

## M.A. Smith

Edwin Wilson *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity!* Woodbine Press, 1984, 214 pp. \$10 paperback, \$20 hardback.

*Liberty, Equality, Fraternity!* is Edwin Wilson's first novel. His volume of poems, *Banyan*, was published by the Woodbine Press in 1982. Those who have read the poems will find much in the novel that is familiar. The poems are mainly concerned with the Australian landscape, its flora and fauna, and these are described in detail in the book, too. One poem in particular, "Sunday Afternoon", subtitled "Sydney Domain in the Sixties", has a very close parallel in an important scene in the novel. Even the words used are similar:

Robbie Burns leans on a plough, recently washed. He looked very youthful up there, with a pen in his hand. (p. 116)

Robbie Burns with a  
Dripping pen, leans on  
A plough and watches on,  
Recently washed. ("Sunday Afternoon")

A glance at the biographical note in *Banyan* (that in *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity!* is more reticent) confirms the impression that the novel is at least semi-autobiographical. The blurb-writer as good as admits this by saying that *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity!* has a "predictable theme for a first novel":

Work, life, love, friendship, sex, marriage, birth, death, religion, and the nature of 'freedom' and 'individual liberty', set against Australian society in the Fifties and Sixties.

In other words, it is the story of a young man growing up. The novel begins with a transition in the hero Peter's life. He returns to his childhood home (a little town on the northern coast of New South Wales) for a Christmas visit to his family and his estranged wife. Old memories are, naturally, awakened: Peter's history is told in a series of flashbacks that become continuous narrative as the young Peter heads south for university in Sydney. By Chapter Fifteen we are back "where we came in", and in the concluding Chapters we learn what happens next.

Along the way, Peter sheds his small-town shackles, and discovers science, art, sex and alcohol. He marries and has a child; his

marriage breaks up; he finds a satisfying career after trying school-teaching; he thinks profound thoughts about the world, death, and the meaning (or meaninglessness) of life. Eventually, in his thirties, he remarries and enters a new, more settled phase.

In spite of its subject matter, *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity!* is not a bildungsroman. The only direction of the plot is that provided by the forward passage of time. Peter does not develop or mature; in his late twenties (or perhaps early thirties) he is still thinking like a rebellious adolescent:

She (his mother] had to understand why he had to be brash sometimes. . . out of contempt for the limiting forces, the trap of the petty, and the boredom of duty and habit; the intimidations, the sacrifices, the niceties, the impositions and compromises; the whole bloody-minded, mindless, repetitive inanities of life to which he was subjected and to which she had succumbed. (p. 39)

Peter's non-development in the course of the novel is defined in his relationships with women. He has a best mate, Chris, with whom he has terse but meaningful conversations, but these conversations are often about women; and in the end Chris fades out all together.

For Peter, women are threatening, unavailable, desirable and disgusting all at once. What they are not, it seems, is human. At times this attitude becomes so extreme as to disturb; as with this description of a waitress in a roadside cafe:

She waddled off towards the kitchen, her stockings rubbing together from above the knees. . . He pictured her naked —two boobs hanging over a big gut — it wasn't a pretty sight. (p. 43)

The women in Peter's life — his mother, his girlfriend of Uni days, his first wife — are all trying to trap him. By the time he meets the woman who is to become his second wife, the reader might hope that Peter sees women differently, for his own sake. But he doesn't:

In a fuzzy male way he'd have liked to commit himself but he wasn't going to play into her hands, just yet. These bloody women were all the same. They all get hysterical. They all want babies. The thought of another infertile month just sends them balmy!. . . No wonder they

say their hormones sometimes over-ride their neuroses! (p. 182)

Peter even externalizes this sense of threat he feels, into natural objects; as when he walks into a spider-web while out in the bush:

He recoiled in absolute horror as the web, that stretched between two trees, meshed in his hair. . . The spider was part of the dark horror and revulsion of childhood, and in the black spaces of his mind was the cultural image of the black widow. What a fool he'd been with women — risking life and limb for love! (p. 175)

There is no suggestion that the reader is being invited to see this fear of women as a problem, a flaw in Peter's character. Rather the feminine principle is just a part of the big birth/sex/death cycle in which nature traps men: "time and place and biology — mother nature claiming her own. So much for free will!" (p. 49)

The teeming sea, "the universal solvent, like death. . . everything jumping on everything else to eat it or stuff it" (p. 47), is used throughout the novel as a symbol of this:

He could hear the crackle of the rising tide over the air-roots of the mangroves of the mud-flat — the rhythm of the moon, the sea, the oysters and the air; the red tide, the suck and surge of the waves, the anenome of love; and the smell of eggshells when the waters broke. (p. 61)

The sea is blood, and his own blood is the sea, the "ocean his ancestors had come from." The sight of his own blood, the thought of the sea, frightens him. But of course for women there is no problem; they are part of the conspiracy:

Bloody women have a resignation to blood that men never achieve — initiated with birth and afterbirth, the sacrificial hymen and the fertile flood, much closer to the river — one step from the cloaca. (p. 61)

This novel is obviously fed by personal experience, and memories of specific incidents and places. In view of this it is a pity the author has not been more precise. It would have been much more interesting, both for those Australians of Peter's generation, and for those who would like to learn about those times, if the events had been more firmly linked to the era Wilson chooses to write about. As it is, the

dating is vague, and the reader is disturbed by such anachronisms as an orator in the Domain, some time in the Sixties, mentioning Northern Ireland and Lebanon as areas of religious conflict. They were not in the news then.

*Liberty, Equality, Fraternity!* is a very readable novel, and competently written. Sometimes the style is rather flat in the narrative sections, but the nature descriptions are lyrical and evocative. Its ultimate aimlessness, however, is summed up by the blurbwriter's statement that the novel finishes with "a kind resolution" — surely a misprint for "a kind of resolution" (there are many typographical errors in the text). Peter decides to leave the Sydney rat-race and return to his home town:

Now that he'd made up his mind it was all so simple — he'd manage the farm from Budgie and Elizabeth could teach part-time in the local school. Farm life wasn't so difficult these days with mechanization and he could sub-contract out the heavy work if necessary. (p. 213)

The reader can't help feeling that both Peter and Edwin Wilson are taking an easy way out:

He was going to a lotus land where time would pass by and he'd never really be free but that didn't matter. . . He'd been a fair way in his life; he'd broken away, but now he was going home. (p. 214)

Fay Weldon says that the reason more poets than novelists are acclaimed as masters while still young (Keats, for example), is that "poets are expected to have a view of their response to the world and can do *that* from adolescence onwards; novelists are expected to have a view of the world itself".<sup>1</sup> Perhaps this comment can explain why *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity!* is finally rather unsatisfying. The author has chosen to use a technique whereby the world is seen and described through the eyes and thoughts of the main character; but one feels that Peter's vision is also Wilson's own. That added distance which would make Peter's experiences instructive is missing.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>*Letters to Alice on First Reading Jane Austen* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1984).