

LUDMILLA K. ROBINSON

Alan Wearne: *NEW DEVIL, NEW PARISH*, Paperback Poets, Second Series, 14, Queensland University Press, 1976;

Andrew MacDonald, *ABSENCE IN STRANGE COUNTRIES*, Paperback Poets, Second Series, 13, Queensland University Press, 1976;

R.A. Simpson, *POEMS FROM MURRUMBEENA*, Paperback Poets, Second Series, 12, Queensland University Press, 1976.

Reading collections of poetry, not solely for pleasure, but as a critical exercise may be as exasperating as it is stimulating, and whilst perusing three collections of poetry published by the Queensland University Press in its Paperback Poets series, I experienced almost as much exasperation as stimulation.

Alan Wearne's collection of poems *New Devil, New Parish* comprises seven unconnected poems and a much longer poem "Out Here", consisting of nine dramatic monologues. The individual poems at the beginning of the book contain the usual admixture of introspection, reminiscence and social comment, and I found them rather dull and uninspiring. Wearne's language, which works through association and connotation, is too close an imitation of E.E. Cummings to be effective, and although it is fairly easy to grasp that he is trying to give a sense of spontaneity to his verse, I do not think it succeeds as well as he intended. Some of the associations, which should have been evoked by the juxtaposed words, are too free, and as a result, his poems tend to become obscure and even unintelligible. If the test applied to good poetry is how far the poet is able to communicate with the reader, then a number of his shorter poems do not fulfil this criterion.

However, Wearne fares considerably better in "Out Here", the series of dramatic monologues. These poems gibe at middle-class values; the facade and shallow hypocrisy of respectable citizens, who are not only the victims of their own tortured lives, but who also create victims of their own children. The monologues radiate from a central event; the attempted suicide of Brett Verney, a young high school student. One by one, Wearne explores the personalities of all those involved in the drama: his parents, teacher, grandfather, girlfriend, aunt, his father's mistress, his girlfriend's father, and Brett Verney himself. The poems as a whole give the sense of gradually dissolving relationships. Every relationship in the poem is either past and remembered, or present and disintegrating; demonstrating the uncertainty of life beneath the veneer of middle-class respectability. They

are disturbing poems, in which the characters clutch at the straws of lives they are powerless to control, and which have either passed them by, or are falling to pieces around them.

The most striking aspects of "Out Here" is the sensitivity and empathy with which Wearne creates the characters; and the language, which, although unusual and obscure, is admirably suited to his subject. The stylistic techniques he applies in his shorter poems, and which seem inadequate in that context, perfectly mirror the thought processes of the characters of the monologues.

One of the major impressions I gained from reading Andrew MacDonald's *Absence in Strange Countries* was of his tremendous feeling of belonging to the earth and nature. Although the collection is entitled *Absence in Strange Countries*, MacDonald does not portray the cities of London, San Francisco or Sydney, as the title suggests, but rather the earth from which these cities sprang. This is especially so of such poems as "Pass out", "Long jumper", "The death of George Reeves" and "The fall of a sky diver"; all insist on the fact that the earth is gathering the subjects of his poems to itself; that everywhere there are "green arms to welcome back earth's own" (The death of a sky diver). Moreover, MacDonald is gifted with a very perceptive eye for the bizarre and with a subtle sense of humour, which together result in a number of curious and very amusing poems.

Although he does not challenge his reader's understanding, as does Alan Wearne, I found the language of MacDonald's poems more traditionally poetic and more aesthetically pleasing. Furthermore, the styles and subjects of his poems are varied enough to prevent the feeling of boredom that may accompany the reading of a collection of poems by the one poet. The poems cover the many moods and styles usually encountered in such collections: MacDonald moves from the lyrical to the vaguely humorous; from the nostalgic to the satirical and witty; but he brings to his poems an imagination, a command of language and a sense of the bizarre which make them extremely entertaining and stimulating reading.

In the final analysis the appreciation of poetry must be one of the most purely subjective of activities, depending entirely on how far the experiences of the poet correspond with the experiences of the reader, and on the response of the reader to the poet's diction. My lack of sympathy for the experiences and language of R.A. Simpson, therefore, probably explains why I found his collection of *Poems From Murrumbidgee* dull and unpoetic. Simpson's poems lack the imagination and verve so apparent in the works of Wearne and MacDonald. Moreover, I became a little weary of his intense introspection, which I admit, may be interesting if found in only one or two poems, but which does tend to become rather tiresome when

carried through a series. His attempts at simplicity of language have merely resulted in banal verse; whilst his attempts at philosophy degenerate into the repetition of mundane thoughts and emotions, reminiscent of very late Wordsworth in modern dress. Furthermore, the abundance of supposedly poetic aphorisms in his poems left me wondering what effect he was trying to achieve. Obviously, they are poems written purely for their cathartic effect on the poet, rather than for any general appreciation. The titles of two of the poems, "The telephone is working again" and "Rubbish dump", represent for me the level of the whole collection.