Bruce Beaver — A Poet’s Poet

Tom Shapcott

BRUCE BEAVER DIED peacefully in his sleep on February 17, a few days after his seventy-sixth birthday. He had been under dialysis for a dozen years, so the news was not unexpected. But it is always a shock and a sadness when a commanding poet dies.

Bruce Beaver (born in 1928) published his first collection of poems, Under the Bridge, in 1961, a time when Australian poetry was paddling through something of a lull. The generation of poets who had come to maturity during World War II (Judith Wright, Rosemary Dobson, Douglas Stewart, John Blight, David Campbell et al.) had by the end of the 1950s become, in a sense, predictable. The newer generation was spearheaded by Chris Wallace-Crabbe’s remarkable and zesty first collection, The Music of Division (1959): urbane, a bit Audenesque and very Melbourne. Beaver immediately announced himself as a regional poet — Manly, indeed — and he sustained that capacity to give Manly a soiled, solid, sordid and singing quality, with the whiff of ozone and salt, and an old resilience that would not be smothered by the superficial changes of the subsequent decades.

But it was his fourth collection, Letters to Live Poets (1969), that really put Bruce Beaver in the big picture, as it were. Nothing like this had been written in Australia before. Beaver was not a naturally lyrical poet; he had inherited something of the loping awkwardness of Christopher Brennan and R.D. FitzGerald. Letters to Live Poets displayed how he had honed his long-limbed verse cadence to a personal style and a universal application. These Letters are very much that — epistles to writers dead or not dead — and it was in this mode of address that Beaver became a master of invention and a self-confident conversationalist in a heightened, but natural, word-world.

His next volume, Lauds & Plaints (1974), developed the rhetoric, but the gathering intensity was even more powerful. The shadow of Rilke became more apparent, though Beaver in doing this was refining his own voice and his language. From this point on, all his collections fell into place, though often with elements of surprise, as in the autobiographical recollection of a rural childhood, As It Was (1979), or the prose sketches in Headlands (1986).

At the time of his death, Beaver had just sent a new manuscript of poems to his publisher, UQP. His last decade or so had been a continuing battle with kidney failure and illness, but during that decade Beaver published several collections, as well as a New and Selected Poems 1960–1990 in 1991, in the notorious Angus & Robertson series, which fell apart in the reader’s hands, due to poor glue and binding. Although, during his Manly years, he constantly battled with a bipolar condition, Beaver was a generous and charming host, and the Manly flat which he shared with his wife, Brenda, became a meeting place for younger poets and writers.

Beaver was one of the original committee members of Poetry Australia, the important journal begun by Grace Perry in 1964, and which, for more than a decade and a half, led the way in adventurous poetry publishing in this country. It produced French, Dutch, German, Swedish and Irish issues, and regularly featured overseas writers of high calibre. It was through Perry’s international network of connections that Beaver was first able to expand his range of reading so remarkably. As the 1960s developed, this openness to what was new and possible in poetry was one of the factors that made the Beaver household such a stimulating and welcoming place for younger writers.

In his later years, because of medication and failing health, Beaver withdrew from that more public role, but the number of poets initially encouraged and nurtured under his wing, as it were, was wide and varied.

Beaver received most of the major Australian literary awards: the Patrick White Prize, the Grace Leven Prize and others. Because he was on an invalid pension for most of his writing years, he never applied to the Literature Board for a grant. His second novel, You Can’t Come Back, was published in 1966, and was reprinted a couple of decades later. But it is as a poet, a poet’s poet, that Bruce Beaver will be remembered.