

CHERYL FROST

W.A. AMIET : LITERATURE AND THE R.S.L.

In Mackay, where he lived for nearly forty years, W.A. Amiet is still highly esteemed, one indication of this being the library of the university centre there, which is a memorial to him. The main reason for the community's remembrance is probably that Amiet did all the proper community things. A barrister by profession, he was on the local executive of the Country Party for more than thirty years, for six years president of the R.S.L., foundation president of Rotary, president of the Amateur Race Club and the Dramatic Society, chairman of the Mackay Ambulance committee, of the Mackay Show Association, of the local branch of the Royal Geographical Society, and so on. To the outsider, however, Amiet is chiefly memorable as a writer, and as one, furthermore, who flourished in a region not remarkable for its encouragement of the arts.

Although Amiet's initiation in the world of letters preceded his coming to live in Mackay — he gained a first class M.A. in modern languages from the University of Melbourne in 1912 — his position in the community helps to explain his literary survival. Four of his six prose works are collections of material published originally in the Mackay newspaper, "The Daily Mercury", to which he contributed the Saturday editorial and occasional essays on literature over a span of thirty-four years. (Amiet died in 1959, and most of his contributions were therefore offered when newspapers were much less tabloid than they are now.) The last of his literary productions was a collection of poems, written, as he states in a poetical preface, "O'er half a happy century", and entitled, *Metrical Diversions of a Sexagenarian*.¹

The prose works can be readily grouped according to their major subjects, of which there are two — astronomy and literature. Two books on astronomy — *Starry Pages*² and *Starry Ages*³ — and three on literature — *Literature by Languages, A Roll Call*⁴, *A Shakespeare or Two*⁵, and *Courses in Literary History*⁶ — appeared in the thirties. The war caused a break in Amiet's production of volumes and his next, *Scrambled Scrutinies*⁷, was not printed until 1949. It includes essays on a variety of topics, although the favourite two still predominate.

Amiet did not learn his astronomy through original research — Mackay could hardly have provided the facilities for that — but by extensive reading. It was a field which expanded considerably during the thirties, and Amiet set himself the double task of informing local people of new discoveries, and of studying their effect on traditional beliefs and concepts⁸. In

fulfilling the first part of this task, he concentrated on the facts most likely to surprise his readers. He seems to have been fascinated by time spans and dimensions infinitely, or almost infinitely, great or small, with the result that he sometimes reads like the *Guinness Book of Records*.

As a philosopher, he is dedicated to the *via negativa*. That is, he informs as to which beliefs advancing knowledge has rendered invalid, but offers no compensatory vision. Where knowledge is not exact, he refuses to state any personal convictions to take its place, although he often presents the alternative speculations. This open-mindedness seems to have been fundamental to Amiet's personality, and not just a superficial ethic of editorial objectivity. One of the best of the *Scrambled Scrutinies*, entitled "Man the Silkworm", for example, condemns rigidity of opinion — what some people might call commitment to a faith or an ideal — as a cause of wars. Amiet's abiding attitude is also epitomised in the poem. "It May Be So" (*Metrical Diversions*, pp. 24-25), which renounces the beliefs of atheist, Christian, agnostic and Jew, before offering the solution of the true empiricist:

Some day in the future perhaps we'll know —
Yes — I think I'll wait and see.

Many of the features which distinguish Amiet's writing are to be traced to his rejection of commitment. His style is cool and intellectual, and often illuminated by flashes of verbal humour and irony. The reader of today will probably regard his wit as his most endearing trait. The following example is from the preface of *Starry Ages*:

The title is intended to suggest that this book is mainly about the stars and the ages they endure . . . Moreover, the title has not been selected to conceal the fact that this is a companion book to *Starry Pages*, and to certain other volumes, as yet unex cogitated, to be known respectively as *Starry Gauges* and *Starry Stages*, ending up, when the box office receipts are known, with a rhapsody on the subject of *Starry Wages*.

On the other hand, Amiet's determined fence-sitting means that his writing, including his poetry, hardly ever expresses or inspires deep emotion. He seldom deals with moral issues, never settles them, is often superficial, and sometimes trivial. He sets himself problems more semantic than real, for example when he asks, in the eighth *Scrutiny*, if the great works of art, including *Hamlet* and *The Iliad*, are "indispensable". (By understanding "indispensable" in the narrowest way possible, he is able to answer in the negative.)

Amiet's political conservatism is plain from his affiliations and lifestyle, but he never mentions politics in his books. His political stance may in fact further reflect, in an indirect fashion, his dislike of dogmatism, since

a refusal to support a shift of power in the community, either upwards or downwards, would certainly be conservative in its effect.

Amiet shows considerable versatility as a literary critic. Many of the uncollected "Mercury" editorials prove that he was capable of informative, sensitive, and close reviewing, although that is not his favoured manner of dealing with other people's literary works. His usual method is to extract and discuss in his own style the ideas of theirs which he finds most interesting, and he often limits the criticism proper to a brief evaluative paragraph.

The three books of criticism capitalise heavily on his knowledge of languages. They are all encyclopaedic in scope, covering, by different means, all of the worthwhile literature of mankind — and some that may be less worthwhile. There are two major ideas behind them. The first, undoubtedly correct, is that the essential character of a literary work is partially derived from the language in which it is written — hence the inadequacy of any translation. Secondly, Amiet professes the aim of establishing an "international mind", to be accomplished by encouraging the nations to read each other's literature. Sometimes, as in the preface to *A Shakespeare or Two*, he presents this idea with wry humour:

... The idea is that the excellences of this particular Finn will suggest the thought that his countrymen may be companionable fellows also, so that, when our politicians fall out with the Finn politicians, and threaten vengeance, either economically — with taxes, or anatomically — with axes, my readers will rise up in their millions and prevent a further demonstration of man's inhumanity to man . . .

Also in pursuit of internationalism, he urges that schools of Comparative Literature be established in Australian universities. At this time only Strasbourg and Lyons could boast such schools.

Literature by Languages is a bibliography of major world literature, arranged according to languages and derived from the histories of literature which Amiet had on hand in his Mackay study. Disproportionate space is given to some literatures, for example to those of the "white" Empire countries, but this apparent lack of perspective means that Amiet provides information on minor literatures which, even now, it would be hard to find elsewhere. All of Amiet's judgments are individual, but some seem extraordinarily inept today. The following is his opinion of *Beowulf*:

As a story, it is in the "also ran" class, but as a sample of the tales with which our ancestors amused themselves in their more soulful moments, and of their dignified social manners in the days when they dwelt on the Continent, this poem, which runs to over 3000 lines, is a precious historical document.⁹

A Shakespeare or Two offers brief accounts of the lives and works of writers who, Amiet believes, hold in their own literatures a position similar to Shakespeare's in English. It is therefore a literary history, written according to a rather idiosyncratic plan, but useful enough, especially when it leaves the well known writers, such as Vergil, Dante, and Molière, to deal with authors often completely unknown to English speakers, such as those from Asia and the lesser European countries. Amiet's chapters are often well-written enough to inspire a strong wish to read the authors he describes.

The third book, *Courses in Literary History*, is a scholarly annotated bibliography of histories of literature, once again arranged according to languages, and using once again the literary histories which Amiet had collected in his Mackay study. The work was intended as the first tool to be taken up by a scholar undertaking the study of a literature previously entirely unknown to him. The purpose was, therefore, narrow to begin with, and the usefulness of Amiet's bibliography has declined further as literary history has grown more unfashionable. Its style, however, is impeccable; it fully accomplishes its avowed aim; and it is the most scholarly of Amiet's critical books, as *A Shakespeare or Two* is the most interesting.

Amiet's published poetry is careful, pedestrian, and as untouched by the enlivening example of modern English poetry outside North Queensland as it is by genuine imagination. The following stanza is fairly representative:

I wonder whether, out in space —
On wings of light conveyed —
The eyes of seraphim retrace
The scenes wherein we've strayed.
Does pulsing ether still preserve
The image of the past?
Sailing the empyrean curve,
Where does it end at last?¹⁰

Amiet often strives for complex and ingenious verbal effects, but even the poems in which such effects predominate remain stylistically much inferior to his prose. The following is from his "Kyrielle" for his daughter, Cecilie:

Gracious, vivacious, sagacious and sage,
Cheering, endearing, petite personage,
Dainty, delicious, jocose and judicious:
Jewels and Pearls for the gayest of girls.¹¹

Somewhat more tolerable are the very brief "rounds", paraphrased from various languages, and arranged in a series entitled "Sermonettes in Rondelets". This example is based on a poem by Jean I, Duke of Brabant:

Early in May
One morning gaily I arose,
Saw far away
The islands misty in the bay,
Beheld the cane in verdant rows,
Heard music where the river flows
Early in May.^{1 2}

Even so, the canefield is an uneasy companion to the European Maytime.

Amiet rarely takes notice of his North Queensland environment. His scholarly works probably reflect it indirectly, in that lack of access to comprehensive libraries may have determined their nature and range. Direct references, such as the following, are unusual in the prose works:

A collision of two suns, half the size of our own, would create a temperature of 600 million degrees Fahrenheit in the shade – somewhat too torrid for even North Queenslanders to endure.^{1 3}

In the poetry they are somewhat more frequent and occasional poems, such as "To a Distinguished Citizen"^{1 4} and indissolubly linked to Mackay. However, Amiet is not a regional poet in the sense that North Queensland is a major theme. He declines either to celebrate or to deride it. Although he lived there for so long, the contents of his mind would not have been very different if he had stayed in Melbourne.

The danger in dealing with a writer such as Amiet at any length is that the very act tends to inflate his importance more than is probably warranted. This was the fault which H.A. Kellow compounded in his book, *Queensland Poets*, written nearly half a century ago. When the literary ocean is an area such as North Queensland, minnows are only too likely to appear as whales to the eager researcher. A judgment of Amiet which scrupulously avoided the excesses of jingoism and of scholarly enthusiasm would be as follows: a charming and witty writer of prose, whose works, however, usually lack philosophical substance; a literary phenomenon who produced works of scholarly value, though stationed in Mackay; as a poet best forgotten; significant for Queensland rather than for Australian literature.

NOTES:

1. Brisbane, Watson Ferguson, 1952.
2. Angus and Robertson, 1934.
3. Angus and Robertson, 1937.
4. Angus and Robertson, 1932.
5. Angus and Robertson, 1935.

6. Angus and Robertson, 1938.
7. Published by Watson Ferguson.
8. In a brief reference in *A History of Australian Literature, 1900-1950* (Melbourne University Press, 1951, p. 1210) H.M. Green designates Amiet as a "populariser".
9. *Literature by Languages*, p. 27.
10. "On Wings of Light", *Metrical Diversions*, p.26.
11. "Jewels and Pearls", *ibid.*, p. 30.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 21.
13. *Starry Ages*, pp. 109-110.
14. *Metrical Diversions*, p. 18.

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TOWARDS AN AMIET BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Jack High: Amiet's Australian Essays. *The Bulletin*, 28 April 1937, p. 2.
An article on his *Literature by Languages*, *The Practice of Literary History*, *Starry Pages*, and *A Shakespeare or Two*.
2. Amiet's Essays: *The Bulletin*, 12 January 1938, p. 2.
A review of *Starry Ages*.
3. Frederick T. Macartney: a paragraph review of *Starry Ages*. *All About Books* vol. 10, no. 1, 15 January 1938, p. 4.
4. W.A. Amiet: Australian Literary History. *Meanjin Papers* Vol. 1, No. 6, Summer 1941, pp. 5-6. Three rules for Australian literary success.
5. W.A. Amiet: Review of Kathleen Fitzpatrick: *Sir John Franklin in Tasmania, 1837-1843*. *Meanjin* vol. 9, no. 4, Summer 1950, pp. 305-6.
6. Nettie Palmer: Review of his *Scrambled Scrutinies*. *Meanjin* vol. 10, no. 3, Spring 1951, pp. 315, 317.
7. W.A. Amiet: North Queensland in Poetry. *Queensland Writing* (1954) pp. 11-15. An essay.