

## *Interview*

**Laurie Duggan** interviewed by **Fiona Scotney**

at the Fryer Library, University of Queensland, 17 December 2010

*You have been described as a “foremost” and “major” Australian poet, and Martin Duwell has described your work as “equally profound and entertaining”. How would you describe your poetry and your position as an Australian poet?*

Well, I think it is nice for anyone to be called “profound and entertaining”. I know there would probably be some people who would balk at the “entertaining” thing, but I wouldn’t. Because I’ve never wanted to make (deliberately try and make) my stuff easier, but on the other hand I’ve never tried to make it difficult. Some of it, I imagine, would be difficult, but if people enjoy it, great. As for my position as an Australian poet, I’ve always felt that that’s where I come from, but like a lot of people that I hung about with in the late 60s and early 70s, I felt alienated from what was then seen as Australian literature and I think the feeling, between those poets who saw themselves as representatives of Australian literature and those poets I was grouped with, was mutual. A lot of the outlets for poetry at that time weren’t very interested in the sort of work that we were doing, so we more or less had to set up our own outlets or do things, like take over the Poetry Society as Bob Adamson did. I always thought it strange when people that didn’t like the sort of poetry that people around me were writing and kept saying how American it was.

On one level I thought it was strange because the same people wouldn’t have been at all perturbed if our writing was very English. A lot of those people probably felt the opposite way about the two countries; they would have felt pro-Australian republic, severing the ties with Britain, and would have agreed a lot with American political goings-on at the time. So it was a very odd, purely literary thing where to be American (rather than English) was seen to be un-Australian. I didn’t feel that way; even though a lot of my main influences were American poets I didn’t feel that my poetry was particularly American. And the one thing

that bought that home was in 1987, when I went on a reading tour in the US that Lyn Tranter organised. Helen Garner was on the tour as well, and we were talking about it together and we both said, you know that there are things that you think, that you know you have to explain to an American audience, but the scariest bits are the things that you don't know that you have to explain to the American audience, things where you just think "oh well, this is the way people think and the way people operate", and they don't get it and you don't know that they don't get it and you've got no way of knowing that they don't get it unless they say "what was that about?". It really brought home the way the writing was really distinct, it wasn't just American writing – it may have been influenced by American writing – but I used to think of all those American poets like Ashbery who were hugely influenced by French writing and it was thought all for the better as far as they were concerned, getting influences from anywhere and everywhere was good rather than bad. Also I guess I felt since then that there are always big problems with constructing things like a national canon.

*Could we talk for a moment about your relationship to the "Generation of '68"? The term is, as any broad label tends to be, imprecise and rather contentious, but it endures; you have said previously that you see yourself more as a Generation of '71 than '68 because that was the year you really started to get writing. Did you feel that there was a shared connection between yourself and the poets Tranter included within The New Australian Poetry anthology?*

The Tranter anthology took its title from *The New American Poetry*. I think there are certain parallels there. I mean *The New American Poetry* has a lot of people in it that had nothing to do with each other. But the one thing that they had in common is that they were all writing poetries that Donald Allen saw as being new, poetries that weren't taking off from Cleanth Brooks and all of that stuff. It wasn't the Lowell side of things, it wasn't the people who had just taken on board the academic side of Eliot and not taken on board Pound or any of those other people like Williams. So it was really a kind of, well it was a positive thing, but it was a kind of negative definition; it's all of these poetries and not those. I think that is all you can really say about the Australian anthology too. I mean there are people in that anthology that I still haven't met. In the library here [Fryer Library, University of Queensland], there is a bit I wrote in a diary – Tranter had shown us the introduction he wrote, and John Forbes and I were discussing it between ourselves and we both found it really... we thought: "oh there is

going to be trouble”. Because John had said a few general historical things that were fair enough, but then he’d made some connections in it that made it, I just thought, I know that the reviewers that don’t like this are going to see us as being some sort of gang – a poetry gang – which is precisely what happened.

*It was read as a manifesto in a way wasn't it?*

Yeah, it was read as though we’d all signed it, which we hadn’t. In fact the funny thing about it was that John gave it to us to look at and we came back with these criticisms of it and he said “Oh, it’s already gone to press.” So he had waited until then... There were a whole lot of things which I took issue with and have taken issue with since; the details about the little magazines and everything, that’s fine, but when he gets into the sex and drugs and rock and roll stuff, it’s a bit weird because it’s – I don’t know, this is probably a bit esoteric – but I think that even if you are just talking about drugs, people did different things with drugs. I mean, Tranter is talking about it as though drugs took the role that they would have in Romantic poetry where they were seen as being sources of inspiration and creative power and all of that sort of thing, but for the people I hung out with, drugs served no such purpose whatsoever; they were purely recreational.

I mean with John Forbes, he is a good example. I mean the guy eventually died as a result of drug use. John really only took drugs because he was a really speedy guy and it was something to occupy the time when he wasn’t writing poetry, rather than something that would help him write poems. On the other hand you got people like Dransfield who made a big thing about drugs and I thought at the time that that was one of the things that the older poets that liked Dransfield had liked about his work. I mean it was almost a vicarious thing, because here is this young guy that – I think I made a comment once about a young guy spouting sex and drugs and Gustav Mahler – they wouldn’t have done it themselves but they really liked the idea that there was a young poet doing it. Whereas people like me and John Forbes, Alan Wearne and John Scott, would’ve just thought it’s got nothing to do with it really. But Tranter plugged into that because I think he sort of saw the work as being - I don’t know whether he saw it as a selling point or what - but it was glamorous.

*Your writing style has been described in diverse ways, but the main stylistic element that reviewers return to is your use of bricolage, or the collage effect created by your use of*

*quotations and found poems. I read that Kurt Schwitters was an earlier influence, but how else did you evolve and synthesise this eclectic approach to writing poetry?*

Right back from the Monash period, we were interested in things like that. “East”, the first poem in the first book, is a collage. There are probably a number of other sources too. I remember reading some of Williams’ work that made use of other things like signage, some fiction too; John Dos Passos’ sequence of novels *USA* has got a lot of collage in it, things like newsreels, the use of capital letters and all of that sort of stuff. Then there were the Ern Malley poems. I actually read them before I left high school. I found them in the local public library and thought, “Wow, this is pretty amazing”. And I think – I have thought about it since – that what the Ern Malley poems gave to me was the thought... I mean I don’t know how I would have felt if I’d come to the Ern Malley things thinking that this was a real poet who’d written this stuff, but I came to it right from the beginning knowing that the poems were fakes and that they had been written by a couple of guys with ulterior motives. I wrote somewhere about it later that – and I think I’d still stand by this – that I was thinking if it were possible for other people to invent a poet, then it would be possible for you to invent yourself as a poet, and I think that that was an important thing for a young writer, because of what it got me away from – it took a while – was that I idea that I had to write about being lonely and walking down the street, and seeing somebody who I would like to be my girlfriend and all of that sort of stuff. I didn’t have to do that anymore, and of course if you’re that age, in your teens, that’s all you’ve got to write about. I mean, that’s what’s around you, that’s what you’re thinking about and so that’s what you do – that’s what so many people do when they start writing poems. So it was really a step away from this and into the things that you do if you continue to be a poet.

The “I do this, I do that” thing doesn’t necessarily mean that you are going to write something that is going to be a psychological document at all. It’s a completely different approach from say Lowell in his *History* sonnets. If I mention people’s names in poems it is because they happen to be there, not because there is some incredible significance about them being there. But to relate that back to collage, I suppose these things just parallel each other; they’re just two things that are going on when I am writing. I like the idea of plonking something here and something there next to it and the result is something else. It always seemed an interesting thing to do and I guess also it was a part of contemporary experience. I suppose you could come at it from a Media Studies/Cultural Studies approach and say well,

you know, this is the way we live in an age that's got television and all of these sorts of things going on simultaneously. Our lives are a kind of collage; they're not some sort of measured narrative.

*The use of quotations from sources as varied as graffiti on walls in Berlin, history websites and mass media form part of your latest book published in 2009, Crab & Winkle: East Kent & Elsewhere, 2006-2007. The jacket of the book describes it as a journal of your first year in England; it is a wondrously eclectic and experimental book, as well as being reflective, questioning and descriptive, perhaps akin to some of your earlier books. Over the years, how did you see that your poetry changed?*

I think I have often rotated around some things, moving away and then coming back at a later point. There are times when I'm writing in one sort of mode and feel that things are getting a bit stale, [like] I just need to do something else and I've done something at those points, like maybe translation or maybe work like *The Ash Range* – a documentary poem, something a bit different. Looking back now I can see that there are three books that have some structural similarities: *Under the Weather* and then *Memorials* and then *Crab and Winkle* because each of those three books is basically a long poem – they're basically journals. If they've got structural differences, they're slight ones. With *Memorials* I set out initially to write four poems, or four sections, working on them for a period of a month, once every three months. It's not quite seasonal, especially because the third and fourth ones are actually set in the Northern Hemisphere, which blows the seasonal thing completely. But then I wrote a little bit for the beginning as a sort of introduction and then, some six months later, I wrote another long piece that became the final section. So there was a kind of fairly crude structure, but it was basically journal form.

The thing I liked about the long Williams poems, the long inclusive ones, was that you could have a really loose structure and every now and then something would just come together sharply, and it just seemed to me that that was a good way to work. Because if you try and write things that are just little diamond-like objects all the time, sometimes they lose their energy, they're like "oh well, here's another one", sort of thing. It's good to be able to have these things that just leap up at you. Writing constantly means that you can cut things down. When I was writing *Under the Weather*, which was the first book like that – I thought when I started writing it "oh well, this is where the journal and the poem come together" and

I didn't think there would be any distinction between the two. But I gradually became aware that it is not just like a journal; there were things that I would put in a journal that I wouldn't have put in *Under the Weather*. Not because they were personal or embarrassing or anything like that, but just because they simply didn't fit what I thought I was doing. So I was already making some aesthetic decisions and I think that I just, over those three books: *Under the Weather*, *Memorials*, *Crab and Winkle*, I just gradually got better at it through practice. I mean I like *Memorials* a lot, but *Under the Weather* has got its problems and I'll see what I can do about those sometime.

With *Crab and Winkle* there is just the monthly thing. I started writing it the month I arrived in England. I'd planned to do it beforehand to ensure that I kept writing after moving, rather than just sitting around wasting time. I thought, okay I am going to do a calendar poem and what happens in it happens in it, and there were a couple of little excursions out of England. There is one short bit in Marrakesh and a bit in Berlin, but it is mainly local stuff. So you could say that there is some continuity between those three books. Other books that I have done have been more like collections of individual poems. Things like *The Great Divide* and *Blue Notes* and a couple of other books are just collections of discrete things. But within those there have been some sequences that have kept going, some of those short things that I have written called "Dogs". That was something I started to do in the very late 70s, writing these very short things, and that also fed into my translations of the *Martial* poems because some of the shorter things I wrote – some of them were like epigrams, some weren't, some were more like haiku.

The other series that started in *The Great Divide* were the *Blue Hills* poems which are going to be published in their entirety sometime next year [2011] by Punter and Wattman. There are seventy-five of these [and] most of them have appeared in books already; there's probably only about ten or twelve that have not appeared anywhere. I've recently started writing a series in Britain which is almost like an English equivalent of *Blue Hills*. The *Blue Hills* poems incorporate lots of things like items of art history and memories of other times and places, but they are all more or less written in Australia, so once I left, I thought well okay I am not going to keep writing *Blue Hills* poems, but if I write poems in that mode I need to give them another title. The new ones are called *Allotments*; I had to give them an English title and I couldn't give them – there is an English radio series called "The Archers", but it just doesn't have the same resonance.

*Martin Duwell has described you as “always ... especially good at recording those moments when the world seems miraculously to reveal itself without anybody's assistance.” This may be due to the elegance created by the economy of your language, but how difficult is it to write something that is both mundane and miraculous?*

I keep notebooks all the time, and there's an enormous amount of material in the notebooks that doesn't get to be a poem. You can go through sections of the notebooks and read page after page after page of stuff and just think that there is nothing in it whatsoever. But it is only because I do it that I can get the other things. A lot of the notebooks are in the Fryer Library and I just deposited another eight of them. I don't know how long it will take them to catalogue, but they go right up to about a year ago.

*How hard is it to part with those?*

When I was living in Brisbane I reached a certain point where I was carrying all these things around with me and it was just a matter of, I thought I had to make a decision about this, because I had lots of letters from people, lots and lots of things and I thought – what am I going to do with it all? Am I going to destroy it? Am I going to carry it around with me? Or am I going to give it to an institution? And I didn't want to destroy it. In the cases of things like the letters, I did filter out some that were not really particularly literary, but the rest of it I thought well, if I put it in the library I can put conditions on it, and with things like letters, I would want to be responsible to the person that wrote the letters, that they should have some say in whether things get looked at. But with other stuff it was really up to me to make some sort of decision and once I'd done that it was kind of a relief because I'd been carrying it all around with me for years. I wait until I'm sure I've completely finished with things in the notebooks. Things that I want to hang onto I type up on screen. So I don't lose anything. If I was really desperate I could get somebody at Fryer to copy something for me, but that hasn't happened.

*Nietzsche once argued that “Our writing equipment takes part in the forming of our thoughts.” I think this was actually just after he bought his first typewriter, which was unsuccessful because it broke during transport.*

So did Nietzsche.

*Yes. Your archived manuscripts contain drafts on foolscap in pen, typewritten pages, pages printed from electronic typewriters and from computers. How do you prefer to write now? Do materials influence your thoughts and the way you write?*

There's the famous Charles Olson comment about the typewriter changing the way that poems were written. I know some writers are superstitious about the way they write. There are people who swear by writing things with a pen on paper and getting that sorted out first before, you know, printing it up. There are people who only write on screen. I don't have phobias about any of these things. If the technology is there I am happy to use it and I find it useful. I certainly find the editing functions of the screen useful. *The Ash Range* was written just with a typewriter and literal cut and paste. If you were doing anything big then and you wanted to change something, you had to completely retype it. I know there are a lot of people who'll say that meant that people paid a lot more attention to writing than sometimes they do [now] on computers. But I think that it's down to the person, rather than the technology. I mean of course computers can make you really lazy, but they don't have to make you lazy. I still find, I suppose just being the age that I am, I tend to want to print things out to look at them, rather than initially correct them on screen. I need to see them on a piece of paper and then what seems not very good seems even less good. But I think that that is just a product of my age and my experience rather than anything profound. I do keep notebooks all the time, which are of course handwritten. I can't imagine keeping notebooks on a little portable gadget. But I love my computer, you know, and I like it to be fast and have all the latest available applications. It's useful, but if something else came along to write on, I'd probably try that. There have been some things that I have written directly on a typewriter and edited from there and there have been things written directly to screen and edited from there.

*You're visiting Australia at the moment, but you're currently residing in England, can you describe how you have found the expatriate experience?*

I think I was prepared for it to some extent, I mean I am there because my partner Rosemary is a Law Professor and she has got a job there. But she and I have both been to England quite a few times in the past and once in 1992 we were in Manchester for three months, which



comes into the *Memorials* poems, there's a Manchester section in that. So we knew what we were up for, we knew that it was going to be a rotten climate in many respects, but that there are other compensating factors. But of course moving is a big thing. We live in a market town, Faversham, and well it's pretty weird because... both of us have lived in inner suburbs of large cities for most of our lives and suddenly here we are in a town, a market town. But it is a big enough place and there's a difference between towns in England and towns here anyway, partly to do with the fact that they are closer together over there. We're only an hour and ten minutes out of London. I go into London for poetry readings probably about three times a month, which is amazing. When I was in Brisbane I probably would have gone to one poetry reading every six months, and even when I was in Melbourne and Sydney one a month...[and] I'd think I was going to an awful lot of readings.

One of the significant differences too is the fact that we are in the web age, that people who were expatriates in the 1950s and early 1960s, for them it was a real break [to go to the UK]. They had to go there by ship, it was a long voyage and they were pretty much, apart from letters, *incommunicado*. Before I left Australia, most of my friends were spread out all over the place anyway, in Adelaide, Sydney and Melbourne and elsewhere, so I was already emailing backwards and forwards, which I still do. I am still just as close to them as I was when I was living in Brisbane.

*And you've got your blog* [<http://graveneymarsh.blogspot.com/>].

And I've got the blog. I get feedback from all over from that. The blog is just another form, another thing to do. It's also a kind of collage form because I can use photographs and other images. I don't see myself as being a great artist or great photographer, but I like taking photographs and it's a good way of making use of some of them.

Because of all of those things, it's really not the same as the "expatriate" life once was. Of course there are some differences and you do tend to feel a little bit remote from what's going on in Australia, every now and then there will be some major things happening, like the last federal election where you will try and find out as much as you can about things as they are happening and various other news events will grab your attention, but the day to day occurrences are no longer there unless people mention them to you in correspondence.

*And finally, what does the immediate future hold for Laurie Duggan?*

Well, I would love to see the *Blue Hills* book come out, but I don't know as yet about this. Light Trap Press will be bringing out a limited edition book called *Leaving Here* that will have art-work by Angela Gardner. I've got another book sitting around but at the moment I am not sure whether or not to divide it up into small things or to keep everything and put it in a big book. I've also started on something completely separate, [as mentioned above] the *Allotments*.