

Book Reviews

Reviews Editor: Victor C. Hayes

Anthology of Australian Religious Poetry

Selected by Les A. Murray
Blackburn, Victoria: Collins Dove, 1986.
302 pp., \$45.00

Les Murray treats the idea of Australia being the most secular society in the world as mere shibboleth. It is as if this idea is for him no more than a methodological mote in the Enlightenment eye. Something to ignore, in other words. He goes ahead, himself, to find three hundred pages of poetry which documents "the religious" and "the spiritual" in Australian writing. This is his answer.

Murray is an unusual figure to have around. Fiercely independent, he confronts the modern world with a gleeful (if usually benign) snarl as befits an old Calvinist who converted to pre-Vatican II Catholicism. All of this, plus an ardent overlay of Australian republicanism. His choice of poems, therefore, is — not surprisingly — surprising. There is no Vincent Buckley or David Malouf and few of the recent younger women poets such as Kate Llewellyn and Susan Hampton collected in the *Penguin Book of Australian Women Poets*.

Nonetheless, Murray's anthology possesses flair. First, it brings to the foreground a selection of Aboriginal poetry. Three songs from the Arnhem Land Moon Bone Cycle — a sequence which Murray has said "may well be the greatest poem ever composed in Australia" — stand alongside other translations by Georg Von Brandenstein, Roland Robinson and others. The Jindyworobak tradition with its Europeanised affinities for Aboriginal lore is well represented in the Anthology.

Second, it emphasises a sense of the comic as a way into Australian spirituality. Murray holds this view in all seriousness, and relishes such poems as Douglas Stewart's "The Bishop" and Bruce Dawe's "And A Good Friday Was Had By All". Third, he gives ample space to Kevin Hart, a new poet to many Australian readers, whose gifts are highlighted by the context of the Anthology. Hart is one of the leading exponents of Jacques Derrida; his poems, however, resonate with clear sensuous religious appeal. Fourth, the Anthology tends to bypass the intellectually theological poem in favour of the sociological and sacramental. And fifth, Murray's book allows him to show off his own work in the broadly-based, earthy, traditional and folk-oriented wisdom which sums up much of what Murray means by "religious poetry" in Australian terms.

Recently, I was looking for some "Jesus" poems, and the Anthology gave me half-a-dozen which were full of variety and little piety. James McAuley's "Jesus" reads Jesus through Ezekiel, a strikingly Semitic prophetic presence. Judith Wright's "Eli, Eli" is an incantatory meditation of forsakenness, marrying Hindu and Christian modes of awareness. Kevin Hart's "Companion" psychologises and eroticises the Christ presence. Murray's own "An Absolutely Ordinary Rainbow" ingeniously plays with quasi-parable and allegory. It is a laconic evasive Australian model of secular spirituality. David Campbell's "A Song and a Dance" balladises the Bible with a keen ear for Outback idiom:

O come out in the desert air
 And wash your hearts in the desert
 creeks
 For love comes when the heart is bare.
*We piped to you, but you did not dance;
 We sang you dirges, you did not weep.*

Murray has commented on the "strangeness" of this poem among Campbell's other poetry. It is a quality Murray seems to be looking for as the representative quality in his Anthology. Quirky, tangential, evasive — Australian poems open up space for the religious subject to emerge.

The Anthology reminds us that the medium of language has survived well through the twentieth century both for religion and for culture. Poetry — especially of the all-too-human Murray kind — is an invaluable link between religion and culture, and nowhere more so than in a society such as Australia where a confident style in bridging the two worlds is rare.

—James Tulip
*Associate Professor of English
 University of Sydney*

The Sectarian Strand: Religion in Australian Society

Michael Hogan
 Ringwood, Victoria: Penguin, 1987.
 316 pp., \$14.95

This is a book in search of a title for the one it has is not really appropriate. It is not, as its introduction makes clear (pp. 3-4), what the first part of the title suggests, a study of the role of sectarian controversy in Australia. What we have, instead, "is an essay which tries to explain the relationship between religion and society, religion and culture, religion and politics, even religion and the economy" (p. 4). In addressing these issues Hogan is forced to treat conflict between religious groups as one of his themes, but only incidentally. There is no attempt at describing and

analysing sectarian conflict in Australian society.

Does this matter? In one sense no, because the book as it stands is provocative and interesting. The second part of the title makes up for the expectations that the first part conveys. In another sense it does matter because to touch "sectarian" conflict as an appendix to a larger issue still requires a careful analysis of the components of and significance of that conflict.

Hogan deliberately avoids dealing at length with disputes within the Protestant and Catholic traditions. This myopia creates a serious restriction on his perception of the past. This is best illustrated in his treatment of the growth of secularism in the nineteenth century which he contends effectively established the role of government in the modern state. The removal of state aid at least as an open feature of government, the development of a state system of education and the establishment of the government as the setter of rules in social relations such as marriage and divorce, are central topics in his analysis. But because he restricts his view to just the main Christian denominations in Australia he appears to misunderstand the major forces involved in the nineteenth century component of this debate.

Secularism was not a clash between religious and irreligious forces. It may have been more accurately a clash between clerical and anti-clerical viewpoints, if it is allowed that the anti-clericals were mainly people of deeply religious belief who held very strongly to the ideal of the "priesthood of all believers". But even this is too simple a notion. Indeed the forces favouring the growth of a secular state were quite complex and often involved churchmen of the same denomination, apparently equally devout, taking separate sides. While Hogan has set out not to discuss such themes as this, no analysis of the themes he pursues can be satisfactory without them.

A recurring theme in the debate over secularism was the ideal that Australia should be free of the worst excesses of re-

religious intolerance known to England and to Europe. The extent to which virgin European-Australian society achieved this is a significant item for examination. While the anti-popery of John Dunmore Lang and others is frequently mentioned, there is no analysis of this point. Although there were many attempts to exploit sustained sectarianism in Australia, none was dramatically successful. John Dunmore Lang tried at times to whip up strong feelings but even he lost supporters because of this and he had to be very wary about what he said about Caroline Chisholm. William Morris Hughes tried to do the same with Mannix over the conscription issue in 1917 and beyond, but he was dropped by his own political party in favour of the more urbane and less divisive Stanley Melbourne Bruce. There are periods when individual incidents of sectarian dispute reached considerable heights, as in the Coningham case and the deportation of Father Jerger, but Hogan sheds less light on those than Edmund Campion does in his *Rockchoppers: Growing Up Catholic in Australia* (1982) and *Australian Catholics* (1987).

The reverse of this point is also true. Although there are moments in the book when inter-denominational rivalries gave way to a seemingly solid front on some social issue, these moments of joint support are not systematically analysed. It is interesting, for example, to note that there was widespread and deep feeling over the proposed Federal divorce law put forward by Senator Dobson in the first moments of the life of the Federal parliament, to such an extent that no divorce bill of any note came to that parliament until half a century later. Not only did all the denominations share in that victory but the epicentre of its fearsome energy was that most secular of states, South Australia. In spite of these criticisms, there is much to think about in this book. Hogan believes that "many of Australia's most important institutions and traditions have been shaped by forces that have taken re-

ligious or anti-religious forms" (p. 287). He catalogues these and argues that religion played a fundamental role, almost as significant as that of class, in developing the Australian nation from the 1890s through to the end of the Great War. After that there was a period of decline followed by a resurgence from the 1970s onwards. This thesis seems to reflect the weakness noted above about secularism. The period of strongest, denominational influence in Australia may well have been in the period from the 1850s to the mid 1870s when the big issues of state-aid and state education were decided in favour of the secularists. His thesis exaggerates, too, the role of religion in Australian society now.

Hogan's interests are in government and his background is that of a former priest in the Archdiocese of Sydney. He is strongest in his analysis of the role of Catholic influence in the Australian Labour Party and the Democratic Labour Party and his sections on the link between the major Christian denominations and politics are worth pondering over. But as one who saw reasonably closely the anti-conscription fight in two states in the 1960s and early 1970s, it seems to me that the Quakers deserve far more attention than just the passing reference they receive.

Which leads to my last point. This book is written from within a well defined body of opinion — mainstream Christianity. There are brief sections given to Aboriginal religion but none to religious diversity of any other form. The multiculturalism of the present, sometimes with its sectarian clashes, gets no mention.

—Ken Elford
Sr Lecturer and Head of School of
Education Studies
SACAE Sturt