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Mark Tredinnick, *Bluewren Cantos*

Pitt Street Poetry, 2013, 137pp pb

ISBN 9781922080325, RRP \$30

Michael Crane, *Postcards from the End of the World:*

*A Michael Crane Sampler of Poetry and Prose*

Paradise Anthology, 2013, 95pp pb.

ISBN 9780646594941, RRP \$19.95

Mark Tredinnick, in this second expansive collection, has developed into an ideal mystical poet for a secular age. He finds his inspiration not in dogma or self-denial but in landscape, weather and the pressures and pleasures of family life. His writings are informed by Christian, Sufi, Buddhist and Hindu traditions but are not in any way restricted by them. Stylistically, he owes a considerable debt to American 'Midwest Surrealists' such as Robert Bly and W.S. Merwin and the somewhat younger Charles Wright. There's also more than a small nod to Thoreau's *Walden* (1854) and, with his long lines, Walt Whitman.

A good deal of Tredinnick's aesthetics can be sensed in a few lines from section 5 of his 13-page sequence, 'The Wombat Vedas': 'Words are weather, and some of it's mine. But not for long. Language is an act and a thing, / Mood music or sermon, depending; at once ephemeral and incarnate: like the morning wind / And the evening rain, the syntax of the stone escarpment and the OM / of the frogmouth in the mouth of dawn.' Wind, rain and the relative permanence of geology are frequent constituents of his poetry, along with meditations about the nature and purpose of language itself. So is the adventurous metaphor, 'the mouth of dawn'. The reference

to ‘Mood music or sermon’ is not accidental either. Like many mystics, Rumi among them, Tredinnick is prone to a little sermonising along the way, even if this is not the poem’s primary intent.

Unlike the traditional preacher, however, Tredinnick recognises the importance of doubt and sums it up nicely in a line from ‘The Floating World’: ‘Let bluewrens / Be the doubts my faith includes’. Tredinnick is, above all, interested in the numinous (for all that contemporary science might deny it). He reminds us how one can find a sense of it through landscape and weather and relationships rather than through sacred texts or hymnody. He is, however, more than familiar with the relevant sacred texts across his several traditions.

As Judith Beveridge has remarked, Tredinnick is ‘one of our great poets of place – not just of geographic place, but of the spiritual and moral landscapes as well.’ Certainly the property he lives on beside the Wingecarribee river in the New South Wales Southern Highlands recurs in poem after poem – until we become more than familiar with its views, its birdlife, its vegetation, weathers and seasons. It’s important to note, however, that these ingredients are never sufficient in themselves. They are given significance only through being relished, however briefly on the cosmic scale, by the poet himself. The poet’s ephemerality is what provides the poignance.

A crucial dimension is added when Tredinnick includes his wife and children in the picture. He is not just the romantic poet, alone with his thoughts. He is in a relationship and a member of a household – and they too are a great satisfaction, even when they prove distractions. This comes through with a more-than-welcome playfulness in his poem, ‘House of Thieves’. Tredinnick begins by complaining: ‘They steal my mornings and / They steal my nights. They steal the best of me / and they steal the worst’. He concludes however by admitting: ‘I’d be no other man / Than this. This looted self, blessed by theft, / this harbour for love’s worst scoundrels.’

Michael Crane’s *Postcards from the End of the World* is a very different book indeed. If Tredinnick is rural and mystical, Crane is urban and sardonic. He’s a product of, and long-term

participant in, Melbourne's rough-and-ready performance poetry scene. He's been the organiser of Poetry Idol at the Melbourne Writers' Festival since 2007.

This new book is described as a 'sampler' and it does indeed give a sense of Crane's impressive range, from fairly complex literary poems that have found their way into respected magazines such as *Meanjin* and *Southerly* through to sure-fire pieces for performance venues. It also includes quite a number of his 'micro stories', some of which run to several pages.

Common to many of both the poems and the stories is a hapless, slightly naïve narrator who is less than fortunate in love. His encounters with the world generally, and with the female world in particular, are often comic in ways that he himself seems to not quite understand. In stories such as 'Celebrity Lover', 'Double Exposure' and 'Here come the laughing dancing women' our somewhat bemused protagonist recounts his puzzlement at a succession of women who, in one way or another, are too much for him. Crane's 'laughing dancing women' story ends a little more optimistically with its problem gambler narrator at the Rosehill races dancing with a somewhat inebriated young woman – who will probably share his obsession (for a time): 'She is tipsy and then I smile back because I like those odds.'

More consistently successful are several poems towards the beginning of the collection which have a wry sardonicism – and a compression sometimes lacking elsewhere. 'Things she said to him' is a good example. It starts with a series of positive one-liners with which a man's girlfriend has, at one time or another, praised him: "You're funny." / "You're one sexy mother." / "You make my day." / "My kids like you." Then we cut to the final stanza: 'All these thoughts / crossed his mind / as she came screaming / towards him with / a large butcher's knife.'

If many of the poems have an 'unshaven' dimension going back to the hard-drinking American poet, Charles Bukowski, Crane's protagonists are rarely as self-confident as the American's. In 'the momentary survival instinct of the junkie' the poet has a heroin addict 'waking up / the next morning / for the next hit' and remembering the group of virtuous girls he had been polite to the previous day, those who have meanwhile caught 'another train giggling / at being noticed, their beauty / dancing like flamingos / in the swamplands of desire.'

Occasionally, and very effectively, as in ‘The women of Barwon Heads’, this ‘hard-boiled’ quality is transmuted into sincere admiration and compassion. The ‘Barwon Heads’ poem is almost a hymn of praise to the town’s fishermen’s wives who manage to be both resilient and romantic. ‘They like to get drunk and sweet talk their husbands’ but, on the other hand, ‘They scrub strangers’ floors to put their children through school’. Eighteen lines of these sorts of contradictions add up to a convincing, and touching, portrait of women who ‘take the hand of their men and give respite from the sea’.

Unfortunately, this ‘sampler’ has been somewhat hastily compiled and printed, with a depressing number of typos that tend to distract while reading down its over-crowded two-column pages where one poem follows hard upon another. The fact that ‘Hemingway’ is spelt twice with two ‘m’s is just one example.

Poetry generally benefits from some white space around it and *Postcards from the End of the World: A Michael Crane Sampler of Poetry and Prose* (which is really two books in one) could probably have used a little more of it.