"Home Away From Home"

Carolyn Wagner

George Papaellinas, ed. *Homeland.* North Sydney: Allen and Unwin Pty Ltd, 1991, rrp $16.95. 223 pp.

Twenty-six Australian writers, some well known such as Kevin Gilbert, Sneja Gunew, Dorothy Hewett, Elizabeth Jolley, komninos, Dimitris Tsaloumas and Janette Turner Hospital, others less experienced, have composed their perceptions of "homeland." This anthology of short stories, production script and poems, presents a collection of images under this common title.

George Papaellinas says the title was chosen because it was "pregnant with possible meanings" (xiv). The reason is simply that each contributor comes from a different background. Some were born in Europe or Asia, and migrated to Australia at an early age. Others, although born in Australia, have lived with the image of a homeland through their parent's eyes. Then there is the Aboriginal Australian whose perception of homeland is different again.

Although this book was sponsored by Carnivalé, a multicultural arts festival that began in New South Wales in 1978, the word multicultural is inappropriate. It marginalises the writing, and puts it into the category of "the other" (xi), the non-Anglo saxon writer, whereas this collection celebrates a fusion of old cultures with the new.

Anna Maria Dell'oso, the opening contributor, was born in Melbourne of Italian immigrant parents. Her parents lived in this country for 36 years but all they wanted to do was to "sell up everything and go back to Italy" (2). Dell'oso grew up with an awkwardness, "... I felt myself tearing apart with the pain of being a freak and a vision" (6). Although she was born and lived in Australia, her parents insisted on old Italian values. She lived between two cultures. At her Communion she knew she was different as she stood there in her Communion veil, looking like an "imported bride doll" next to the other Australian girls in their "Woolworths" dresses (5). Her parents entrapped her in a cave of memories, an Italy remembered long ago. It was not until they returned from a visit to Italy, disgruntled about the change in their country, happy to be back in Australia, that Dell'oso was given the key to unlock her Australian homeland.

"Postcards from Beirut" by Stanley Correy and Tom Zubrycki, presents an image similar to Dell'oso's. The film Correy and Zubrycki are working on is "interspersed with fragments of recorded conversations and quotes from the production diary" (67). Correy's parents are Lebanese Maronite Christians. He found a set of postcards in his mother's home in the mid '70's at the beginning of the current civil war. They were the usual nostalgic postcard images that his mother remembered. Correy wanted to discover what lay behind these images but it became a "clash of family memory and political history" (69). Multiculturalism sanitises people's thoughts, suggests Zubrycki:

> TOM: You can't talk very much about conflict, internal to the community or external, about discrimination. ... You can't be seen to be critical in your view of any one community because that would be taking away from its image in Australia. The picture has to be as romantic as a postcard." (71-72)
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> STAN: This [film] is a public relations exercise. But there will be conflicts. ... if you say, "forget about your past", then I think that this will lead to another conflict. It seems to me that if you avoid talking about problems, then you actually add to a racist perspective. (72)

Correy's grandparents took their memories from the old Lebanon, and these romantic images they passed on to their children and grandchildren. They were not images of the present Lebanon.

It is not until Correy is able to return to this country that he discovers the real Lebanon. He believes the "Maronite Christians are one of the stumbling blocks to a civil negotiated peace in Lebanon" (75). They see themselves as the educated elite. The people see themselves as separate identities; Maronite, Orthodox, Shiite or Druse. The Lebanese in Australia romanticise their country and are unaware of the tensions, therefore this film aims to show:

> the contrasting images of Lebanon of the Christian mountain village and the Lebanon of the modern city, Beirut (82).

The past is featured in the poetry of Oodgeroo of the tribe Noonuccal (Kath Walker). Born in 1920 on North Stradbroke Island, Oodgeroo has been prominent in the Land Rights Movement. Her poem is about the Aboriginal Motherland "Minji la" (61-62), and how its "first born weep/for what used to be." The poem relates the struggle the "sad dark children now face" because of invaders with foreign laws, and how the motherland has also been ecologically devastated.

Oodgeroo's song of homeland celebrates the strength of this country and asks all "to uphold/your wise balanced laws." This poem implores Aboriginal people to remember their homeland:

> Teach them to nurture,
> to love and understand
> to respect your beautiful gifts
> you gave so freely
> to your dark proud race.
> Menji-la, Our Mother,
> Our beautiful land. (62)

Ania Walwicz was born in Poland and came to Australia when she was 12. Her contribution uses lower case continuous prose, without paragraphs and punctuation. The mostly monosyllabic words, often repeated, help to convey images of Poland and homesickness; "i want to go home i want to go home" (191).

In Paris, in a Polish restaurant, the speaker has pangs of homesickness. The cry "i want to go back" causes the others to encourage her. They tell her Poland has changed, "it's all right now you can buy everything" (192). When asked "who are you" the speaker replies:

> im a little pole and my sign is a white eagle
> and my sign is virgin mary on my flag like
> before the war now we are marching and red
> flags and they told us in first grade that
> every body is equal and my day begins in prayer
> and then the crucifix was taken out gets taken
> i just want to go home now somewhere where i
> belong where never is heard a discouraging word
> and the sky is all clear all day (192)

The last two lines of this quote are taken from a popular song and illustrate the speaker's need for a stable homeland. It is 20 years since she left Poland but she still says "i want to go back to the way things looked."

To Le Van Tai, who arrived in Australia from Vietnam in 1984, "the whole earth is [his] homeland" (198). It is:

> Human souls, hundreds of rivers,
> many streams, one deep, blue ocean.
> One earth, one water! (198)

Nevertheless, "human souls everywhere have been hoisting sails" (197) and wandering as exiles. They remember their past as a calm "heaven on earth" (197) but now separated from their land, they see only "walls, iron bars" because their homeland "is blinkered in darkness" (197). Even though many come from troubled sections of this earth, they still look back to their past land. It is "a mother's devotion," an all enveloping love (198).

The divergent "homelands" in this anthology arouse a compulsion within the reader to acknowledge their "homeland." Some, like the contributors, will find contradictions, a clash of cultures or images discoloured by distant memory. What is important is that the acknowledgment of one's homeland unites both reader and writer and creates a common bond. As Walwicz's speaker says, "i just have to go back somewhere" (193).