

of old Europe as it plunged into its titanic crisis.



Paul Knobel

CONTEMPORARY AUSTRALIAN POETRY

Sue Hicks and Danny Gardner, eds.
Light on Don Bank: Fifteen Years of Live Poets' Society. Sydney: Live Poets' Press, 2006. ISBN 0 646 45529 X. RRP: \$20.00. pp.144.

Light on Don Bank is an anthology of the work of 142 mainly Sydney poets who have read with the Live Poets group at Don Bank Museum, the oldest house in the suburb of North Sydney; each poet has one poem of no longer than one page. Poets have been reading at Don Bank for 15 years on the fourth Wednesday of each month for 11 months of the year. Live Poets was established by British emigrant Sue Hicks and latterly carried on by her former partner Danny Gardner following her return to Britain for family reasons. Some non-Sydney poets have also been guests. As the editors explain in the introduction where they give the history of the group, the title of Live Poets was inspired by a famous movie, *The Dead Poets' Society*. This reviewer has read at Don Bank and

was a featured poet, with a selection of his poems appearing in the collection *Live Wires* with 21 others. However my work is not included in the current anthology as I was overseas at the time of compilation.

Many poets have made enduring friendships at Don Bank where supper is served in the interval following a monthly featured poet and before an open section. Proceedings have latterly been recorded, which will be a fascinating archive. The late Vera Newsom, who did not start writing poetry seriously until she retired from teaching, but soon became an excellent practitioner, was the first featured poet. *Light on Don Bank* is thus a defacto cross-section of contemporary Sydney poetry.

This is the first lesson of the anthology. Why not create your own poetry writing and reading circle, if one does not exist? It could occur in any town across Australia. The New York poet Molly Peacock's *How to Read a Poem — and Create a Poetry Circle* (1999) gives advice, but goodwill and a lively atmosphere are crucial; they can easily be created with the right person in charge.

On beginning this review, I read all poems twice; if a poem did not "click" on the first reading I tried again (about 90% did click on first reading). The editors have ensured that none of the poems in *Light on Don Bank* fall below being very competent poetry, having something to say and saying it well. They have done a good job.

Here it should be stressed that the aim of Live Poets has been to get people to write and read poetry and to meet others. Poets range from "names" such as Les Murray and Robert Gray, to suburbanites. Overall I detected the influence of Judith Wright and Michael Dransfield. Many poems allude to the Australian countryside and many focus on domestic situations (love, parents etc.) while quite a few deal with international issues such as the war in Iraq. Very few, though, rise to great heights, a problem which has been lamented by critics of much recent poetry where competence wins out and facility is the order of the day (this point was raised by several speakers at the September 5-6 Sydney Poets' Union Conference: State of Play; see also James Scully, *Line Break: Poetry as Social Practice* (1988)). I would have liked to have seen evidence in the poetry of wider reading; hardly any of the poems gives evidence of an acquaintance with Charles Olson and he wrote fifty years ago; however the poems in *Light on Don Bank* are mainly poems for the ear and not for the page.

Because Live Poets aim to get all to participate I am reluctant to single out poems, but Judith Beveridge contributes an outstanding one with "The Knot" which is about psychological issues, recalling RD Laing's famous book *Knots*. This poem, showing evidence of great craft, suggests that there are many things in life which are intractable problems because we cannot get

beyond the problem itself; it brings to mind the poetry of JR Prynne.

In about two thirds of the cases, the poems are followed by a statement about what triggered them (Trigger). This anthology is one of the very few with this feature. I was at times surprised that what triggered the poem was frequently not apparent in the actual text, or disappointed that in many cases the trigger over-explained the poem. However, most often, I found the addition of a trigger to be fascinating. More anthologies would benefit from including them. Overall this anthology gives an excellent overview of contemporary Australian poetry and is a tribute to the devotion to poetry over 15 years by Sue Hicks and Danny Gardner. *Light on Don Bank* is a real achievement.



Stephen Torre

SINGING THE COUNTRY AFRESH

Wright, Alexis. *Carpenteria*. Artarmon (NSW): Giramondo. 2006. ISBN 920882170. RRP: AUD 29.95.

On the cover of Alexis Wright's 2007 Miles Franklin Award-winning novel is a photograph of the Leichhardt River flowing to the coast through several s-shaped