

***Selected Prose of Dorothy Hewett* edited and introduced by Fiona Morrison (University of Western Australia Press, 2011)**

Editor Fiona Morrison points to a certain tradition of collecting the prose of poets (4); this collection brings together the literary criticism, political essays and writing on theatre of Dorothy Hewett, never only a poet. While Hewett's manifold achievements across diverse genres, especially poetry, have been well surveyed, her voice as a critic has remained historical, muffled by its scattered presence in small, even forgotten journals and magazines, and unavailable as a discrete body of work.

Great affection remains for Hewett as a writer and figure, among her readers but also her witnesses, and this collection will find interest from many. Her trajectory, from young modernist to committed communist, to melodramatic apostate and then contrarian grande dame, can be traced in these pieces, and they are rich biographical resources for a commanding figure in Australian literature. But not only such – Hewett deserves to be read for her reach into Australian and international culture as a critic and commentator in her own right, and in her own changing times.

Morrison has collected 32 pieces of Hewett's non-fiction prose, of differing size, weight and amplitude, grouped into three nominated sections, organised chronologically. The first of these presents literary critical pieces, and begins with two from 1945, when Hewett's poem 'Testament' had just won the ABC Poetry Competition and she was writing for *Black Swan*, the student magazine of the University of Western Australia. Two pieces of greater contrast are hard to find: one on the British modernist poet, eccentric and wit Edith Sitwell; the other on the recently published first volume of the goldfields trilogy completed by communist and West Australian Katharine Susannah Prichard. Written when she was not quite twenty-two, Hewett's piece on Sitwell is notably accomplished and striking now for its immediate address, as if Sitwell, her contemporaries, outlandish performative modernism, desiccated aristocratic family and committed readers were all directly present for the *Black Swan*, refusing volubly any imaging of Perth as a lonely outpost on the far edge of a mere former colony. The emphasis is on Sitwell's mythic self-fashioning, from the tawdry remnants of blasted Georgian England – 'Enfant terrible of the twentieth century, with her patched ladies with parasols, walking in gold and tinsel landscapes, full of waterfalls, jewels and bear-dark woods ... her own childhood appears again and again' (31). Hewett's assessment of Sitwell that 'to know her early work is to know her childhood' resonates of course with Hewett's own work, especially her poetry and 1990 autobiography *Wild Card*, and draws comparisons with Sitwell's own assessments of herself as both writer and figure. As a woman poet, she told Stephen Spender in 1946, 'there was no-one to point the way. I had to learn everything – learn, among other things, not to be timid.' Despite the tenderness and vulnerability often exhibited in Hewett's work, she was never accused of timidity.

Her piece on Prichard contrasts in style, emphasis, weight and approach, as well as its topic. In a short, summative essay, Hewett delivers punchy characterisations in a declamatory style. Single sentence paragraphs dominate: 'There is always a sense of teeming vivid history in her characters and the events that shape their lives' (42). *The Roaring Nineties* carries Prichard's broadest attempt to cast Australian versions of egalitarianism as the building blocks for a socialist nationalism, sourced in a goldfields community democracy forged against 'the big money-grubbing operators who with backing from the Perth Parliament were

Book reviews: *Selected Prose of Dorothy Hewett* edited and introduced by Fiona Morrison. Nicole Moore.

Transnational Literature Vol. 4 no. 2, May 2012.

<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

squeezing out the original small digger' (42). This piece from Hewett finishes with lengthy quotations from Prichard herself, and the source of its immediacy is place rather than address. Prichard's intellectual Marxism is evident and Hewett's interest in this clear, while her passion is invested in art's capacity to change worlds and lives, to model justice. In the difference between these two pieces, we witness Hewett surveying the divided cultural terrain of the postwar English-speaking world, as it appeared from Perth, and staking out the polarities of the literary cold war.

The first section moves from this opening pair to a 1960 essay blasting Kylie Tennant's later work as sensationalist and sentimental, charging her with mere 'naturalism', that Zhdanovian sin, in the most full-blown exhibition of a Stalinist reading model: 'Is she up another dead-end with a bug about style à la Patrick White?' (51). It then contrasts in its turn with an ecstatic review of Randolph Stow's *The Merry-go-round in the Sea*, published in 1965, when Hewett had returned from a disillusioning visit to the Eastern bloc. I thought of her among her women contemporaries, thanks to this juxtaposition – on the one hand, Judith Wright, publishing highly wrought poetry criticism in mainstream forums, attracting respect and accruing stature, and on the other, Mona Brand, a communist poet and playwright, publishing strongly opinionated yet carefully rigorous literary commentary in small, left wing journals, ironically defending White from his socialist critics. Women remained effectively amateur critics throughout those mid-decades of the century, without institutional support or permanent gigs, as shown by the absence of their work, with the exception of Wright's, from *Authority and Influence*, the 2001 edited collection of 'Australian Literary Criticism 1950-2000', and from other histories – Sue Sheridan's recent *Nine Lives: Postwar Women Writers Making their Mark* illuminates this tellingly. Hewett's literary criticism encompasses essays on Michael Dransfield, Robert Adamson, Peter Cowan, poetry and gender, and finishes with a 1994 review of Miles Franklin's collected letters – another woman writer with a notable yet half-forgotten life as a critic.

The second and third groupings in this collection are 'Politics' and 'Theatre', and in these sections we see Hewett's expansive interests as well as her sheer longevity as an observer and opinion maker. But writing and literature are at the heart of these two sections too – the political pieces almost all address literature's political and social responsibilities, apart from a series of articles from the *Worker's Star* about equal pay for women and a forward to Max Brown's *The Black Eureka* (1976), about the 1946 Pilbara strike, from which came Hewett's protest ballad 'Clancy and Dooley and Don McLeod'. Two unpublished essays sit at the centre of the 'Politics' section: 'Eat Bread and Salt and Speak the Truth' and 'The Times they are A'Changin' were both written in the mid-1960s and remained unpublished until collected by Ian Syson in *Hecate* in 1995. Both announce Hewett's disillusion with the proscriptive model of progressive aesthetics that had informed her work for two decades, and see her using the words of dissident Eastern bloc friends like Stefan Heim, that realism should, above all, 'speak the truth'. Her critical obituary after Prichard's death in 1969, 'An Excess of Love', now appears less an abrupt betrayal than a long held position, only confirmed by Hewett's resignation from the CPA in August 1968. The complex internationalism of Hewett's (and Communism's) investments in the literary are evident not only in these connections but in a substantial, previously unpublished lecture on 'The Russian Writer', delivered it seems in 1968 for an adult education class, which dovetails with her 1967 disaffected poem 'The Hidden Journey', testifying to both her long attachment and her grasp of its limits.

The theatre essays begin in 1976, as if in mid-conversation, with a piece about the role of theatre in 'Australian Literature', which 'is an old dame now, and needs a good shot in the arm' (209). Her writing here appears as if from a third life; these are full throated, richly historical assessments of theatre's role, preoccupations and repeated crises in Australia. A pugnacious defence of White as modernist playwright is prominent, published while *Big Toys* was in its first rehearsals for the Sydney Opera House in 1977. In this section too we have Hewett's first extended commentary on her own work, in a piece about 'Creating Heroines in Australian Plays' and another about 'music dramas'. The collection ends with two speeches, recording Hewett's participation in public discussion about women in theatre, and by then we hear her as the laurelled figure she was – towards the end of her life she confessed: 'my daughter tells me I'm famous'.

This is not all of Hewett's non-fiction prose, as the title tells us, and Morrison's selection shows a great deal of care and acumen – partisan pieces are set against contrasting passions; the calculated interests of the political woman are not separate from the appetites of the theatrical poet. Morrison's rich introduction explains the connections between the essays by elaborating Hewett's romanticism and Leavisite or Lawrencian interest in 'life', a word which recurs through the collection, but also elaborates the differing conceptual or philosophical positions, and the self-conceits and professed loyalties or betrayals. Hewett's work is both rigorous and partisan, assertive, sometimes doctrinal, at other points intensely personal. More than this, as in her review of Jack Beasley's *Red Letter Days* in 1979, she assumes the role of opinion maker and speaks, often despite her position, as if from the centre of a literary world. By the 1980s she was something of a grande dame, as she'd accused Australian literature of becoming – contrary, outspoken, even freewheeling, but still such. And we are indebted to UWA Press and Fiona Morrison for bringing that dame's critical voice to pointed life again.

Nicole Moore