

# Long Paddock

**ANDREW BURKE**

Mavis Sofield, *interstitial journeys*  
Broken Hill, Broken Hill Community Foundation, 2008  
36pp, ISBN 9780975770283, RRP \$15 pbk

Barbara De Franceschi, *Strands*  
Woodford, Island Press, 2009  
100pp, ISBN 9780909771782, RRP \$20 pbk

Rae Desmond Jones, *Blow Out*  
Woodford, Island Press, 2009  
72pp, ISBN 9780909771768, RRP \$20 pbk

Les Wicks, *The Ambrosiacs*  
Woodford, Island Press, 2009  
128pp, ISBN 9780909771775, RRP \$22 pbk

I heard recently, from one of the usual unreliable sources, that there are 150 poetry books published in Australia each year. That is surprising. I see the “top names” as they lob over the desert into Perth bookshops, but the minor poets have a hard time being heard. You can write and read your poems to a group of like-minded friends, you can share them in small circulation magazines and local newspapers, but nothing quite satisfies like seeing them in a book. A real book – paper and ink, attractive cover, bio and blurb paraded for all to see. In my experience this gives the poems a true perspective not achieved in any other forum. (Traditional art is the same when hung in galleries, and perhaps major compositions have a similar feel for their creator with their first outing in front of an audience.)

Here are four books of Australian poetry. And I know at least three of the poets have shared these poems in workshops and writing groups; the fourth is doing a Lazarus act, fascinating in itself for a mature bum like me who remembers the author’s first poems and the times in which they flourished. Two of the poets were born in Broken Hill; another lives there; and Les Wicks has visited, lived, and presented workshops there. So, this is an interesting bunch for more than textual reasons.

I am not encased in an ivy tower: I read these poems with the dog barking, the bills dropping in the letterbox, grandchildren playing harmonica, and wife suggesting I do something useful around the place. If they give me joy amongst that lot they have truly achieved something valuable.

Enough preamble: first book off the shelf is *interstitial journeys* by Marvis Sofield, published by the Broken Hill Community Foundation, 2008. There are just twenty seven pages of poetry here, a slim volume, more like a chapbook. It has been a long and winding road for Sofield, from her birthplace in New York to her life in recent times in Broken Hill. Rich cultural contrasts ride in her pulse – starting out with an American father, growing up

“multi-cultural on the Illawarra coast”, then exploring Queensland and New South Wales as an adult, to finally settle in Broken Hill as a public library manager and founder of their Regional Writers Centre. This collection is dedicated to her late partner, William John Hudson, a Gamileroi man. Rich cultural streams run beneath these sparse poems, giving some of these descriptions added subterranean force. This is a first collection and, as such, indicates themes and passions which will reverberate through later works. Marvis pinpoints this in her dedication: “There are things about love and land that (dis)connect us... forever.” I would like to see her use these varying tones and dictions from her multi-cultural relationships more in her poems to give them a broader sympathy and deeper sonic variety.

Her gallery of characters is entertaining. Here’s a taste of one such character, even if a man born of an old Polaroid snap:

laconic iconic  
a larakin (sic) digger from  
either of the last  
world wars  
now somehow  
sanitised romanticized  
not in the turgid reds  
of blood and dust  
but black and white  
all the shades of grey between  
he smiles  
kill still hangs from belt  
his skills put to getting tucker  
not fratricide  
he could easily step  
out of time out of frame  
and with an antipodean drawl  
invite us to supper

(“rabbit man: an old uncle in Polaroid”)

Some poems have their richness at the end, at a point which would have been great as a beginning. Examples speak volumes:

to be born again  
an anal phoenix  
to do it all  
again and again  
again  
(“Obsessions”)

In this poem, obsessive compulsive disorder is expressed mildly in the words which run before this witty closing. The obsessiveness is not expressed by the left hand margin short lined style; other than the wonderful word *oozlum*, the diction is plain and the syntax ordinary. It is not a fully realized draft.

On the facing page is “An expatriate choice”, a poem about thongs (in the Australian use of the word, not the British). Again the ending lifts the poem out of the ordinary and would

be a good place to start:

she remembers  
in the jungles of her youth  
patriots in Vietnam used tractor tires  
to fashion footwear

she prefers their black tread  
to their tabled  
(l)imitations

Now I look at my shelves and see my first slim volume (seven-eighths rubbish) and praise Marvis Sofield for getting this volume out. It is a first step and a major one towards a lively publishing career. She has the themes and the passion to do it. All I suggest is less workshopping and more passion and energy in the words on the page.

*Strands*, by Barbara De Franceschi, is this poet's second collection. It expands upon themes hinted at in her first, *Lavender Blood* (Seaview Press, 2004). De Franceschi was born in Broken Hill and lives there to this day, working on many committees and such in the area.

This collection is packed with poems that respond to a rich daily life with imagination and vigorous language. It is presented in four sections: "Aligned", "In the Moment", "Certain Species", and "Wanderings".

In her first poem, De Franceschi questions the juxtaposition of her knowledge of quotidian life in "the arid zone" (her phrase) with the innate European cultural knowledge she inherited.

I am tinder for billy tea  
the grass that feeds merino sheep  
how then does thick moss on fallen stone  
bring a prickling to my skin  
a row of bushes divide my brain  
into thorny hedgerows  
and every spring  
I remember fifty shades of green

("Origins")

A confidence rides here in these pages, enough to allow subject to dictate style. An unpunctuated uncapitalised "Fireflies" sits comfortably on the facing page to the more formerly presented "Morning Radio". In "Fireflies", a very evocative verse caught my eye and my ear:

fingers tap  
invisible notes  
until the tune  
rotates into  
a summer melon  
shape

Invisible notes hold these narratives and thoughts together, like the majestic notes of

Beethoven's silent piano.

I find it difficult to limit myself in the number of poems I want to talk about, so I shall rush over many I value and give you a later verse from "In the Moment" to ponder:

Every image has its limits  
where sin and mutiny meet the flesh  
doppelganger stares from inside a mirror  
to reveal / I live outside myself.

Mentioning sin prompts a focus on her wit: in "Floral Confessional", De Franceschi writes:

As a child I confessed to hollyhocks  
rather than those wire grills ...  
Open faces on tall elegant stems  
swayed with understanding.

...

I withheld fear and hellfire  
(the black peatmoss of religion)  
from their root-base  
sang made-up hymns  
deserted martyrdom when new shoots  
pushed through horse poo in the spring.

A very individual mix: confessional poetry with a gentle wit.

In "I will begin with a sin", De Franceschi's wit shines again:

in the puritan now after  
we preach to our children  
drag them screaming  
away from the Easter Bunny  
shut the door on the Tooth Fairy  
shatter the Santa Claus myth  
while we wait with a towel  
for Harold Halt  
to return from his swim

In the section titled "Certain Species", a variety of oddbods – all ages, genders and sizes – not only entertain us, her readers, but turn us to look at those around us and inwardly to ourselves. This is my favourite part of the collection where Barbara's generosity of spirit delights in the human frailties and eccentricities of her fellow citizens. Never heavy handed enough to preach a moral, these poems do lift us out of ourselves to view others with a kind eye:

Sunday afternoon band concert ropes him in.  
Feet strike a tempo / body rocks.  
Beneath brows tossed every which way  
flashes of malachite detain my curiosity.  
I scout his face –  
a national park sprouting growth over rough terrain.  
He accepts the scrutiny.

Overcoat doused with a thousand scarecrow seasons  
hangs from lopsided shoulders to below the knees.  
Suddenly he pirouettes. Black cloth is out there  
circling above green grass. Arms rise and fall  
hands form intricate parades.  
Oblivious to the staring crowd he spins  
in a sigh-fetching ballet.  
Poise and nobility explore every turn.

(“Culture in the Park”)

No need to rush to the dictionary, these poems are written in every day language used in a refreshing, bright and imaginative – and accurate, importantly – way.

I could go on praising *Strands*, but I think you get the idea. To finish, I will echo Michael Sharkey’s words: Barbara De Franceschi’s poems deserve to be better known.

Reading Rae Desmond Jones’s *Blow Out* before breakfast, I raise my head up as my wife walks in the study, and say: *This guy’s really goo – and I’m glad to see a sense of humour return to poetry.* My wife says, *You should write that down, that’s a review in itself.* That’s it in a nutshell. Rae Desmond Jones has awoken from his civic slumber and produced a grand collection of poems that speak and sweat, sing and glance at humanity around him. Jones responds to people with a kind and non-judgmental eye, and, between drinking coffee and pondering on the Big Questions of Birth, Death and the Space In Between, he writes poems that say so. Many people ponder but few write it down so wittily.

So there will always be some foreign frontal lobe  
That will remain forever you

(“It feels good when someone hates you”)

a black & chrome mobile phone as  
sleek as a mortician’s van.

(“Shot”)

Despite that cute blue uniform & a good set of lungs,  
Earth is feeling pretty constipated.

(“Blow Out”)

When he was nine the Titanic  
Plunged into the North Atlantic as the radio  
Bleeped out save our souls  
But God didn’t put on his headset

(“My Father’s first Christmas”)

I could go on, but Jones sums himself up nicely, if self-deprecatingly, in “Singing Crazy”:

... I guess I’m the same, reaching for the stars  
With one arm while shoveling from the slop bucket  
With the other.

His “slop bucket” is displaying open emotion, but not in an excessive confessional way: simply through his use of image and diction, his empathetic portraits of others, often in an implied narrative with just enough ellipsis to intrigue and kick-start the receiver’s imagination. There are many styles on view here, in this contemporary gallery of poetics, with old influences fully absorbed, from Imagism to Narrative poetry to prose poems, even the occasional touch of satiric surrealism. And yet it is all absolutely Rae Desmond Jones – a subtle one-man band, if such a thing could be possible: lyricist, satirist, even rhythm guitar (the “sound” of each poem happily married to its theme). So I am applauding loudly simply because it is the contemporary poetry I value executed effortlessly. As a practitioner myself, I wonder how much effort went into that effortlessness? Never mind: we benefit as readers.

There are political poems here, but they are not myopic. There are personal poems here, but they are not self-pitying or confessional. There are many narrative poems here about the skinny guy, a middle aged blonde, Denis who died, two girls in the coffee lounge, the naked saint, four small girls who dance, dead poets, the homophobic lady and the litter picker-upper and the two mincing boys... The list goes on, but luckily Rae doesn’t; he keeps it short, the majority of these poems a page in length. There’s a poem about his father’s life with historic moments to pinpoint the years, quite appropriate as Rae teaches history. (He forgets to mention that, like De Franceschi, Jones was born in Broken Hill.) I would love to go on quoting poems all day, but you should really do yourself a favour and buy this book. I guarantee the poems in *Blow Out* will stimulate your mind and imagination for reading after reading. Don’t wait: this book will sell out quickly...

Les Wicks is a peripatetic poet, a workshop coordinator with a band of happy devotees behind him (and, I dare say, in front of him). He has published seven collections before *The Ambrosiacs*, and the opening pages here proudly state “Les Wicks has toured widely and seen publication across 11 countries in 7 languages”. I have met him and seen him in action: he is a clear and firm workshop leader who inspires and affirms as much as he criticizes. But I wonder if he has a mentor? I ask this because a number of these poems seem forced and hurried, as if he was busy getting the poem finished and moving on to the next poem or the next workshop without letting the poem rest between drafts and seeing it with an objective eye&ear. Perhaps this choppy uneven-paced style is reflective of its subject; perhaps he says so in this quote:

A bungling unity here:  
narration, refuse and the wild.

(“Cape Banks”)

He certainly narrates the implied and fragmented stories of places he is visiting, read from landscapes and detritus of lives around him. He does celebrate the “wild” of environments, as in “Roadstone”:

A wallaby flops back into cover...  
surprised, distracted farce.  
Two Tasmanian devils rumble under scrub,  
ferns flung aside in rage.  
The patina of green  
beneath a wind-whisked lake.  
Brown trout immobile,

pregnant opacity.  
Deep tincture of winter.  
Trees shiver in lichen rags.

“Poems begin in delight and end in wisdom,” Robert Frost once wrote. In “Three Headlands”, Wicks starts in bravado-delight:

I can do pretty –  
slickbacked pine above a tablecloth sea.  
Clarity stretching east,  
acclamations of purple-wrapped seagrass.  
My pen says grace before the lunch.

And wisdom? Six various-sized verses later, he is lead to write:

I bury my friends in sand.  
Three are gone  
and my life is a beach.  
Grit under the molecules, torn heart,  
a lethal idea-bubble in the brain – we can be killed off  
with a constantly varied repertoire.

Many of his more dogmatic statements irritate me, but then nobody can tell me anything: I just don't like that tone in a poem (unless it is a character in a dramatic monologue). And some frankly confuse me:

The drug of enough  
is like a diet of bracken.

...

One gets the drug of enough  
from any streetcorner should  
be more habit-forming than it is.

Too much is harder to obtain  
 (“Wodi Wodi”)

These are just four of a hundred and fifty plus Australian poetry books for 2009. I know my table is cluttered with well-presented desktop published anthologies of Western Australian poets, bandying together to get their voices heard. I have books here from Edith Cowan University and Sunline Press which may not make a ripple over the desert, so any collection published by a long time publisher like Island Press is absolutely worth your attention. My pick of this crop is Rae Desmond Jones's *Blow Out*, but your tastes may run toward another. Sofield's industrious effort in being published by Broken Hill Community Foundation is to be loudly applauded as a good example of regional involvement displaying a richness of commitment. May other community bodies follow this delightful example.