

AT THE MARGINS'S MARGINS



Simon Caterson

- JOHN ANDERSON, *The Forest Set Out Like the Night*. Black Pepper, \$15.95
PETER BAKOWSKI, *In the Human Night*. Hale & Iremonger, \$16.95
ERIC BEACH, *Weeping for Lost Babylon*. Angus & Robertson, \$16.95
DORIS BRETT, *In the Constellation of the Crab*. Hale & Iremonger, \$16.95
CAROLINE CADDY, *Antarctica*. Fremantle Arts Centre Press, \$16.95
LOUIS DE PAOR, *Gobán Cré is Cloch: Sentences of Earth & Stone*. Black Pepper, \$15.95
ROBERT GRAY, *Lineations*. Duffy & Snellgrove, \$16.95
ANTHONY LAWRENCE, *The Viewfinder*. University of Queensland Press, \$16.95
JOHN MATEER, *Anachronism*. Fremantle Arts Centre Press, \$16.95

Eric Beach's speaker in his poem "once I spat on a statue" recalls expectorating on a likeness of Henry Lawson. The statue, he says, returned fire. Beach himself has little time for literary banter with dead poets; many of his most brilliant poems are concerned with a father's grief at his son's suicide. Originally from New Zealand, Beach is one of the few poets in this sample who seems not to have spent a lot of time in departure lounges. Apart from their solid work-out in the usual areas of poetic pre-occupation, these collections together pose an important question for contemporary Australian poets: to travel or not to travel.

Lawson simmered in pre-post-colonial self-loathing for which the current import-export literary trade has little time. The author biographies often read like a backpacker's dream itinerary. Anthony Lawrence, for one, trains his *Viewfinder* on locations around the world. Several of the poems are set in Ireland, where Lawrence's speaker is for the most part dutifully drunk. The poet encounters Irish pub "characters", whose undying friendships last about as long as the pint over which they are forged. Lawrence's Ireland is populated largely by people who are drunk or mad, as indeed it can often seem to be to the casual visitor. Lawrence staggers through the more remote tourist magnets like Skibbereen and Inishmore with his bottle of poteen in one hand and imaginary bodhrán in the other. The way into the Irish "mystery", like the mystery of other Others (the Australian bush often seems to qualify here), is really just a presence mak-

ing up for the inability to comprehend an absence. All illiterate islanders who whisper "God bless ye" are automatically shamanised. Lawrence is much more effective at the Sydney Cricket Ground, where his "Umpire Crafter Says No" stands as a small masterpiece of cricket poetry.

The reason why people abroad tend to think there are more Australians than there are is because so many of them are at any given time out of the country. It is therefore refreshing to find a poet of Louis de Paor's calibre travelling in the opposite direction. If not geographically then linguistically Louis de Paor is as isolated an exile as perhaps a poet can be nowadays. De Paor refuses to allow the English translations of his work, or "forgeries" as he prefers to call them, anywhere near Ireland. Like his previous bilingual collection, the new poems, at least in English, at least in the English, celebrate the newfound landscape and in particular its big weather, but De Paor also begins to explore an Irish childhood. His thoughts, it seems, heliotrope towards home, though he also has some powerful things to say about indigenous Australians, with whom he as an indigenous Irishman feels an affinity. It is here that a rich seam is waiting to be worked.

"We have known these declensions", intones Ern Malley. Certainly John Mateer's tales of descent into sexual confusion involving "Corpses living in heat" have a familiar wench. The compass of Mateer's imagination extends from Perth to his native South Africa in the "mental apartheid" that seems to affect his speaker's reaction to everything: sex, the weather and recurring dreams of "emaciated torsos". Clearly some baggage is never lost.

In a cooler and saner Melbourne, Peter Bakowski pays unabashed homage to Charles Bukowski. They do indeed have more in common than the surname they almost share. In addition to his many payments of obeisance to the master, Bakowski demonstrates his orientation towards America in a verse biography of Billie Holliday and in poems that are dedicated to, and flatter in the sincerest way, Hart Crane and Frank O'Hara. Postcards from Los Angeles, Cairo and Berlin are complemented by a series of portraits of the artist as a flat-dweller. Here Bakowski evokes a bleak world of graveyard shifts in inner city factories that are "crying on the shoulders of rivers" and lovely St. Kilda bed-sits in which only the sound of "ragtime rain" is heard.

Also in Melbourne, Doris Brett's speaker, writing a verse autobiography, hears little from her hospital bed as she contemplates the removal of her cancer-riddled ovaries. Brett shows the reader that patient life is like war, with long periods of boredom punctuated by moments of terror. She demonstrates most impressively the possibilities in illness for fantasy and

also identifies its tender trap, realising that “if I just lie still, / I will be fed for ever”.

Still on Australian soil, though further afield and much more mobile, John Anderson, Robert Gray and Caroline Caddy are cartographers in verse, the first two supplying visual as well as metaphoric delineations of various parts of the landscape. For her part, in addition to her shiver-inducing poems, Caddy conveys the white vastness of Antarctica by means of a heavy reliance on infra- and inter-line spacing and the inter-leaving of satellite images of storms over the Australian Antarctic Territory, the last Australian *terra nullius*. Anderson’s line drawings help to disguise the prosaic (in both senses) nature of his search in the bush for found objects, floral and faunal. Gray’s drawings of landscapes and bodies are sparer of line than Anderson’s, yet achieve greater clarity, as do the poems, all of which have appeared before without the illustrations.

As a whole these volumes indicate that there is a lot to be said for writers staying near home. Peter Carey famously told an interviewer that the two years he spent in London trying unsuccessfully to write novels made him realise that he was better off living at home: “What I missed was that ability to recognise instantly what people are, what they are thinking and feeling which comes from your own kind”. Les Murray’s T. S. Eliot Prize, won from the family farm at Bunyah, situated, as it were, at the margin’s margin, proves, he reportedly said, that Poetry has no geographic centre. Travelling is, to be sure, as ingrained in the Australian collective consciousness as, say, emigration is in the Irish, but the Australian verse postcard may be close to exhaustion.