

## ELIZABETH PERKINS

### BRIEF REVIEWS

Eric Irvin, *Gentleman George: King of Melodrama*. Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1980. Cloth \$14.95. 234 pp. with index. David Williamson, *Travelling North*. Sydney: The Currency Press, 1980. Paper \$4.95. 88 pp. John Summons, *Lamb of God*. Theatre Australia New Writing Series. Sydney: The Currency Press, 1980. Paper \$2.75. 96 pp. Louis Nowra, *Visions*. Sydney: The Currency Press, 1979. Paper \$3.95. Sumner Locke-Elliott, *Rusty Bugles*. Sydney: The Currency Press, 1980. Paper \$4.95. 112 pp. *Three Political Plays* ed. Alrene Sykes. (Steve J. Spears, *King Richard*; Stephen Sewell, *The Father We Loved on A Beach By The Sea*; John Bradley, *Irish Stew*). Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1980. Cloth \$17.95, paper \$9.95. 156 pp. Barry Oakley, *The Great God Mogadon and Other Plays*. Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1980. Cloth \$8.95, paper \$4.95. 119 pp.

George Darrell is known to followers of Australian drama as the author of *The Sunny South*, first produced in Melbourne in 1883, and published by The Currency Press in the National Theatre series in 1975. Eric Irvin and the University of Queensland Press have produced a handsome, well-illustrated biography of George Darrell, with useful references and an index. *The Sunny South* is apparently the only extant script by Darrell, and has an interest beyond its status as a competent and typical nineteenth century melodrama.

Darrell came to Melbourne in 1865 at the age of twenty-three. He was then George Frederick Price, the son of an inn-keeper of Bath, already in love with everything about the theatre. Irvin suggests there may have been something shady in his scant twenty-three years in England, since he never offered information about them and soon changed his name to Darrell. He died, an apparently "unhappy, bitter, and lonely old man" by quietly drowning himself in Sydney Harbour in 1921. Irvin points out

that a number of Darrell's plays held characters who met death by drowning and suicide.

Everything that Darrell wrote, says Irvin, was intended for the popular stage, so it must have lacked the polish of the more sophisticated theatre for which Wilde wrote, or the serious pretensions of Pinero and Jones, and even more the brilliant social concern of Shaw. Yet the plays of these illustrious contemporaries could hardly have been presented further afield than his own, which played in England, Australia, the United States, New Zealand and South Africa.

Since the script of *The Sunny South* is the only survivor, Irvin draws on newspaper reviews for information about as many of the others as possible. Darrell's plays may lack great dramatic and literary quality, but some of them were obviously observant of colonial life and manners, and their observation would be interesting in tracing historically the representation of society in our drama. *The Forlorn Hope*, for example, which opened in Melbourne at the end of 1879, was both praised and castigated by critics for its insight into the social life of the colonies.

Irvin quotes a Sydney critic who said the play was burdened with "little lectures" on free trade, protection, drunkenness, the land question, the Chinese question, and politics, which "however excellent they might be in a debate, or in the leading columns of a newspaper, are rather out of place in a drama". This critic did praise the originality and stagecraft of *The Forlorn Hope*. Another critic found the play's involvement with public issues highly commendable and praised its keen insight into the social life of the colonies, and hoped that its "faith in the military ardour of our native youth, and a whole-souled conviction of the greatness and grandeur of this glorious country" were justified, while it appealed "forcibly to the sympathies" of the audience.

Of particular interest in *The Sunny South* is the character of the goldfield digger Ben Brewer who, if drawn from Darrell's observation, uncannily foreshadows Alf Cook some eighty years later in Seymour's *The One Day of the Year*.

I'm a digger, I am, (says Ben when we first meet him) and I ain't much on palaver, but what I says I means and what I says I does, and what I says, old pal, is as we've struck it hot—that's what we have, struck it hot.

And Brewer is characterised by "I says it, and I'm a digger, I am, and what I says I means" as the less fortunate Alf is characterised by his "I'm a bloody Australian and I'll always stand up for bloody Australia. . . . I'll show the lot of 'em. I'm a bloody Australian and I'll always . . ."

Reports of Darrell's other plays whet the appetite without hope of satisfaction, it seems, and the discovery of another authentic script would be of great interest. Irvin's book draws sympathetically and simply the vicissitudes of Darrell's life and gives interesting glimpses of the progress of colonial theatre in the background. Perhaps it is too easy when reading a simple and unemotional account of the life of an ordinary person to imagine that it would make a good play, but that was a first response to this biography. There are precedents for lives of theatre people, not least Pinero's *Trelawney of 'the Wells'*, commemorating Tom Robertson. Darrell seems not to have been as substantial a writer as Robertson, certainly, nor as innovative, but he could not but help be one of our theatre pioneers, and in Irvin's pages he arouses interest, curiosity, sympathy, respect and admiration. That is no small thing, and subject enough for a drama.

Such a selection of Australian plays as that listed above is difficult to comment on briefly since they range from the polished professionalism of Williamson's *Travelling North* to the restored vocabulary of Sumner Locke-Elliott's *Rusty Bugles*, and the sincere if strained searching of adolescent psychology in John Summons' *Lamb of God*. *Travelling North* was excellent on stage and is not disappointing when read. But if it is, as Philip Parsons says, "the most religious play that Williamson has ever written", and in one way it is, its spiritual tendencies only testify to the profound humanism of its educated Australian characters. Williamson's *The Removalists*, *Don's Party* and *A Handful of Friends* are more likely to prompt reader or audience to investigate the possibilities of religious help for our society. The nihilism of those plays can be frightening, and Williamson's per-

ception of it almost indicates an instinctive awareness of our spiritual vacuum. Unless, indeed, they are written from pure observation.

Perhaps Philip Parsons is indicating that *Travelling North* goes beyond pure observation in its characterisation of the ageing Frank Wilson whose life has been directed by political altruism and apparently a good deal of personal selfishness. The play makes death seem rather funny, even resorting to a fairly hackneyed stage-trick with Frank's corpse, but in a decade where an affluent society has to be counselled in "death awareness", perhaps *Travelling North* is the modern sophisticated equivalent to the Victorian death-bed scene as a *memento mori*.

*Lamb of God* and the three political plays by Steve J. Spears, Stephen Sewell and John Bradley, try to do more than *Travelling North*, but fall far short in technical smoothness. Playwrights' reach should exceed their grasp or what's Australian drama for, and all these plays had good reviews when first produced. Those who were unable to see them, but read the reviews, will be grateful to Alrene Sykes and the University of Queensland Press for presenting the scripts not much more than a year after they were first staged.

Simply reading them is rather heavy going, although Spears' *King Richard*, about a convict who organises a Trade Union for gaol inhabitants, is less intense in dialogue and more novel in the implications of the subject. *The Father We Loved etc.*, *Irish Stew* and, from a socio-religious view, *Lamb of God*, are essentially polemical, although obviously successful in presenting acceptable characters and scenes. While applauding (or decrying) their sentiments, probably most readers will need to see them in performance before trying to evaluate them.

*Rusty Bugles* always was a good play, a pioneer in sensitive realism some seven years before Lawler's *The Doll*, and the Currency edition which restores the originally censored vocabulary is a necessary complement to the script presented in Eunice Hanger's edition of *Three Australian Plays*. Locke-Elliott says *Rusty Bugles* is a documentary, not strictly a play, about soldiers encamped in the Northern Territory during the winter months of 1944. The war was not over, but boredom, isolation, the in-

stability of personal relationships, and the insecurity of civilian life waiting in the south are more threatening than a Japanese invasion. It is a sensitively observed play, with strong structural coherence even if it lacks a plot, as the author claims. The greater rawness of the original vocabulary is certainly not offensive and does not undermine the play's sensitivity, but does restore its authentic tones and strengthen it as a dramatic entity.

Louis Nowra's *Visions* is, like his other published scripts, more closely related to recent European theatre of symbols than most other Australian plays. It is the fourth play, apparently, in a quartet comprising *Dreamhouses*, not yet published, *Albert Names Edward*, suitable for stage or radio, *Inner Voices* and *Visions*, which Nowra said could be called *Inner Visions*. These plays are so mentally stimulating and theatrically sharpened that one looks forward to the published script of *Inside the Island* which was presented this year.

Debates as to whether Nowra should say what he does say in drama strictly within an Australian setting seem pretty irrelevant beside the impact of the plays themselves. The other debate about the Australianness or otherwise of his dialogue also seems pointless, and an experiment with a class fairly alert to language proved that unless there was some specific place or character reference, it is not often possible to distinguish between lines from Pinter and lines from Nowra. This does not mean at all that one resembles the other, but that both write excellent impersonal dialogue especially designed and suited to the kind of plays they write.

The six short plays by Barry Oakley are of varied quality but have similar themes: the struggle of the little man against social suppression, bureaucratic regimentation, or his own conscience. Even listing those as antagonists of the ordinary, culpable, spasmodically defiant little fellow does not seem adequately to account for the forces pitted against him. It is probably Fate waiting there in the wings or poised from the overhead flies – a Hardylike fate with an Irish accent. It would be interesting to see the powerful kind of play that Oakley might write if his resolute wry humour deserted him to be replaced by the sombre vision of O'Neill. For Oakley has what O'Neill lacked,

a distinctive, cadenced, dialogue which demands attention even if the theme flags. This collection of short plays is ideal to supply little theatre groups with a variety of styles. *Scanlan*, a delightful satire on Australian literary criticism and unfaithful academics, and *The Hollow Tombola*, a rather heavy parody of White's *The Solid Mandala*, may need a fairly initiated audience to appreciate their finer points.

*The Jindyworobaks*, edited by Brian Elliott. Portable Australian Authors series. Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1979. Cloth \$18.95, paper \$9.95. 330 pp.

Some of us first met the Jindyworobaks at school, encouraged by English teachers trying to leaven or dilute our diet of English poets with native products. Long before the age of xerox, Australian poems were written on the blackboard and laboriously copied into our notebooks. Rex Ingamell's *Moorawathimeering* caused many patient recourses to a grubby rubber as I wrestled with his wonderful incantation, and it chanted itself in my head on the homeward tram. It was probably as close as a city child had come to the aboriginal spirit of the land in those comparatively ignorant days.

Polite critical jeers at the pretensions and achievements of the Jindyworobak movement have always seemed misplaced, and this anthology with its excellent appendices of critical opinion and statements from Jindyworobak writers completely rectifies any injustice they suffered. Their aspirations to tune into the spirit of the land, and the productions of their lesser practitioners, often exceeded their knowledge of aboriginal culture and the aesthetics of poetry; yet their contribution to Australian literary culture was not insignificant. Judith Wright summed up this contribution well: "To emphasize our regionalism instead of trying to ignore it, to concentrate on the background instead of trying to elude it—this has had a value in itself, and it has performed the further function of leading to a reaction against itself. . . . having found out what happens when one tries to treat the problem as an end in itself, it is now possible to apply the knowledge."

Brian Elliott's introduction is a most useful incitement to reassessment, and the substantial sections of the anthology containing Jindyworobak prose, theory, criticism and examples of later verse affinities (including poems by Kath Walker, Les Murray and Peter Porter) are essential aids to seeing the movement in perspective. Rex Ingamells, Ian Tilbrook and Max Harris began the Jindyworobaks in Adelaide in 1938, and as we learnt in that long-past poetry lesson, the aboriginal word adopted to describe the group's intention means *to annex* or *to join*. They wanted not only to join Australian poetry to its native environment, but also in Rex Ingamell's words, to cut it loose "from whatever alien influences trammel it." Apart from the Lindsay school, and not always apart from them, these influences seemed chiefly the politer kind of English verse practised by the Georgians, with a little of Eliot and Yeats. It seems surprising that from these influences Australian poetry was even then striking some distinctive notes. Yet Ingamells, and William Hart-Smith and Roland Robinson who soon joined the Jindyworobaks, were right in sensing that Australian poetry needed more native inspiration.

Some academic criticism of the Jindyworobaks perhaps rose from fear that inferior craftsmanship would be excused by the content or intention of the poem, and The Bulletin Red Page was cautious in accepting them, having, apart from aesthetic reservations, a deep suspicion of any form of primitivism. A.D. Hope summarised one aspect of Jindyworobakism as "the Boy Scout School of Poetry" because of their "enthusiasm for playing at being primitive" and finding moral value in bush craft. A fair amount of their output perhaps is too simplistic for adult readers, but this anthology provides dozens of verses that are ideal for teachers looking for suitable poetry for young readers or reciters.

*Moorawathimeering* is probably one of the worst of the better Jindyworobak poems, and James McAuley's *Envoi for a Book of Poems* one of the best to fall under their classification:

... And I am fitted to the land as the soul is to the body,  
I know its contractions, waste and sprawling indolence;  
They are in me and its triumphs are my own,  
Hard-won in the thin and bitter years without pretence.

Rodolfo Delmonte, *Piercing into the Psyche: The Poetry of Francis Webb*. With a select concordance of Keywords and Key-roots and with a foreword by Chris Wallace-Crabbe. Venice: C.E.T.I.D., 1979. Price on enquiry. 289 pp.

Dr Rodolfo Delmonte teaches at the University of Venice and has studied in Australia: *Piercing into the Psyche* is a selection from his Doctorate thesis, augmented by further work with computer analysis of the poetry of Francis Webb. Many Australian readers will follow this latter section with ease and interest, but the rest of us will find Dr Delmonte's general discussion of the man and his poetry of greater concern.

He begins with a sternly courteous rebuke to some Australian critics who, he says, tend to discuss Webb's poetry while carefully refraining from examining the aesthetic or human implications for his poetry of his mental illness. "What these people have done to Webb, the man who lived the most important part of his life in mental hospitals, has been to sacrifice him, in the name of the canons established by society – the society of normality – to the goddess of aesthetics and decorum. They have split Webb into two different entities: the poet, and the man – mentally ill – as if they were not one and the same person." Webb was born in Adelaide in 1925 and at the age of twenty-two drew critical acclaim with his historic narrative, *A Drum for Ben Boyd*. He died in 1974 leaving a considerable opus which has been read and discussed with enthusiasm. The best excuse for critical neglect of the poet as a whole man is that few who value the poetry are equipped to venture into the medical field. Dr Delmonte cannot be charged with rushing in where others more prudently refrain, for it is apparent that his discussion of schizophrenia is adequately informed to bear the weight of his reading of Webb's poetry.

He is greatly sympathetic to Webb's work and the analysis of its semantic structure does not reduce his approach to clinical appraisal. The conclusions may seem obvious once they are pointed out, but they have not been pointed out earlier, at least in print, in this way. Dr Delmonte explains, for example, that:

“Most of Webb’s poetry is directed towards this aim (the mitigation or transformation of an alien society into something comprehensible to the self); almost all of it is structured on a dialectical basis; its central myth, the myth of Christ, is used as a mediator between opposite poles: the whole of Webb’s life has been a quest for harmony, order and balance in his psychic world.”

What emerges from the discussion is the desperate courage of Francis Webb’s poetry, so that one appreciates more his kinship with William Cowper or Christopher Smart, in spite of differences in their poetics. More immediately relevant comparisons with Webb’s work have been that of Robert Lowell, Rainer Maria Rilke and even T.S. Eliot. But the struggle to survive physically and mentally through words that gradually, inexorably desert the poet is only fought to a mortal conclusion by a few, and Francis Webb was one of these.



Norman Lindsay: Illustration to Francis Webb’s *A Drum for Ben Boyd*.