

John McLaren, *Journey Without Arrival: The Life and Writing of Vincent Buckley* (Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2009)

This is an interesting and informative survey of Vincent Buckley's life and writing that also engages with the complex interplay of social, political and historic events that inform the work. John McLaren is modest about his intention 'to open a number of conversations about Buckley and his work' (vii) rather than offer an 'authorised' biography or 'definitive portrait', but his insightful and well-researched assessment of Vincent Buckley's contribution to Australian Literature well deserves the close attention of readers interested in poetry, Australian literature and cultural politics in the four decades ending with Buckley's death in 1988.

Given Buckley's prominent place in Australian literature as a poet, critic and public intellectual, his diverse interests and involvement in crucial debates and controversies of his day he necessarily became a man 'most concerned not to be misrepresented' (ix). So it is apt that McLaren pays close attention to the facts of a life fully lived as he takes on the challenge of reading and interpreting the writing and indicating the evolving directions of Buckley's ideas and achievement. Buckley's voice consistently informs the text (italicisation indicates this source throughout) and this offers a timely reminder of the significance of Buckley's commentaries, essays and criticism. This is not hagiography (Buckley was no saint) and McLaren is up-front about personal and political short-comings (disastrous drinking habits, a failed marriage and insights into the tensions of his academic and intellectual choices). Instead it is a compassionate portrait of a hugely talented man whose compulsion to write poetry involved a lifetime journey with language that was also vital in Australian and Irish educational and cultural terms.

McLaren employs a chronological approach, beginning with formative family years and the inheritance of immigrant Australian Irishry, the story of a Jesuit education and early academic success resulting in isolation from family while boarding in Melbourne, the interventions of war and subsequent illness and, through adult re-education, subsequent degrees in English Literature, employment as a tutor at Melbourne University and an academic career up to professorial level spanning the years between 1954 and 1986. Buckley was a formidable scholar who experienced Cambridge late and made his mark by writing the book *Poetry and Morality* rather than a thesis. He then produced a series of influential critical works, among them *Essays in Poetry: Mainly Australian*. Resisting Leavisite proscription, and later the grip of the deconstructivist theorists in the Melbourne University environment, McLaren indicates that Buckley remained a dedicated and influential teacher who strove to encourage the creativity and open-mindedness of others (116). As an academic he maintained heartfelt positions against difficult odds in a divided English department but remained 'faithful to his ideal of a university as a communal society and of teaching as a collaborative venture in learning' (308).

McLaren's readings are astute (he speaks of *Golden Builders* as a dialogue about contesting values and indicates the ways in which the 'Shadow of Violence' informs *The Pattern*). His contextualisation of the writing offers further dimensions of understanding as the circumstances, interests, debates, personalities, politics and cultural emphases that shaped Buckley's changing preoccupations are explored. McLaren describes Buckley's engagement with moral and spiritual issues, especially with 'The Apostolate', a Catholic society within Melbourne University dedicated to 'complete the work of the secular university by opening it to the sacred' (58) which Buckley saw as central in the contest for hearts and minds of the times.

There is useful analysis of groups like Catholic Action, 'The Movement' with its intense and secretive opposition to communism, and of individuals like Frank Hardy whose writing challenged the Labour party, the Catholic Church and Melbourne capitalism, with reminders of contemporary issues like the furor between contesting ALP and DLP affiliations and the effects upon fellow writers of cold war politics. Buckley was engaged in significant cultural debates about the place of religion in a secular society, nationalist/internationalist tensions and the evolution of Australian writing at a time when anglophile preferences held sway in Universities across the country. McLaren suggests that 'In his poetry, Buckley sought to find the world's meaning, but in his politics and polemic, he acted to shape it to his ideals' (138).

Buckley's relations with other poets, like Hope, McAuley, Wright, Webb and others with whom he corresponded or whose work he wrote about, are canvassed: debating religion with McAuley and Webb, applauding the benefits of the mimetic functions of American poetry and prose with writers like Evan Jones and Chris Wallace-Crabbe and always articulate about his changing appreciations of the ways in which language might be more effectively employed. McLaren traces Buckley's modification of his own work, charting the creative distance between *Arcady* and *Last Poems* and suggesting ways in which experimentation foreshadowed future developments. He observes that images in early poems like 'Land of no Fathers' reappear transformed in *Golden Builders* and the ways in which ideas, about rhythm and discourse are re-envisioned in the process of the writing. Central concepts, like redemption or the sacred, are sequentially investigated in the context of the struggle to find a language to reveal rather than enunciate the world's mysteries (229).

Not the least of Buckley's achievement was his pioneering advocacy of Australian Literature and McLaren explains the ways in which he challenged Nationalism but supported Australian literary studies. His intense involvement with Irish nationalism is also well documented. Throughout, Buckley's passion for ideas and preparedness to engage with them is a fascinating reminder of what this scholar saw as the role of an academic in an humanist university. McLaren notes that 'his criticism, like his poetry, was a dialogue with the world, not an attempt to set the world to rights' (109).

In the re-reading of the poetry (especially *The Pattern*) there is an interrogation of the dominant 'place' that Ireland has in Buckley's writing (and life) and there is ample evidence in support of this claim. McLaren wisely notes that 'If Ireland failed to satisfy Buckley's need to connect with the past, it gave him a place in society that is lacking in Australia' where the 'poet is at the centre of society' (318). The experience of being in Ireland with his second wife and daughters and moving between Ireland and Australia in his later life as well as his interaction and communication with poets in Ireland verifies this. There are diverse perspectives interwoven (personal, professional and critical) to assist readers to re-consider the writing and the life. Penelope Buckley's letters and reminiscence of selected details of Vincent's home life, especially in relation to interactions with his daughters, generously contribute to McLaren's readings of the poems and allow different access to aspects of sequences like *The Pattern* and *Late Winter Child*. While adhering to the wish for privacy by Edna Forbes (Buckley's first wife) McLaren acknowledges her presence as muse, wife and mother in formative years. Whether the reader is primarily interested in poetry, biography, history, or criticism, this book is worth reading as an exemplary model of tact and scholarship.

Lyn Jacobs