

Long Paddock

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Review of *Thirty Australian Poets*, ed. Felicity Plunkett, University of Queensland Press

Thirty Australian Poets, edited by Felicity Plunkett, collects major names of our country's contemporary poetry, born after 1968. This date is of significance in general terms as the apogee of radical Sixties politics and social mobilisation, and in particular the beginning of Australia's experimental and postmodern poetic renaissance of the Twentieth Century. 1968 was a tumultuous time in Australian poetry. There is an immense divide between those poets collected in anthologies like *12 Poets – 1950-1970* and *New Impulses in Australian Poetry*, and those young poets of the time building alternatives to the establishment, in the form of handmade magazines, journals, and underground readings, somewhat represented by Thomas Shapcott's *Australian Poetry Now*. This loaded date has shareholders of different factions and context across Australia, even now. However, the '68 geist was one whose zeit was already written internationally, and as such was a profound paradigm shift at all levels of cultural and political being in Australian poetry. 1968 was the beginning of John Tranter's 'Transit' and Charles Buckmaster's 'The Great Auk' magazines – 'Auk' featuring many of the La Mama poets like Kris Hemensley – and a plethora of other handmade publications. That these magazines aspired to something other than a national canon is obvious, issue 11 of 'The Great Auk', for example, is even subtitled "NEW REACTIONS AGAINST AUSTRALIAN POETRY".

In Martin Duwell's thorough review of Felicity Plunkett's *Thirty Australian Poets*, he compares the Rodney Hall and Thomas Shapcott edited *New Impulses in Australian Poetry* of 1968 with *Australian Poetry Now*, edited by Thomas Shapcott alone, in 1970. Duwell finds a closeness in curatorship between *New Impulses* and *Thirty Australian Poets*. *Australian Poetry Now*, in comparison with *New Impulses* "very strong sense of a generation", had the aim, writes Patricia Dobrez in *Michael Dransfield Lives*, "to present

contemporaneity without apology.”¹ Such ambition regarding the contentiousness of the contemporary would lead the defining poets of ‘68 to engage with lively and international exigencies of the new and the unknown in art. Especially lively were links made to British and American poetic movements; networks represented, and continued, in part, by the online magazine *Jacket* by the end of the Twentieth Century. Can we see such a drive in this new anthology edited by Felicity Plunkett? David McCooley writes in his introduction that the collection “puts the designation ‘Australian’ under numerous creative tensions” – through its cosmopolitan “scope”. But, is the conception of poetry here put under “numerous creative tensions”? How representative is this collection of the contemporary conversations our poetry is having, and with whom we converse?

In Plunkett’s preface and McCooley’s introductory exegesis, this hermeneutic backdrop is presented inconclusively, though with “variety” and “revitalisation” being rightly preferred terms regarding the rich array of poets within the anthology. However, though being an avid reader of a number of the poets in this collection, for me there is a surprising persistence of insularity and quietude that the collection’s exceptions struggle to surface from. This is a strangely mediocre compilation of poems by poets we know are interesting. Here we are speaking about a book that collects in one volume Samuel Wagan Watson, Maria Takolander, Emma Jones, Petra White, Sarah Holland-Batt, Elizabeth Campbell, Cameron Lowe, Louis Armand, Ali Alizadeh, Kate Fagan, John Mateer, Claire Potter and others, poets of different birthplaces, contexts and poetics, and yet the sensorium in which we are immersed and the tempo at which we amble is somewhat, and somehow, homogeneous. How can this be? Though not to the degree of esurience that anthology *Australian Poetry since 1788* has of the oeuvres of those it anthologises, one problem here is of proper representation of the poets anthologised, and what seems to be preferential treatment to a handful of modes and subject matters from poets far more various than presented within. This collection is a globetrotting one, and well represented by expats, but immigrant poets and cosmopolitanism as such, I contend, are poorly represented here. Australians have always made good backpackers, the same cannot be said for postcolonial politics.

¹ Patricia Dobrez, *Michael Dransfield Lives: a sixties biography*, Carlton South: Melbourne University Press, 1999, p. 9.

However, these are enormously varied writers with sometimes numerous methodologies or quite aberrant and singular features as part of their poetics. Not only are these poets contemporary, but many too are contemporary “without apology”. There is something inconsistent in this collection with the oeuvres of the poets it collects, then. Take for example Justin Clemens’ four poems. I very much admire Clemens’ work, and ‘Trying to buy that what they have not got’ is in the mode of his recent Vagabond chapbook *me n me trumpet*, displaying his penchant for baroque and flamboyant language to wonderful excess. ‘Balladia Libidinalia’ is that mad kind of poem Clemens writes where the archaisms and eloquence make the poem all the more tactile and caustic. However, ‘Whirl’ is drawn from *Villain*, a book that plays with a number of verse forms, in which this highly florid sonnet does not appear so conventionally mellifluous, and ‘Morning’ has good rhymes but has its refrain of “grey bird” and “grey cat” ruined in retrospect by the unnecessary profusion of garden poems in the rest of the volume. Claire Potter, also an excellent poet, appears here strangely imprecise in ‘A While’ – perhaps chosen for its punchy ending – and uneventful in ‘Eurydice’s Cellar’. ‘Genet Lesson’, ‘Forget Krakow’ or numerous others from *Swallow* would have been my first choices for this anthology.

I can’t help but think it’s not these poets’ fault they sometimes sit blandly or awkwardly, even though it is they who attached their names to these poems. This leads me to wonder how many poems by each poet were sifted through before the four or five poem slots most poets are given here were chosen. Lisa Gorton and Samuel Wagan Watson’s poems have been keenly and representatively chosen, but Louis Armand, with ‘Utzon’ having already appeared in the purportedly generationally representational *Calyx* anthology? And what of Michael Brennan’s ones, which strangely for him seem to blend into one another?

Efforts have been made to include vastly different styles, approaches, philosophies and politics in play in our poetry, and yet somehow appears an irrefutable ubiquity of poems on the subject of being alone in a garden; birds, often sparrows, in flight (and often in descent); the serpentine geometrical, living, and conceptual; and slow or restricted movement. These are subjects perhaps made glorious by Coleridge or Shelley, staged with fear and delicacy by Jennifer Maiden and Michael Dransfield, or uncanny by John Mateer’s ‘Ode’ or Jaya Savige’s ‘Summer Fig’ in this collection (poems set in or

about gardens). However, the assumption appears to be in many of the other poems on these subjects in the collection, if I may follow the equalised trajectory offered in this anthology of unequal poets, that these are subjects interminably poetic, requiring little preamble, setting, or interrogation. There are some unsettlingly quiet, uncannily tranquil poems though that cut through the din beside Mateer or Savige; Cameron Lowe's 'Requested' for example: "breathe, patiently, into the body, / the hot stone. Sleep in it." Or, Petra White's intentional aberrancy in the repetition of grey in 'Magnolia Tree', a poem of psychic turmoil: "a world like a pill of grey, / dissolving in a glass of grey." These poems remind us of intrigue in subjects that are otherwise overrepresented in a volume of poems anthologising poets from either ends of the continent, of vastly different poetic frontiers and literary drives.

The best poems of this collection are dazzling, mind you, where language is at once knife and knife fight, song and underworld, "canticle" and "clay", and not just agent for description. Mateer's 'The Long Man of Wilmington' is as good as his 'Ode':

[...] Whale-rocks

sank under the exhaling tide of gusty shrubs,
a ghost dolphin was released on dark sparkling
that's neither chewy blood nor Memory's black.

(For me there remains a human-sized space.)

Another startling, gothic-tinged poem is 'Bone Yard, South Brisbane' by Samuel Wagan Watson: "a prehistoric beast / ribcage reaching for the moonlight / or an arthritic fist / frozen in protest". Kate Fagan dances a number of steps at once, at once mesmerising by a gesture of love in a cut-up, and then interring her most surprising visions in a belied tranquillity of quiet verse in 'Letter IV: On Reality': "our heels mining canticles from clay. Look, you said, this is real. / The boats decay on their painters / and no one lives to sail them." Ali Alizadeh's 'Rumi' provides one of the most indelible images of the collection: "The raiders had given up / on me. I was alone // with the moon and the

sand-dunes. / I looked down at my feet. // They were skinned. I looked at my trace: red footprints // dark on the glowing plain.” David Prater’s ‘Oz’ is a wonderfully insouciant though weirdly sweet poem of subjects of contemporary Australian newsworthiness. ‘The Meaning Plain: 40 Aerial Shots’ by Nick Reimer is rightly considered in Gig Ryan’s review in *The Age of Thirty Australian Poets* to be the funniest in the volume; it’s also one of the few unserious. ‘The Pain Switch’ along with ‘Summer Fig’ remind us of Jaya Savige’s mettle, his ease with syntactic daring as well as elegy. Petra White’s ‘Karri Forest’ and ‘Notes for the Time Being’ are some of the most psychically stratified, and welcome in a collection replete with uninterrogated first-person narrations. The nudity of Maria Takolander’s verse too surprises in *Thirty*, the willingness to speak of birth and the monstrous in the same breath is welcome courage here. Interestingly, though based in Prague, Louis Armand’s imagination is still very much based in Australia, finely represented by ‘Patrick White as a Headland’ and ‘Something Like the Weather’. The latter, as proposed in its dedication “(to John Forbes, et al.)”, gads through a Sydney montage of urban velocity, itinerants, “street hustlers bidding dreams of wordless fornication”, figures streaking the once precise eye later as inapprehensible phantoms, leaving it “caul- / like. And how the dumb horrors laugh.” Armand’s are clearly some of the most thoughtful, and well thought, in the collection.

Omission necessarily becomes part of a discussion of any anthology. Though the criteria for inclusion (poets born on or after 1968 with at least one full collection published) seems, as mentioned, a no-brainer of a cut off for an anthology of contemporary Australian poetry, when one considers what was left out it doesn’t quite seem such a good idea after all. Matched with a missing hunger for the contemporary, and contemporaneity in our poetry, the results appear unimaginative. Firstly, one assumes the anthology is intended to showcase young and early career poets that aren’t as well anthologised as some. Of these, there are a number of surprising omissions, of young poets with one or more full-length collections published: B.R. Dionysius, Duncan Hose, the late Benjamin Frater, and Nick Whittock, for example. This is especially problematic when you consider what anthologised exposure gives to young or emerging poets, compared with, say, Bronwyn Lea, Michelle Cahill, and John Mateer, frequently anthologised poets, and in some cases editors in their own right. Indeed, I also wonder at this editorial requirement for the poet to have had one full-length book of poetry

published. With books forthcoming at the time of the anthology's publication, chapbooks to their name, or lengthy publishing histories in journals – here I think of Astrid Lorange, Toby Fitch, Bonny Cassidy, Stuart Cooke, Liam Ferney, and Tim Wright, in particular – the anthology must unfortunately neglect significant poets as these. Of course, the most crucial part of a national poetry anthology that intends to be “a new generation, a landmark anthology” is to at least parry with the pomp of its claim. As Sam Langer says in his *Arena* review of Peter Bakowski's *Beneath Our Armour*, amongst others, quoting Ezra Pound: “Poetry may be news that stays news, but it does have to be news first”. Perhaps inclusion of those separate from that generation of '68 but born before the '68 mark, those undeniable proponents of contemporary Australian poetry such as Chris Edwards, David Musgrave, Jill Jones, Claire Gaskin, Michael Farrell, Emma Lew, Lionel Fogarty, would have made *Thirty Australian Poets* news.

David McCooley's introduction is right to see Australian poetry as “undergoing a powerful – if somewhat paradoxical – revitalisation”, but it is this revitalisation that does not get its due attention in this collection. However, it is entirely well intentioned and a welcome summary of contemporary Australian poetry by some of the best poets born after 1968. Its skill lies in its inclusion of the majority of the country's publishers of poetry – with Five Islands, Giramondo, Hunter Publishers, UQP, Vagabond, Puncher & Wattmann, Salt, John Leonard, Whitmore, and Fremantle Arts in appearance here, though papertiger's soi 3 and Black Pepper are missing – and not in its curatorship of poems. The problem in short is that it privileges the safe bet, preferring the quiet and the languorous in some otherwise coruscating and challenging poets. It is also haunted by the unapologetically contemporary anthology it could've been had it included the little bit older, and more of the younger. Its moments must be trawled for, but certainly there is much linguistic sophistication to be discovered here. However, this anthology is not an adequate account of the places poets meet, their conversations, and the psychic terrain of their provenance, the gambit proposed to self expression by poetry and its abandonments. New Australian poetry appears well made here, but I welcome the next that instead celebrates its events and catastrophes, its difference, iconoclasm and surprise, to open our poetry for conversation with the stranger, the contemporary, and the foreign.