

## ***For those not yet dead.***

(We took their orders and are dead. An Anti-war Anthology, edited by Shirley Cass, Ros Cheney, David Malouf and Michael Wilding. Sydney, Ure Smith, 1971. \$ 2.95).

We took their orders and are dead is not a collection of Australian anti-war propaganda, a comfortable rosary of poetry and prose to be told over by a pious left-wing minority. Wherever your principles and prejudices lie, this anthology will disturb them, forcing you to begin thinking and to continue thinking.

In some pieces the specific subject is Vietnam but in all the universal theme is a questioning of the value of war, and an analysis of the proposition that death is a valid way of life. Those who condemn violence in the streets of Brisbane and Melbourne but condone it in the streets of Hanoi or Saigon, who argue that at home we cannot meet violence with violence and urge that it is our moral duty to do so abroad, will find the question unpalatable and the analysis incomprehensible. Nevertheless the poems and prose pieces in which this analysis is made are literature, not raw diatribe or propaganda. They carry the disturbing conviction of all good literature that no matter how distasteful they are to our prejudices, they embody a truth.

The anthology makes its impact more forcibly because it is so varied in tone and style. The converted reader who glows with righteous indignation on reading B.A. Breen's The Orphans at Xuyen Phu killed Aug. 1970 or Christina Stead's What Goal in Mind? must check and pause at Bruce Beaver's Letter XV or Geoffrey Dutton's Marshal Ky in Australia: a Post-script. Beaver asks where the real war lies.

I understand only the man  
who is at war within himself . . .

Look back and shudder. Move on.  
End the tyranny of history,  
that shambles of old blood and bones.  
Learn at least how to live and die  
without the fear of longevity's  
objectiveless freedom,  
without the hope  
of an eternal adolescence.  
The task is to survive the outer  
lure of the bonfire's martyr, the inner  
holocaust of consciousness.  
To turn the entire being  
into a veteran of the natural agon  
whipping us into life between  
a birth and a death.

Dutton points out that sincerity, like patriotism, is not enough:

It appears that in the background, the Uncles, Sam and Ho,

Are also being sincere, behind the same white beards,  
 Though it is very confusing to know that the North and the South  
 And the Vietcong would all join together to fight the Chinese,  
 (Who are appallingly sincere), when we thought all along, told  
 By our Harold, who is so sincere he cannot stop smiling,  
 That the faceless monster, communism, had Chinese eyes.  
 The helicopter, with the cool silk couple, chops over the city  
 Where the teacher lifts his head from the examination papers,  
 'Wordsworth was a great poet because he was so sincere',  
 While the children in the puppet theatre do not hear for laughing  
 At the little stage man on strings whose fear is so sincere.

The oldest contributor to this collection was born in 1893, the youngest in 1949. The poems include formal unrhymed stanzas of Judith Wright's News-reel and Rodney Hall's Detail from Four Incidents. A number of pieces utilize typography and layout as structural components, as in Thomas Shapcott's Picnics, A Conscript Veteran and Richard Tippling's Vietgram: July 1968. Sonnet, ballad and other traditional forms are also used as in John Blight's Helmet Shell, Robert Brissenden's T V and Circuses, Dorothy Auchterlonie's Questions for Kaspar and Timothy Klein's Soldier. In mood the anthology ranges from the cool ridicule of Alan Marshall's prose in How I met General Pau to the detached narrative of the extract from Hugh Atkinson's The Most Savage Animal and the bitter sarcasm of Alan Seymour's To the Gutless Wonders. The ingredients and style of Patrick White's The Full Belly make the reader suspect that the novelist is parodying himself, but as always with White the story is unforgettable. Michael Wilding's ironic parable, The Silence of the Seer, is a disturbing little piece of controlled humour.

The collection is neither left-wing nor right-wing. It is not a display of egocentric emotion from craven intellectuals. The title is taken from a brief epitaph by A. D. Hope called Inscription for any war:

Linger not, stranger, shed no tear;  
 Go back to those who sent us here.  
 We are the young they drafted out  
 To wars their folly brought about.  
 Go tell those old men, safe in bed,  
 We took their orders and are dead.

The reader who would accuse Hope of shapeless emotionalism is directed to Hope's essays, The Cave and the Spring, which reflect, as does the simple classical perfection of the epitaph, a sharply analytical and finely disciplined mind.

The collection is remarkable for the degree of control in tone and structure achieved by the poets and prose-writers. Passionate intensity loses its power and betrays its cause when the writer forgets that his words are impotent without art.

We took their orders in an interesting comparison with a little volume called Poets at War, an Anthology of Verse by Australian Fighting Men published in 1944. Two poets, David Campbell and Geoffrey Dutton, are represented in both collections.

Poets at War has many poems less professionally competent than those in the later anthology but an urgent need to make a statement has given even the less practised of the soldier-poets some distinction. The two volumes set up a tragic tension in the mind of the reader. It is hard to accept that yet another generation has made no difference. What answer can be given to D.B. Kerr (killed) :

This wound will hold some truth perhaps  
In time future when the knife is lost,  
And the hand which held it clasps  
Elsewhere a sheet in death ...

But the fool who laughs will hear  
Dead steps in the hollow hills,  
And as again they echo near  
This wound will hold some truth perhaps.

"You can't argue with a dead man," wrote John Quinn in 1944, "Ask his opinion of a red star/Or a crooked cross/And he'll not tell you." But those who write and read are not, on the whole, yet dead. Perhaps the reader is best directed to We took their orders and are dead with the final sentence from Morris West's fine address, Bombs cannot wipe out communism:

I do not ask you to agree with me, I ask only that you think deeply, and be courageous enough to confront the truth when you find it.

ELIZABETH PERKINS.