

Michael Sharkey, *The Poetic Eye* (Brill, 2016)

Heather Sladdin, *Patterns of Being* (Heather Sladdin, 2016)

Heather Taylor Johnson, *Meanwhile, the Oak* (Five Island Press)

Michael Sharkey has long been known as one of Australia's most congenial, collegial, and agile poets and literary critics. One might have expected this anthology to be an assemblage of various tribute and assessments, all done with the urbanity and goodwill long known to be Sharkey's hallmark. What a surprise, then, to realise that this collection, though indeed various, generous, and informative, tinged throughout with what Gordon Collier, in his preface to the book, calls Sharkey's 'evanescently ironical' but not 'acidulous' personality (ix), is really dedicated to one theme: the shared cultural practices of Australia and New Zealand.

It is thus totally appropriate that the book is part of Rodopi's renowned Cross/Cultures series, because Sharkey's work is postcolonial not just in being firmly situated in an Australian culture whose poets, from the 'deliberately strident' Ronald Robinson (57) who yet 'tried to extend the English language' (59) to the 'distinctly accessible' yet 'philosophical' Gwen Harwood (282), could presume neither recognition nor readership from the broader Anglophone world beyond Australia's shores. In other words, writing about Australia alone would be postcolonial enough. But Sharkey chose to cast a wider gaze. Across the Tasman.

Sharkey starts out by advising the reader that, between Australia and New Zealand, 'similarities are perceptive' and 'differences are profound' (xiv). Accordingly, while noting the shared colonial heritage of the two countries, as well as their shared cosmopolitan turn in the twenty-first century, Sharkey refrains from a systematic comparison between the two literary cultures. Symptomatically, Sharkey notes that his interest in New Zealand began when he studied with two noted New Zealand academics, Michael K. Joseph and Terry Sturm, the latter of whom, then at Sydney, encouraged Sharkey to go to Auckland to study – Lord Byron! That a canonical English poet, albeit one who wrote about a fictional Polynesia in *The Island*, was what brought an Australian to New Zealand speaks volumes.

What Sharkey brings to this task is above all fairness. One would not expect that Sharkey would particularly embrace the poetry of Kendrick Smithyman, a poet often forbiddingly intellectual and verbally dexterous, but Sharkey has a wonderfully deft way of isolating such a poet's virtues – he says that Smithyman, along with Bill Manhire – and the apposition is itself striking – is 'drier, trickier' (16) than other poets – while making clear he feels more sympathetic to poets such as David Mitchell (1940-2011), a poet whom I had never even heard of before, but who Sharkey renders vividly as a poet of 'zip and irreverence and swing' (549). Sharkey is particularly good with poets who – on both sides of the Tasman – have several levels to the poetry from the casual to profound, a quality he brings out particularly well in the work of Chris Wallace-Crabbe. Sharkey speaks of the critic, and reader, 'inhabiting a poem' (574), and this is a quality we, as auditors of a poem, can share with the poems' author – the experience of inhabiting. And Michael Sharkey proves again and again he inhabits poems superbly well.

Despite the asymmetry and incommensurability of Australia and New Zealand, you cannot really understand one without understanding the other, and Michael Sharkey, with his characteristic lightness of touch, has done as much as anyone to indicate this.

Heather Sladdin and Heather Taylor Johnson similar traverse the Anglosphere, though both have engaged one of its more imposing components in the United States. Taylor Johnson is originally

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American but now living and working in Australia, whereas Sladdin was born in Australia went to Carolina to study, and is now again in South Australia, around Adelaide. Sladdin's *Patterns of Being* is a rather unusual verse noel, not in its subject-matter – growing up and coming to personal and aesthetic consciousness, which after all is the subject of Derek Walcott's *Another Life* – but in its form. The poem unfolds in short stanzas of short lines, often three or less, often moving, in a staggered away, rightward across the page:

as a hot sun lifts
windows open
to catch dust

Mum reads poems
from the *Golden Treasury*... (14)

These lines force the reader to hinge on each breath, and induce an extraordinary intimacy: we do not just rush past the details of childhood in order to conjure a sort of arc of formation, but are induced to linger, to pause over each detail, to take it in. Some of the images are absolutely striking, and could be probing poetic aphorisms in themselves:

Lilly's tin house is blue
In the setting sun (16)

Metal, colour, light all come together in an arresting tableau, one vouchsafed by the internal rhyme, hidden in the para-couplets middle, between 'in ' and 'in '. Sladdin's open, unrhymed staggering lines are indeed anchored both by this internal sound-play and by the intensity and focus the writer puts into all of her images. Sometimes the line-lengths mimic motion:

dry spinifex
rolls
across the russet verge (23)

Not only is this glimpse of landscape iconically and characteristically Australian, but the rolling of the spinifex is limned by the way the verb, 'rolls' does not even begin in space until the line with the spinifex in it ends, delineating the process of motion, just as the line with the russet verge carries the eye further perhaps into what Bill Ashcroft has called 'the horizontal sublime'. The plural in the volume's title, *Patterns of Being*, is a clue: the focus here is less on an overall trajectory than on how meaningful discrete patterns are. Yet these are patterns, not, as in Virginia Woolf's similar title, moments; and the material Sladdin gives us clusters into several fairly defined maps, helped by the fact that each of the poem's individual sections has a title and a gloss. The point-of-view character, Anna, grows up amid the beauty of nature and a loving family and is just discovering her own perception and sensuality when, rather like in a Janet Frame novel, her cousin Dawn dies tragically. This trauma leads to a distinct separation between the paradisiacal and the fallen, and to Anna's role as discoverer of the world to recorder of it. In the second book, Anna imagines her bereaved aunt, Lilly (Dawn's mother), as she is hospitalised, put in a wheelchair, and suffers from old age and regret. Anna then imagines Aril, the mermaid she experiences an encounter with just before Dawn's tragedy, and the sea-creature's search for humanity. It is a scenario hard to make compelling in a poem, but Sladdin brings it off. As she grows towards adulthood, Anna becomes Annie, and the canvas becomes wider: we meet Lily's war-scarred father and the Sydney painter Patrick Bon Arbour (somewhat

out of a Patrick White or David Malouf novel), and Dawn's murderer Rufus (whose Indigenous background makes his case more ethically complicated than it would otherwise be), seen through the prisms of Annie, Lilly, and Aril – the real, the margined and the imaginary. The reader is left with the moving image of:

the red sand
the dust of time
and the memory of Dawn (200)

When beginning Sladdin's book, I had no idea what to expect: I found *Patterns of Being* narratively absorbing, emotionally riveting and above all tangibly and poetically rendered. In terms of the trans-Tasman frame raised by Sharkey's collection, Katharine Mansfield and Janet Frame would, I think, have loved it.

Heather Taylor Johnson's poetry is replete with the life of the body, in sickness or in health, at rest or in motion. Some of Taylor Johnson's liveliest poetry is inspired by a trip to South America, whose energy and diversity has proven galvanising to her poetry, as seen in 'Los Perros':

Their ragged clothing gnawed in patches
of gnarled clumps like feral field
of stinking swamp in the crowded streets
and trash is what they have to eat. (90)

The doubled 'gn-' sound and the alliteration of 'stinking', 'swamp' and 'streets' as well as 'feral' and 'fields' make this not just compassionate social observation but verbal kindling, enabling the next stanza to catch fire, as a dog sits on the 'red tin roof' thus rendering the dogs both 'above' and 'below' the street, 'the smell of their embryos floating in the air.' Taylor Johnson's poetry of South America nimbly avoids the tourist gaze, exhibiting a space where 'dulce de leche' coexists with 'racism' and 'slander and earthquakes', where the tango composer Carlos Gardel and Tony Abbott exist on the same simulacral plane.

Taylor Johnson's South American poems were provided with thematic weight of the book; most of the rest of her work is characterised by soaring and stunning lyricism, one radically open to experience and persistently observant as seen in 'Life Science in the Garden at Alberton Primary' where the life in nature is celebrated even amid decay and damage. 'Yellow zucchini leaves are wilted, not fallen/sleeping, not dead' (24), is reminiscent of Wordsworth's 'woods decaying/never to be decayed', and exudes a similar sense of how admitting there is dross and refuse in nature actually intensifies the exuberance of the glory of nature. The children at the Alberton primary school ask what is the 'purpose of marigolds' and their teacher responds 'the purpose of beauty is to be.' Like the apothegm at the end of Keats' Grecian Urn ode, the sententiousness is earned by the sensory details of milkweed, goji berries, and zucchini leaves. Taylor Johnson's poems are realistic about sex, male rage, and various states of animality, but also take time to stand in praise of nature, often specifically located in Australia: the Mallee, the Hay Plain, Braidwood, and Bateman's Bay, where, like 'a heavenly swatted fly in the blue of a lazy bubble/we move through each second' (79). Her responsiveness to what is, whether beautiful or ordinary, and her multifocal rendition of experience mark Taylor Johnson out as a poet not just verbally dexterous but genuinely rewarding to read. Although the poetry of Toby

Davidson is much more overtly spiritual than Taylor Johnson's, her work reminded me of his in its openness to the contemporary, while still participating in and soliciting a lyric strain of utterance.

Taylor Johnson's book was blurb-ed by Michael Sharkey, and her poetry embodies Sharkey's vision of a poetry both imaginatively bold and temperamentally compassionate, a poetry pursued with high spirits but above all to be taken seriously.

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