

**Ann Vickery. *Stressing the Modern: Cultural Politics in Australian Women's Poetry*. Cambridge: Salt, 2007, 389pp.**

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Ann Vickery has done a great service for Australian literary history with *Stressing the Modern*. Scholars of poetry, of literary history and of gender will be delighted with the portraits of seven feisty, accomplished women who are poets we need to know about: Mary Gilmore, Marie Pitt, Mary Fullerton, Anna Wickham, Zora Cross, Lesbia Harford and Nettie Palmer. Spanning the first half of the twentieth century, and the tumultuous, often chaotic lives of these seven very different women, this volume offers us strong historical readings of the lives and the work.

*Stressing the Modern* is a real heir to Susan Sheridan's *Along the Faultlines: Sex, Race and Nation in Australian Women's Writing, 1880s-1930s*, which was a 'feminist project of reading women writers together, with and against one another, for differences as well as similarities in what they tried to create out of the knowledges and commitments and desires that textured their lives' (Sheridan). Part of the interest in reading these studies is to be a witness (and sometimes a voyeur) to these women's multiple desires, the family loyalties and dysfunctions, their marriages and domestic lives, and the sisterhood amongst many of them, with Mary Gilmore acting for so many of these women writers as a networking, generous queen.

How fascinating it is to learn more about these women, and to think again about the difficulties they faced in being able to find any time to write. We learn that Gilmore, Pitt and Fullerton were only schooled formally until they were 12, not unusual for the late nineteenth century, but one which makes the reader intrigued to trace the ways in which their poetry came to birth. We learn too of Anna Wickham's monumental and finally tragic struggle to maintain the freedom to write, and write as she felt called to do, in what seems to have been a hostile domestic scene. We see a great deal too, through the story of her life and in her poetry, of the inner struggle of Wickham's desires, which were complex and restless.

In her introduction Vickery sets up a detailed and overarching framework for her seven case studies in a clear and historically informed way. The explosion of possibilities for women's lives and their writing at the end of the nineteenth century, in Australia and internationally, is brought to life in Vickery's discussion of the suffragette women of Federation Australia (Louisa Lawson,

Louise Mack, Mary Hannay Foott, Jennings Carmichael, Inez Hyland); the journals such as *The Dawn*, *Women's Voice*, *Australian Women's Magazine*, *Women's World*, *Australian Women's Mirror*, *Birth*, and *Everylady's Journal*; and the clubs and political groups to which women made increasing contributions: the Lyceum and the Austral Salon, the Ex-Rays, the Sandringham Ladies' Reading Circle, The Women's Political Association. The New Woman was striding on stage, calling for 'independence, individual and economic as well as political independence . . . absolute freedom to choose her occupations and interests' (7, quoting from 'Women's Suffrage in Australia'). But at the same time as the idealism and the activism of The New Woman was being expressed, Australian women poets were perhaps more tentatively, more painfully, only just beginning to stretch their poetic muscles.

For these seven women, the new discourses of Woman intersected with the experimentations of modernism, the realities of the First World War, the political positions of a new Federation, as well as the international call to socialism which impacted on many of them. Of course there are many differences in the historical trajectories of these women. We learn about the political similarities between Marie Pitt and Mary Gilmore, earlier in the century, who were strongly committed to feminism and socialism. Later, Lesbia Harford, in her short life, worked to the point of exhaustion for socialist causes and organisations, as did Nettie Palmer. We are offered wonderful insights into the emotionally and financially chaotic life of Anna Wickham, who was involved more in the poetic and sexual changes of modernism, in her intimate relations with the Parisian circle of expatriate writers, including Sylvia Beach, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Natalie Barney and Djuna Barnes.

Zora Cross, like Wickham, took on many of the emerging forms of sexual liberation, being 'one of the earliest writers to reveal free love as occupying the same spectrum as the girl's more acceptable enthusiasms' (185). Cross's poetry has led critics to think about the connections, or disconnections, between new forms of living and new forms of poetry. While one critic is quoted by Vickery as contending that in her sonnets 'throughout *Songs of Love and Life*, Cross shows "a conservative deference to patriarchal authority"', Vickery herself convincingly argues that 'while Zora maintains many of the sonnet's conventions, she does attempt to neutralize their phallogocentric dimensions'. Vickery offers as an example, sonnet XX1, in which 'subject/object position generally assigned to the sexes is reversed. . . [and] female receptivity is re-envisioned as active and empowered' (186-7). One of the revelations of *Stressing the Modern*, for me, was being introduced more fully to Cross's poetry

of 'the girl'. These are erotic and sexually ambiguous poems which set up a very different portrait of Australian girlhood:

She was an ode to Girlhood as she passed  
 In her sprigged muslin dress and eyes downcast  
 I called her name and she looked up at me  
 So quickly that I saw eternity.

Heaven lies beneath a girl's white lids asleep,  
 For other girls, who knew what dreams lurk deep  
 In maiden's eyes bent to a lovely book  
 With a still lowered look. ('Myrtle', 191)

As Vickery argues, we can hear the older forms and the earlier century behind these lines—sprigged muslin, a maiden's eyes—but we can also feel the sensuous tensions of a poetic eye which promises to explode the demureness of downcast eyes and lowered looks.

Another revelation was the early poetry by Janet Gertrude Higgins, who became well-known literary and cultural critic Nettie Palmer. Palmer, we know, only wrote poetry briefly before turning away to 'more worthwhile' pursuits:

Now Mary's practical, she sews  
 Jane cooks, and she's domestical  
 Whereas in silk Miranda goes  
 Her looks for us make festival.  
 Amie for bazaars will knit a shawl,  
 and Kate will tiny tracts disperse.  
 These works are wanted, one and all:  
 But What's the Use of Writing Verse?

This ditty, written in a letter from Nettie Higgins to Vance Palmer, her future husband, says a lot. It is not ironic, we are told, but in fact expresses, in the words of critic Drusilla Modjeska, fear 'to confront her poetry and the exposure, the possibility of failure that went with it. Poetry, with its metaphoric language, was bringing her closer to articulating her existence as a woman. Criticism was safer and in the end she accepted silence from poetry' (301).

One of the many aspects of the lives and work of these seven women that stands out in *Stressing the Modern* is the ongoing struggle to speak up, to write up, in a world in which women might write, but in which the domestic, the married, the maternal all take precedence. This book makes a very valuable contribution to feminist and poetry studies in Australia, and places the work of these women in the context of emerging international developments in

poetry. It also energises us with the prospect of seven modern Australian women who made time and motivation to seek, in writing, new forms of selfhood.

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