Dorothy Hewett, *The Gipsy Dancer and Early Poems*, with illustrations by the author. Edited by Christine Alexander, with others (Juvenilia Press, 2009)

Dorothy Hewett, who emerged on the Australian literary scene in the 1970s as a major lyric poet and playwright, had practised both these arts from an early age. The story of how Dorothy, the brilliant student poet and dramatist of the 1940s, disappeared from that scene for many years, devoting herself to Communist Party activism and to domestic life, is well known. This publication takes the story back even further, into her childhood, which was spent on an isolated farm in the wheat belt of Western Australia. The play and poems reproduced in this volume were composed by Dorothy between the ages of eight and eleven, when she and her younger sister took Correspondence School lessons at home, and she read and wrote prodigiously. They reveal a powerful creative response to both her reading and the natural environment, and a clear sense of herself as an artist, both as a poet and as an actress.

The poems fall into two groups: the ‘fairy poems,’ which she had illustrated and written out in perfect copperplate to enter in the annual competitions at the Perth Royal Show; and a larger group of poems, which she later typed out and labelled ‘Poems for Katie and Rozanna’, her daughters. This larger group is divided into three sections, all of which demonstrate a fascination with Aboriginal and European myths, often combined, as in:

> The sandman is a blackfeller  
> With soft grey curls,  
> Dreams in his bluey  
> For sleepy boys and girls.

The earliest of these poems to have survived in manuscript form, ‘The Magic Mia-Mia’, written when she was about eight (and reproduced with later punctuation changes only), shows her capacity to infuse the natural environment with the mystery and magic of these myths:

> White-feller dream-children, in the fire  
> Lives the little black magic mia-mia.  
> Take your little black brother by the hand,  
> Let him lead you into Nullabor Land.  
> There in the midst of the Great Red Land,  
> Listen! you will understand  
> Alcheringa, Dream-time, croon  
> Songs older than water, air or moon;  
> Glad songs borrowed from the sun  
> In the Great Red Land where the Wandjis run.

While these lines demonstrate an extraordinary knowledge of Aboriginal terms for the land’s spiritual powers, other poems name the land through everyday observation or...
report, like the poem about an Aboriginal girl whose father is a camel driver and grandfather was a pearl diver:

Little black Billai
Smokes a crab-claw pipe,
Eats red quandong nuts
When they are ripe.
Riding through the Nullabor
Down the camel track...

‘The Gipsy Dancer’ was performed by Dorothy and her sister and some neighbouring children, on the occasion of her eleventh birthday in 1934. For her play, the young writer used rhyming couplets, with instructions for most of the speeches to be sung. This choice antedates by many years the preference for musical theatre that would be the distinctive feature of Hewett’s later writing for the stage. So, too, does the subject – a beautiful and sought-after girl, torn between the lure of fame and fortune, and her loyalty to ‘the folk I love/And the wild free sky that lies above,’ in particular ‘a gipsy lad, though his coat was ragged and old.’ Sir Reginald Rand, a theatre owner from the city, tries in vain to persuade Lynette, the gipsy dancer, to join his company. After his death, however, his brother arrives at the gipsy camp with the news that he has bequeathed the theatre to her. Lynette sings of her dilemma:

When gipsy hearts are loyal, and gipsy hearts are true,
When gipsy hearts are breaking, all for the love of you.
What would you do? What would you do?

She leaves her people, but at the theatre her success attracts the jealousy of a rival, a girl who plots against Lynette. Sent away in disgrace, she returns to the gipsy camp just in time to become the bride of her old love, Tam. The final stage directions read: ‘Tam and Lynette are crowned gipsy king and queen, amongst much cheering and brass band accompaniment. Black out. Curtain call.’ Yearning for love as well as applause, Lynette is an embryonic Hewett heroine. Struck by her name, and wondering if the young Dorothy had chosen ‘Lynette’ as a glamorously modern moniker (given her enchantment with Hollywood at the time), my investigations into its history led me to conclude, rather, that she would have come across the name in Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King*. This, too, foreshadows the literary allusiveness of Hewett’s later lyrical and dramatic writing.

This collection of her juvenilia ends with the ending of her childhood, and exile from the bush. As editor Christine Alexander points out, in Perth, where Dorothy attended school and then university, she kept on writing and performing, but these were her ‘songs of experience’, of a different fantasy world where she imagined a fabulous life of fame as a writer and actress in the great cities of the world (xxxv-xxxvi). Yet images from her childhood recur throughout her life’s work. Now we can understand a little better how they remained so vivid in her imagination since she first put them into words. To understand, as well, how a young girl could have such a strong sense of the need and the power to name her world, and her desires – that remains a mystery, amply documented in this volume.
The book results from a creative pedagogical project where Christine Alexander supervised the work of MA students at the University of New South Wales in editing and commenting on the texts. It appears in the Juvenilia Press series of which she is the general editor, and which includes many such volumes, by writers ranging from the Brontes and Jane Austen to recent Canadian writers, Margaret Laurence, Marion Engel and Margaret Atwood.

More work by Dorothy Hewett (who died in 2002) is due to be published in the near future by the University of Western Australia Press: a volume of selected poems edited by her daughter, Kate Lilley, and one of selected essays edited by Fiona Morrison.

Susan Sheridan