

Stephe Jitts and Keith Campbell. *Henry Moss: His Wreath of Song: The Collected Verse of an Early Australian Poet*. Canberra: Elect Printing, 2020. 245 pages

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Michael Sharkey. *Many Such as She: Victorian Australian Women Poets of World War One*. Hobart: Walleah Press, 2018. 304 pages

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John Arnold. *Elza de Locre: How May I Endure: Selected Poems*.

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In different ways the editors of these three illuminating collections bring to centre-stage previously marginalised and largely forgotten ‘minor’ poetry. All are works of literary archaeology and advocate a reassessment of the literary and critical significance of the writers and their work. Each collection provides a rich, multi-layered sampling of work that is finely wrought, variously styled and textually compelling. These books remind us that what might be a ‘good’ or ‘great’ poem changes with the eye of the beholder, publishing opportunities and the contexts of utterance, and that ‘conventionality’ is a tricky umbrella term needing contestation. In each of these volumes, the scholarship, research and cultural and literary commentary are part of what makes the books interesting and valuable—and the poems themselves are fascinating.

To begin with the earliest oeuvre, regional historian Stephe Jitts and philosopher Keith Campbell have collaborated to produce *Henry Moss: His Wreath of Song: The Collected Verse of an Early Australian Poet* (2020). Arising out of his research into the Moses family of Yass, 1837–78, Jitts discovered a ‘trove’ of some 150 poems written by a ‘tearaway’ family member—elder stepbrother to Jack Moses (of ‘Nine Miles from Gundagai’ fame) who, after a stint in prison for haystack-firing, went on to settle in the Shoalhaven district and became the first mayor of Nowra. Moss’s poems were never collected but diffusely published over a thirty-five-year period (1851–86) in (mostly) regional newspapers (especially *The People’s Advocate* and *New South Wales Vindicator* and the *Illawarra Mercury*).

The poems offer us a telling glimpse of an earnest, sometimes radical, civic-minded regional voice, writing as an Australian decades before Federation and speaking in the familiar, decorous, moralising and pietist cadences of mid-Victorian Britain and colonial Australia. The influence of Wordsworth and the English tradition (e.g. Goldsmith and Gray) plus Longfellow are pervasive in Moss’s poems about nature (especially the Shoalhaven), duty, time and familial affection. Idiosyncratic flavours from his Jewish and Irish heritages temper the poems’ embrace of history and politics and his advocacy of Australian ‘heroes’ such as Leichhardt and Macarthur. The poetry invites comparison with Kendall, Harpur, O’Dowd and Brennan.

The special pleading of this volume is that this is poetry by one for whom writing poetry was an important part of his responsibility and sensibility as an educated business and civic leader concerned to inspire and exhort the spiritual, cultural, political and moral aspirations of his community. Poetry should both ‘teach and please’ as in Elizabethan and Augustan times.

Moss's voice is a public and 'conventional' one, using his personal, ideological and emotional selves as a means to advocate national values. In the early 'Beauteous Land: from *Carmel's Wreath of Song* by one of the scattered sons of Zion' Moss adopts the perspective of an exile (part of his Jewish heritage) to decry that the new land will 'reinthral / 'Neath the cold chain of tyranny and spoil, / The rights and freedom of each native born . . .' As the editors note, Moss's politics are radical. And yet the second part of the poem, five stanzas, imagines a future glory for Australia as a still and silent sleeping (feminised) Nature, whose 'sweetly warm . . . beautiful smile' and 'heaving . . . swelling breast . . . / . . . retains the blush . . . / . . . seal'd on her coral lips'—a more conventional stance. While the editors claim Moss 'pulls no punches' in his portrayal of early Australia as a land that 'emprisoned' exiles, Moss's writing is unable to escape a softening sentimentality, fetishising beauty.

More robust is Moss's 'savage sonnet' about William Charles Wentworth, which begins 'Unworthy son of Australia's hopeful race / Thy last fell blow struck at thy country's breast . . .' The poem derides Wentworth's 'push to establish an hereditary aristocracy' (eds) as 'brazen mockery [cast] by men of soul . . . / . . . headlong from on high.'

Moss's 'magnum opus,' claim the editors, is the forty-seven-stanza dream sequence 'The Bridge of Life' showing the illusory transience of Life as 'a Bridge, whose light and fragile frame / Spans the dark gulf . . . / Between a blissful Heav'n, or dark and hopeless Hell.' Prettifying the Shoalhaven ' . . . The blue wave / Borne on the bosom of the swelling tide / . . . / Bounding in beauty 'neath its haught of pride,' the poet wanders through imagined glades, hills and edifices not so much as Virgil, Milton or Piers Plowman but rather as a coy Victorian Lanval who sees a 'Maiden Queen of Love' in her *bowre of blisse*. And for some fourteen stanzas he proselytises her allure and seductive power. The verse is over-written, lush (and might easily win a prize in one of ASAL's celebrated Parody Nights):

Her pouting lips, twin-sister rosebuds bright,
 Were ripe, and full of playful nervousness
 Above her rounded chin, her pearly teeth
 Sparkled like ivory gems, between their crimson sheath . . . (stanza 25)

Her form was faultless. O'er her bosom's height
 But ill-concealed, beneath its silvery screen,
 Her swelling breasts seemed bursting into light
 Like purple peaches 'neath the leaves of green . . . (stanza 28)

Stanzas 38 and 39 provide us with an obverse of both Coleridge's 'vast romantic chasm' and Wordsworth's 'elfin pinnacle' in 'A huge dark coralline crystal rock, its breast upheaved / Upon whose height, 'neath chain that firm enslaves / A dreadful monster of the deep.'

There's no doubting the earnestness of Moss's poetry. There are lots of poems praising the beauties of the landscape, celebrating Australian cultural heroes, Jewish and Irish mythological tropes, enjoining patriotism and the need for moral and religious leadership. The editors celebrate Moss's 'Romantic optimism for the progress of Liberty' but there's a surfeit of homily and nostalgia which 'places' Moss very much as journeyman poet of his times.

Next, chronologically speaking, Michael Sharkey's anthology *Many Such as She: Victorian Australian Women Poets of World War One* (2018) selects some hundred poems from twenty-four writers—a mixture of relatively well known and lesser-known poets (most of the women

published one or more individual collections) who ‘significantly identify’ as Victorian. Sharkey elegantly negotiates the contentiousness of this term and argues that the women’s writing careers and lives, succinctly and expansively contextualised, were more various and multi-layered than the five-year slice of WWI suggests. The significance of this narrow but compendious perspective is that the ‘best’ poems by many of these poets may lie outside the scope of this anthology and that the poems included might well be said to show a minor thread in the poet’s oeuvre—but, as Sharkey would argue, the focus here is not the overall quality of the poets’ work but on the particular flavours, preoccupations and insights of Victorian women’s poetic voices in the WWI years.

Sharkey’s particular editorial skills can be seen in his judicious eye for a terrific poem so that even ‘utterly conventional’ verse is given space to breathe. The selection of works is too various to do justice to, but let me cite a few examples of poems that particularly struck me . . .

There’s a discomfiting echo between Mary Fullerton (‘E’)’s ‘The Targets’:

All over the world the women
 In travail by day and by night;
 Are bringing to life the targets
 For the day when the monarchs fight . . .
 . . . We toil for the home and nation,
 We live for the joyful earth;
 Not the red recurring harvest,
 And the terrible aftermath . . .
 . . . And the clarion loudly rings:
 ‘No more be the patient people
 The targets of bloody kings.’

and Nettie Palmer’s ‘The Barrack Yard’:

A sack of straw suspended from a tree,
 Soldiers with bayonets in the barrack-yard,
 In turn they lunge and thrust and stand on guard,
 Their faces rigid, fraught with destiny.

War dehumanises both victor and victim . . .

More colloquially but personally trenchant is Capel Boake, ‘Stitchin’ Seams’: ‘. . . Me life is changed—Oh, Gawd! It’s queer, I don’t know what it means! / I only know that Bill is dead, an’ I am stitchin’ seams.’ The vernacular conveys an oblique poignancy.

Violet B. Cramer’s ‘The Lusitania’ might strike us as blind to the war-crimes of allies, but accuses the Germans of foul play in their use of gas and fire-bombs. Further:

Would you have us fight with your own vile tools?
 If we’ve no choice we must do the same;
 But we don’t sink boats with civilian crews.
 We leave that to you. ‘Tis the coward’s game.

Joice M. Nankivell's 'Lake Narocz,' written in suggestively speculative septets, conjures a scene 'Where in the winter of 1916, 60,000 Russian soldiers crashed through the ice and were drowned in a vain attempt to reach the German lines on the other side':

. . . In the winter the ripples are stilled,
Smooth and white on the pall on the water,
A pall laid to cover the dead,
The dead who lie under the water,
Did you stir in your sleep at their tread?
To comfort them under the water
Until all of their crying was stilled?

Lesbia Harford, Sharkey (echoing Harford's editor Dennis Oliver) suggests, has a fine, understated poem which negotiates a space in the public discourse, of private attitudes to war:

Ours was a friendship in secret, my dear,
Stolen from fate.
I must be secret still, show myself calm
Early and late.

'Isn't it sad he was killed?,' I must hear
With a smooth face.
'Yes, it is sad.'—O my darling, my own,
My heart of grace.

Sharkey concedes that, due to being largely published in newspapers and women's magazines, the majority of the poems are 'conservative'—echoing the tastes of editors, readers and the writers' own inclinations. Patriotism is no surprise. Nevertheless there's a wide spectrum of views and positions—from imperialist and religious conservative hallowing of England's imperial breast to more radical challenges and anger at the injustice, pain and jingoism of 'the war effort.' It's an intriguing and satisfying volume.

John Arnold's *Elza de Locre: How May I Endure: Selected Poems* (2019) presents 'a forgotten figure of 1920s literary and artistic London . . . the partner of Jack Lindsay . . . Australian expatriate writer and co-proprietor [with P.R. Stephenson] of the Fanfrolico Press.' The poems are selected from Elza's two 'fine' collections *I See the Earth* (1928) and *Older than Earth* (1930) as well as from the handful of poems in the *London Aphrodite* (1928–29), all published by Fanfrolico. Dedicated in part to Jack Lindsay and aware of Norman Lindsay's 'vitalist' philosophy of art and creativity, like early Slessor (one of whose poems is in the same issue of *London Aphrodite* as one of de Locre's), the poems explore/celebrate/mourn—from an elemental, female sensibility—beauty, sensuality, Nature as an immanent pagan divine.

Unlike the free verse of her contemporaries such as Laura Riding and Edna St Vincent Millay, de Locre's poems are written largely in rhymed, formal stanzas and have a sense of looking back to or through a kind of golden age which articulates emotional, psychological and sexual desires and disappointment. There's often a wistful, damaged intensity as a frequently naked self speaks her pain: 'mangroves thrusting their fingers into my wounds' ('Childhood'). The writing is often luscious and, like Christopher Brennan's Lilith, de Locre's consciousness identifies with a yearning desire for fulfilment, revenge even:

Huddled on the dark light as before
 I'll knock upon your doors, seeking to come to you.
 For six thousand years have I been asleep thinking to escape
 This part of me, but all is not in vain—
 I am the wind now sown with the seeds of music,
 I am the light beating on my window pane. ('The Sun Rises')

and

. . . men came knocking on the door,
 For my body walks among their eyes,
 As though I were a whore—
 My subtle body that the gods
 Gave to me of late . . .
 On the waters travelling on the minds of men . . . ('To—')

According to Arnold, Jack Lindsay wrote that many of de Locre's poems were 'direct transcriptions of dreams, written down in the early morning . . . the world of the poems is one of elemental change and dissolution, with her lonely spirit pursued and tormented, finding release only in momentary identifications with the bright life of nature' (*Fanfrolico and After*). So, in 'My Burning Eyes' a romantic/sexual encounter is expressed in bodily, elemental nature-goddess terms suggesting the ecstasy of both conception and birth:

A bird was fluttering in my breasts
 Quickening my blood to a million stars,
 Dew from his wings . . .
 Seeking to take flight and race the dying sun
 For all the jewels falling into the sea.

Slowly my body swelled to the moon,
 Slowly to a flower opening
 And breaking through darkness
 With kisses winged about each petal-limb:
 The flower broke open and the bird went loose
 Soaring up beyond the skies . . .

In 'This Girl,' de Locre writes with a decadent, Lindsayan sensuality that buys into the trope of the madwoman/temptress, (like early Christina Stead?) embodying her perception in the natural world:

She walks with the drunken wind for lover, this girl—
 This mad girl who can't tell the thighs of shadows
 From those of Dick and Tom and drunken Harry
 As she goes walking with the wind along the meadows . . .

She lays her languid body out under the trees;
 And, lying with the drunken wind, round her lover's eyes
 She curls her slender body round and round,
 Like a young tree curling its branches round the skies.

In the next poem, 'Your Power and My Image,' de Loche writes with dramatic, teasing (self-?) mockery: 'How like to Satan is this hand of mine / . . . twisting these words / To shapes I never guessed at, dragged from me . . . '—juggling both agency and compulsion as she does in another poem also invoking Lucifer as her avatar: 'My mind poised for flight / Stands trembling on the brink of flight . . . / . . . on the crag of night.'

The poems from *Older than Earth* are untitled, inviting the reader's sense that they may be fragments gesturing to a whole. Nevertheless, in all her poems beauty, death and desire are inextricably linked and metonymised through ghostly visions of suffering *femmes fatales*—partly Pre-Raphaelite and partly Sappho ('. . . as a dead body breaking into daisies . . .') partly Ophelia and partly Aphrodite :

This is the flower I distil from my beauty . . .
This is the wild Sunflower,
your power and my image,
giving light to our vain lives, that the gods
may drink nectar.

These are three worthwhile volumes—testifying to the value of literary scholarship by bringing to our attention poems that make special demands on us as readers. We have to step outside our comfortable prison of (post-) modernism to consider as legitimate these 'other' chameleonic poetic styles and preoccupations. Even though at first glance the poetry might be thought unfashionably artficed—a sparkling reminder that tastes and attitudes have changed—the collections are an invitation to step back into differently-fashioned poetic shoes, to appreciate that a 'good' poem may involve a foxtrot, a quadrille, a funeral march or a tarantella.

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