing the actual bush, because so many of us were descended from non-country type people in Europe who huddled into such civilisation as the country possessed when our ancestors arrived. They were trying to reproduce the world they knew already, I think, they weren't thinking "O brave world that has such people in it". In Australia "new" means free of the bad old things we've left behind. I have a theory that no-one is really free of anything: there are no such things as new starts, new countries, there are only re-arrangements of patterns in different forms. So when I'm reading a poem that's very good I don't notice whether it's about the city or the country. What interests the mind is what counts. So when you think of allegiances of country or town, you are really only describing the fact that in Australia the country has always, contrary to what Les thinks, had the advantage over the town. As so often in polemics, Les Murray is actually fighting for the stronger side. The idea that he is fighting for the real people against the phoney sophistication of the city-folk is wrong: he's fighting for the feudal against the democratic, although he doesn't think he is.

sc: *Would you call you idea of Australia both inward- and outward-looking?*

You've included work by three of the best-known Australian expatriates, the other two apart from yourself being Clive James and Barry Humphries...

pp: I've also included one who's completely forgotten about but who's rather good called Whiting, who lived in Rome. I also include Keith Harrison, who now lives in Minnesota. And Laurie Collinson who was born in Leeds and died in London but was brought up in Brisbane. I just include poets who any good and are known to me by people who have Australian nationality or who have worked in Australia. It just so happens that Barry Humphries makes Australia a large part of his subject matter, but Clive James's three poems are not about Australia at all, and there's no reason why they should be. It's a very inclusive remit—modern Australian literature. What will govern it and make it different is the degree to which the freedom from the international style or the resemblance to an international style will be pursued. When the so-called "School of '68" was emerging, they thought the best way to be Australian was to be American, and would have claimed that the old Australians thought the best way to be Australian was to be British. The truth of the matter is the two are in exactly the same position, of being Australian without knowing it whether they were British or American. I think it was Stravinsky who said that the best way to be yourself is to try to be someone else. If you are someone else you'll prove conclusively that you are yourself, since the attempt to be someone else always fails. If you are a powerful imagination you can like write Monteverdi except it won't sound like Monteverdi because it's Stravinsky. But it will have some qualities in which will derive from the example of Monteverdi. If I were teaching literature I would always encourage a writer who came to me and said he or she was interested in Roman poetry. I'd say, follow that and maybe you'll become contemporary by yourself taking that direction. You have to choose your own star to follow. That's why I think nationalism is the most degraded star of all. Not because it's bad or wrong, but because you don't know what it is, it's so unthinking, that impulse of having to stitch yourself into the flag, of national icon-flourishing. I always think of that bit in a parody of a nineteenth-century verse play by Max Beerbohm where he has a whole range of characters like Lorenzo di Medici, Ghiberti and Michelangelo who "enter, severally, all making remarks highly characteristic of themselves." There is the sense in which Australian writing is in danger of becoming too characteristic of itself.

THREE POEMS



Peter Porter

REMEMBERING BERNBOROUGH

He was large, as big as Phar Lap, but I can't
recall his colour or whether he was gelded
or anything much beyond our Queensland pride
that we had bred a horse to make them wonder
in the Southern States. He went south, we all did—
it was Post War, the dullest decade in Australia's
history, relieved in Brisbane by the violence
of strike repression and the Vice Squad's raiding
coffee bars and bookshops. He'll never make the Pantheon
or stand in sport-lit glory at the side of his
great predecessor. But his name breaks rays
and when I read it recently I saw myself,
hardened with the gloom of twenty years, the youngest
veteran of despair, opening a lattice-gate,
book in hand, and calling to my father as I left,
"How do you think Bernborough will go today?"

SECONDARY WORLDS

He's smuggled home this book.
It's only conscience which polices him,
anyone's entitled to pornography,
and he's half a mind to write a vindication
of Arcadian sex. Still it might be hard
to dignify the stuff inside the cover:
two girls grimacing breast to breast
with words of the silliest suggestiveness imposed.
What he didn't quite expect
was how the eye becomes selective,
scarcely moral but perhaps aesthetic,
almost he'd like to joke "anthropologetic".