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REVIEW

Ed. Ric Throssell, *Tribute: Selected Stories of Katharine Susannah Prichard*, St Lucia, University of Queensland Press, 1988, 256 pp.

She was the stern, unswerving Marxist of the period between the wars, the writer who struggled along with small royalties for most of her career, the pamphleteer, speech-writer, co-founder of the Australian Communist Party, the traveller in Russia, the visitor to the London slums, the woman twice struck by tragedy (the suicide of both father and husband over financial problems), twice nominated for the Nobel literature prize and often berated by Australian critics for the stark social realism of her novels. She was Katharine Susannah Prichard (1883-1969). In 1936 she printed a simultaneous cry for social justice and Australian regionalism in fiction: 'Why should there be, in Australia, people who have not sufficient food or clothes: who are unable to enjoy the beauty and natural wealth about us; who are forced to live in filthy slums and houses, not fit to house cattle: who in the bitter struggle for existence cannot afford to buy books, to know anything of the art and poetry of their native land or to provide a cultural background for national expression? Our culture is jerry-built, like the houses most of us live in. Based on cheap foreign patterns, imitations of the antique. We starve our writers and poets: listen to imported claptrap in the theatre: permit our artists, for the most part, to live on the smell of an oiled rag: coldshoulder into oblivion any composer who dares to make an original suggestion in music'.

Katharine Susannah Prichard made a selection from her own stories in *Happiness* (Angus and Robertson, 1967). Her son and biographer, Vic Throssell, has made a new selection, calling it *Tribute*. This contains no less than fourteen of the stories chosen by the writer herself for inclusion in *Happiness* as well as ten others, one of them, 'The Old Track', now published for the first time. The twenty-four short stories in *Tribute*, spanning thirty-five years of the writer's activity, consistently show a woman's point of view inside a working-class or itinerant situation. Prichard herself said that in her short stories she 'gleaned fragments from the lives of our people'. Her technique was derived from

Maupassant's *Contes Normands*. In *Straight Left*, her son's collection of her pamphlets and articles, there is an essay on the craft of the short story in which she explains that the 'conte' has been called 'a telling without a tale' and especially praises those stories that are not clogged up by the author's manipulation. She admires Maupassant because his *contes* flow with 'the rhythm of life itself' and Tchekov for his 'nervous tension, pervasive tenderness, quizzical humour'.

Prichard could have added among the ingredients for successful fiction the element of personal research. She herself travelled with a circus, lived in the outback, followed aboriginal settlements and once went four-hundred kilometres to verify a fact from a desert location. Criticizing the 'quail-like cheeping' of Pasternak's *Dr Zhivago* in a 1959 essay, she casually lets drop the fact that she had heard peasants all over Siberia sing the 'Song of the Red Partisans' and suggests that Pasternak's lyrical outbursts and piling of simile on simile would later have disgusted them. For he used similes as a diversionary tactic to show 'that he could write about things, if not people'.

Her own short stories, for example, dispense almost entirely with similes while they abound in straight naming. They are relentlessly Australian in content, dealing with alluvial gold-mining and in-land farming stations. They have a large cast of Aboriginal characters, often women who play out roles of perseverance or well-merited jealousy. The average location is a shack, or a hut or a camp site along a river bed.

The mining stories, especially the group 'Luck', 'Bad Debts' and 'Genieve', paint a forlorn picture of little towns that collapse or mushroom as a 'show' produces a filament or knob of the yellow metal which may be bargained away to pay for groceries. The Prichardian landscape is dotted with 'poppet-rigs' and salt pans that present a distant mirage of false water. The alcoholic drinks flow freely when there has been a good 'crushing'. The prospectors and miners set up their own court for dealing with pegging disputes. There might be one police sergeant to administer the law a hundred miles in either direction.

In many stories the landscape is dotted with indigenous bushes, conscientiously called by their Australian names, like 'mulga' or 'curari'. The writer uses these terms to fix in the reader's imagination a kind of gritty edge of civilization several days' ride from symbolically repeated names like Coolgardie, Sandy Gap or Sleeping River. It is a landscape through which even Aboriginal children are afraid to escape back home. In the story 'Flight' a good-hearted policeman has to mount three little half-caste girls on his horse and start them on their journey to the Mission in

the south, where it has been decreed that they must be absorbed into white civilization. He brings the children to his own competent, cheerful, scrubbed household where he has a 'full-bosomed and sonsy' wife and angelic fair-haired children with rosy skins.

Out of compassion the policeman's wife releases the ropes on the quiet, resentful, withdrawn prisoners and they, in turn, remove the nails and barbed-wire from their cell and escape into the night. The little girls long to return to the 'miah's' (shelters) of their own people, but they are scared by the 'gnarlu' (monster frog) that comes hopping out from the blue hills. Thorns and 'minnerichi' (hard wood shrubs) cast long black shadows. The three girls avoid shadowed water where the worst 'jinkies' are known to lie in wait. A menacing voice comes from the water making the noise 'wauk wauk'. Here the writer makes the sound so vivid on the page that there is no need to use the word 'frog' in this context. The story is steeped in both atmosphere and symbolic meaning. It contrasts day with night, captivity with freedom, the innocence of youth with the weary complicity of age. Thus, deceptively, it implies the contrast between lower middle-class white and Aborigine.

In these stories the poor whites do not struggle on exactly the same level as the 'gins'. They too lose babies. For them too doctors arrive late or a coffin is ordered prematurely. Yet the slow drift of racism and class separation is carefully charted in the sociological details of the stories from the 1930s and early 40s. Black women have children out in the open, attended by older women from the 'tribe' (which they prefer to call 'family'). They sling their babies over the chest and suckle them while out in the bush. In the famous story 'Cooboo' a black mother wrenches loose her baby and tosses it to the ground because her master has criticized her for poor mustering, during the working day. The baby is dead and the mother is heard wailing with grief during the dawn. The whole story hangs on the words of a white overseer: "You damn fool, Rosey. Finish!" These words cause one of the women to kill the child that has impeded her. The other thinks complacently that she may be rewarded for her stockman work with a new 'gina-gina' (dress).

Of this story Nettie Palmer wrote in *Fourteen Years* (her private journal of the period 1925-1939):

There is a greater mastery in Katharine Prichard's story, *The Cooboo*, published recently in the *Bulletin* than in the lot of them. What a world of tragedy and strange beauty she

has compressed into a couple of thousand words! It is a marvel of economy as well as of feeling — so little stated directly, so much implied.

Nettie Palmer's praise of the story's depth of implication could be applied to several others in this collection. In 'Naninja and Janey', for example, why are two 'gins' sent out by their fellows to die? Naninja and Janey are servants, one old with an arm ending in a stump, the younger one her devoted attendant. They exist on charity and casual labour. They divide all their loot scrupulously, 'as is the Aboriginal custom'. Then they both wander off to perish. A well-meaning white woman questions the sulky local natives and persuades a white sergeant to go out with tracker and camels to save the missing pair. He comes back with a 'jocose' sentence, that the dingoes had found the women first.

Here Prichard observes the weather-beaten commonplaces of racism without any explicit comment. She records the lower value accorded to black life. She notices the liberal conscience of the white woman, accidentally locking the unemployable on to a death sentence, handing out inferior clothes, or feeding the poor on bread and jam. She allows the underprivileged to comment passively on their own passiveness: "Naninja sick feller — close-up finish'm" and also accomplishes a brilliant sketch of the broken pidgin English which is both theirs and yet also imposed on them by their well-meaning but educationally short-sighted superiors.

People criss-cross the in-land landscape searching for other people, as well as for gold, or painted finches, or charity or a free meal. The story 'N'goola' features the human quest in which an old, thin man, stumbling and swaying, hunts for the half-caste daughter that was once taken from him. The child was not his, but forced on his wife by the white boss who locked her into a storage shed with himself one day. All this is expressed in the confused marasma of the old man's memories, half in dialect, half in clear English. The child was taken away, at six years of age, by a mounted trooper who rode into their camp on government business. The child's name was N'goola (which means 'wild boronia'). The man grew to love her and had been seeking for her ever since. Her half-caste colour is explained away by the phrase: 'an evil spirit had frightened her mother and stolen some of the baby's skin colour before it was born'.

The motif of the hunt for a doomed human being recurs in the story 'Painted Finches'. Here a stockman falls for a teenaged girl trapping birds along a river in the wilds. Her violent stepfather takes her away,

murders her mother, turns the child into a common-law wife. Five years go by and the stockman still remembers her. He borrows a truck and crashes it in the hurry to reach her settlement before the jealous, violent man. It is a complete study of life, and an itinerant life at that, in the lower band of the white community.

What is noticeable is that money is not present in these plots. Perhaps as a consequence of Prichard's deeply held socialist views, the writer's canvas includes a marked awareness of lending, borrowing, 'shouting', bartering. In the story 'The Siren of Sandy Gap' it is even a woman who is passed from one man to another, though she is a mature and respectable housewife. The men seek no redress and just mutter their complaints. They shake their heads and agree that the 'siren' had no brains but 'the bloodiest blue eyes in the world'. In fact the story is kept from flagging by the very homeliness of the dialogue. For Prichard has a skilful hand with the clipped sentences of uneducated people, the grammatical discords (as in "The birds all has to go..."), the dropped consonants and non-aspirated syllables, swear-words, verbless sentences ("Pools dryin' up.") and explosive queries ("Couple of women?"). In 1930 Prichard defended herself against a critic who accused her of using 'loose and slipshod English'. She declared that she always tried to use 'the living speech of our people, guarding against a dialect effect, and making the context of a sentence give the meaning of an unusual word or phrase'.

Tribute is a bouquet from the son of one of our clearest writers. She wrote about real people in real situations: a cycle of birth, work and death.