Dougie’s Ton & 99 Other Sonnets by Syd Harrex (Lythrum Press, 2007)

Syd Harrex’s sixth book of poetry is a ‘map of the island’, to quote the epigraph from Robert Louis Stevenson at the beginning of the volume. Setting himself the task of composing 100 sonnets, Harrex has created a diverse and satisfying collection of reflections and musings, detailed and lush in its descriptions of places and events that shape the author and the nation. A consistent interest in themes of memory, connections between people, places and events, cricket, and moments writ large greets the reader, and the relationship between the mundane and the poetical is pursued throughout.

The opening poem, ““Bard-Birth,”” sets the tone of the collection in a number of ways. Its dedication to a fellow poet reflects Harrex’s connections with friends and writers that reverberate throughout this collection, and his previous works. Its title forms a reference to Shakespeare that prefigures the gestures of acknowledgement to poets, writers, artists, and sporting figures that seep through the poems like song lines. The poem reveals a continued interest with themes of ageing and death, the incorporation of motifs of the natural world and, in particular, with light and luminescence, that act as a continual motif throughout the collection.

There are other sustained motifs, of course. Cricket, as can be gleaned from the title, plays a strong role in positioning the depiction of Australia throughout the collection. Here the sweaty physicalities of literature are measured against the informed literariness of Cricket. This is no more obvious than in the titular poem ‘Dougie’s Ton’, sonnet number 100 at the close of the collection. The mythical place of Doug Walters’ century against England at the WACA in 1974 – the nostalgic can revisit the achievement on YouTube – is cemented in the way Harrex equates the event as a defining national moment of similar significance to an Australian psyche as the assassination of John F. Kennedy to the United States. We know that Australia as a nation constitutes itself through its iconic sporting heroes, but the unique spin here is the way Harrex equates the sporting achievements not only with political events that impact a nation but with the ways nations write themselves into legend. Merging the seemingly disparate worlds of sport and poetry, Harrex has captured the poetry in sport as well as the sport in poetry. That is, he delivers via the words on the page the inherent poetry in a moment of national sporting prowess, the one man against the ball at the stumps, but then proceeds to fill his description of that moment with references to Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot which bleeds and blurs the line between sport and poetry and invests each with the texture of the other.

Similarly, the collection is filled with references to the likes of Faustus, Keats, Spenser, Forster, Shakespeare and Shakespearean characters, and the people and relationships in the poet’s life out of which poems have emerged. Poems and the images and ideas that build them – Forster’s idea of ‘only connect’ is quoted twice in the collection – can be seen to have a particular importance and relevance here. The connections between people, events, places, moments, ideas, and words play a substantial role in this collection. This speaks, also, to the impulse to the sublime that is found not only in the references to the natural world but also in reference to ideas big and small.
There’s a lot of death here, related to broader themes of ageing, mortality and memory. The deaths of friends are acknowledged and mourned; the age-old question of what happens after death is contemplated and circled. Despite the religious symbolism and references throughout, Harrex rather emphatically rejects the notion of a Christian salvation. ‘Biopsy’ faces the notion of mortality through the illogicality of cancer and betrays a hint of anxiety regarding the question of death, but this is balanced by the subsequent poem, ‘The Heritage Equation,’ in which Harrex explores the pre-verbal simplicity of a child’s engagement with the environment. Here Harrex contemplates the metaphysics of the natural world, of the grandeur of science: ‘We try to understand the principles / of fallen matter’.

These are poems crafted out of moments, moments that house ideas. But it is the language that captures these moments that really stands out. Lines like ‘Along the tide-rummaged shore and shunting / sea where gales knife gulls and paw at the dunes’ / grasses and vagrant papers’ (from ‘Oceanic Abstract’, sonnet number 11) feel full in the mouth and their textures will resonate with readers.

There’s a quiet agency here that builds up through the reading of the collection, which is particularly interesting given that Harrex ends his collection with two quotes. Harrex in the final moment displaces the energy he has carefully constructed away from his own words towards the notion of nation-building through sport and collective engagement.

_Tully Barnett._