

POETRY REVIEWS

Silvana Gardner. *When Sunday Comes*, Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1982. Cloth \$12.95, Paper \$6.95. 46 pp.

This recent publication, a first collection, is full of promise. It may prove a hard act to follow. If it doesn't, we have a new poet of importance among us.

First books are often autobiographical, either overtly or covertly. *When Sunday Comes* is in the former category, developing material won from the mine of personal experience. For Silvana Gardner is exploring a rich vein of childhood-to-adolescence impressions deposited in the days when she was a child migrant to Australia. These impressions have obviously been of profound significance to her, and it happens fortuitously that the times in which we live lend them a certain significance for us.

The reworking of this material has resulted in a sensitive and attractive collection of poems, elegantly unified by a recurrent theme: migration, transplantation, alienation. Sparks of anger, resentment and bitter pride fly off hotly, but they are always rendered brilliant with wonder, curiosity and humour rather than allowed to threaten. The humour varies from the tolerant, backward look at adolescence in 'Bread' and 'Father Confessor' to the jaunty poking out of tongue in 'For Those . . .'. Underneath all these feelings, the writer has conviction, purpose, a message. And on a theme where sentiment might slip dangerously into sentimentality, she rarely crosses this border, though she perhaps skirts it perilously in 'Columbine', and it is something she needs to watch.

The poetry in *When Sunday Comes* is highly accessible. Many poems are anecdotal. All have an immediacy and directness (sometimes bluntness) that directs itself clearly to the reader. There is little danger of missing the point, and for this reason, if for no other, this book should be popular. A good

example of the poet's directness (even bluntness) is 'La Gioconda', which opens with the plain statement: 'Jews have suffered more than us'. The ungrammatically childish use of 'us' brings with it a picture of a child who has learned this horrible truth by rote. The rest of the poem makes it clear that this fact alone may not be enough to win love.

This poet's use of words is confident, precise and sophisticated. She manages form well also, adapting it well to theme, whether that be the simplicity of 'Three Love Songs', the sly elaboration of 'Father Confessor', or the tightness of 'Steel Flowers'. Rhyme she rarely uses, and if at all, internally. Many of the poems have a lyrical quality and read aloud beautifully. 'Villa Gardone' is one that springs to mind readily in this connection.

As Silvana Gardner is an artist as well as a poet, it comes as no surprise to find a gallery of memorable portraits in her book. In poems such as 'Plaits', 'Fox Fur' and 'The Burial Dress' she vividly, multidimensionally depicts her beloved grandmother, a woman to whom, in truth, the word 'grand' seems appropriate. In celebrating her grandmother, it is possible that the author is also celebrating the much more civilised attitude of her Italian forbears towards the old generally.

Other portraits abound, some with a Breughel-like quality about them. In 'The Boarding House I' and 'The Boarding House II', in 'Bruno' and in 'Jimmy' we are introduced to some of society's 'outsiders' – a retarded girl, a boy who is 'not quite there', and Jimmy, 'a fully grown man . . . with the mind of a baby'. Could these freakish outsiders be mirror images of other aliens, migrating from one place to another, from one class to another? All have been observed with the cruel crystal clarity of a child, set down with perfect recall and artistry.

There is a lot to read and re-read in this little book of forty three poems. To say that many who find poetry heavy and obscure will enjoy this collection is not to detract from its quality. Taken at any level, here is colour, vitality, pertinence, life.

Robert Handicott. *Small Beer*, Brisbane, Queensland Community Press, 1982. Paper \$2.50. 32 pp.

Robert Handicott's book, *Small Beer*, was also published in 1982 and is another first publication.

The book contains twenty poems. Is this too small a collection to publish? Certainly not, if the poems are good enough. Are those in *Small Beer*?

They certainly cover a surprising variety of themes for such a small book – it almost seems as though the poet has deliberately chosen to display his versatility. As a result the book has no central theme (as there is in Silvana Gardner's *When Sunday Comes*) and, while a central theme is no sine qua non, such a lack of focus does tend to produce a lack of unity. It tends to produce also a feeling on the part of the reader that the poet has gathered up a number of poems he has written over the years, deciding that they would now make a book. When this is done, as it sometimes is, careful grouping of related sections can overcome any resultant raggedness, but in a small sample of twenty there is not much room for grouping.

The poems are carefully crafted, and the poet exhibits a felicitous dexterity in his use of structure and form, not to mention choice of words themselves, showing in the process that he has a sensitive ear and good taste. He is quite at home with metre, achieving widely differing effects in two poems with exactly the same rhythm. Compare 'Open Letter from the Duke of Bedford' with its quaintly pompous preciosity, with the stern denunciation in 'For Leni Riefenstahl'. The latter poem is memorable also for its sustained, but not laborious use of a very apposite metaphor, film. Considering its subject, the holocaust, it is a masterpiece of restraint in a field too often mined for anguish.

Restraint is both the poet's strength and weakness. His innate good taste and fastidious restraint are what enable him to write elegantly, as in the pastel pastorate 'Glen Gordon' and the concise, if cool, 'Household Gods', but there does seem to be some sacrifice in feeling impact. The young writer could afford to throw himself into his theme a bit more passionately. He is

never, on the evidence of this book anyway, in the slightest danger of indulging in sentimentality, a snare that Silvana Gardner would have to watch out for. By writing about something that he feels strongly about, and showing that he does, he will establish his own individuality and enable the reader really to *meet him*, not just as another gifted young poet, but as a person in his own right.

So that in spite of the cleverness of such poems as 'Household Gods' and 'Montgolfier Literati', it seems that Robert Handicott speaks to us best when he is writing from his own life experience, as in the poems about boys, boyhood, and the boy that was once himself. In the poems 'Golden Oldies', 'Horror Movie' and 'The House I Lived In Once' the poet takes a step towards us, displaying at the same time valuable insight into not only boys, but humanity. In the longer poem 'Childhood's Myth' he comes even closer without any sacrifice of his message. 'Memorabilia', another 'boyhood' poem is a particularly telling Anzac poem of importance, summing up in its final two lines the hopelessness of anti-war stances.

Writing as a self-confessed northerner, the poet could have done worse than celebrate the north in more poems than the one — 'Castle Hill Cutting'. It is hoped that he will do this in future publications. His ability to write vivid, controlled description might particularly suit the bare, beautiful Townsville scene. It is not suggested that he write only of the north, but if he writes well of it, why not more often? Robert Handicott confesses in 'Dance Bands' that he loves 'to make music' and that his poems are 'on the improve'. If his job is to 'get them odd bookings' he will probably succeed, for he has the equipment to do so.

I found the title '*Small Beer*' vaguely irritating. Was the poet trying to disarm his readers with mock modesty? Or was he actually apologising for his book? If so, then why did he publish it? On reading the Auden quotation from which the title was taken, I found that it was Art generally, and not this book, that was considered *Small Beer* — admittedly, vis-à-vis Christianity.

This seems to be a dangerous credo to admit to, even for a Christian poet, as Handicott is. Art is well known to be a jealous

mistress, demanding pretty well all. At least there needs to be a decent pretence of offering it, for to do anything else is to invite the reader to partake of 'second best'.

Titles are important, in that they are not merely words stuck on to a book, but an integral part of it, if possible adding an extra dimension to it. To add that they are in general very poorly chosen does not take away from the fact that this is still an opportunity lost to the writer. . . .

Summing up, then, yes, the book was well worth publishing. It is a very promising first book, and, if the poet will trust his own feeling and reveal himself a bit more, will be followed by even better books.