

***Selected Prose of Dorothy Hewett*, edited and introduced by Fiona Morrison. Western Australia: UWA Publishing, 2011, 282pp.**

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Dorothy Hewett was the great multi-talented writer of her generation, emerging as an important lyric poet and a major dramatist during the 1970s, and returning to prose fiction in the 1990s. As she represented her career, this late flowering was the result of finally freeing herself from the commitment to communism that had kept her largely silenced or unhappily trying to toe the Party line for some 25 years. As Fiona Morrison points out in her Introduction to *Selected Prose*, this has meant that her post-communist writing has been privileged, and her earlier work marginalised. Morrison's selection of Hewett's prose enables us to take a closer look at the writer's career before 1968, when she, like many others, finally left the Communist Party. It shows, I think, that she went through a long process of intensifying critique, which actually strengthened her writing—not so much a sudden liberation as a gradual preparation for reclaiming her natural anarchism and capacity for experimental writing across genres.

The period covered by this selection ranges from 1945 to 1994, with reviews, contributions to symposia and extended essays on literature, theatre and cultural politics. There are some brief examples of reportage on women's issues (from Hewett's time as a journalist on *The Workers' Star* in the 1940s), and memoir pieces—one on the Pilbara during the Aboriginal strike of 1948 ('The Black Eureka'), and one on her life in the 1950s ('1954: Living Dangerously'). The latter offers a fictionalised version of Hewett's nine-year relationship with Les Flood, the 'red-headed Sydney boilermaker' with 'impeccable working class credentials' (p. 183). It was a time of 'living dangerously' both personally and politically—her clandestine political activism for the Communist Party led to her appearance as a witness in the Petrov case on Soviet espionage in Australia; and the relationship with 'Jack' was violent and destructive. But she credits him with the strength of mind to 'face the falsity of all those specious lies about the Worker's Paradise', casting herself as 'the ambitious one, the egocentric, the Party pin-up girl... and I was the survivor' (p. 188).

This is the self-mythologising but also self-critical Hewett that we meet in her poetry as well as in her autobiography, *Wild Card* (1990). But the intensely subjective note is missing from much of the prose in this volume, as she considers the work of other, admired writers—Randolph Stow, Robert Adamson, Peter Cowan. These essays, mostly written in the late 1980s and early 1990s, showcase the mature Hewett, the successful poet.

The earliest piece in this collection is also a literary essay. 'The work of Edith Sitwell' represents the love of modernist poetry that Hewett had to renounce when she joined the Party. It is fascinating to see the parallels between Sitwell's and her own bejewelled early poetry, even some strategies she would use in later lyrics (such as Sitwell's 'confusion of fairy tale characters and personal memories of actual people'). But the young poet is already critical of those same qualities: her central point is that Sitwell's 'horror of war, of spiritual disintegration, has welded her poetry into a new reality. She has at last found something to write about, besides the purely personal images, the sensuous pleasure in touch, taste, sight, smell and sound that formed the glittering roundabout world of her early years' (p.33). It is 1945 and Hewett too has 'found

something to write about'—the workers' struggle—and it will turn her away from poetry for some time.

The arresting image, the distinctive voice, confident and fluent, are already evident in this essay, and will recur in her later prose. At first, though, the prose she writes as a Party member in *The Workers' Star* is constrained. In the 'Politics' section of this book we find praise for *Australian New Writing*, the magazine edited by a group of Communist writers, and a manifesto, 'Art Must Fight,' which begins by quoting a Soviet author's declaration that 'Art which is not for the people cannot be great art' (p. 134). Sharper and more characteristic in tone is her attack on 'Ezra Pound and his Australian godchildren', the *Angry Penguins*, written at the time Pound was indicted for treason in broadcasting Axis propaganda from Rome during the war.

Hewett's early essay on Katharine Susannah Prichard from a series, 'Spotlight on WA Writers', praises the 'hot rush of energy characteristic of her novels' (p. 42). This is surely a primary quality of Hewett's own work, as Morrison shows in her insightful discussion of her Lawrentian 'rhetoric of life' (p. 10). She appears to have interviewed the older writer, and quotes some of her rousing precepts about 'creative realism'. When Hewett tackles concepts of literary realism ten years later in a revealing essay on Kylie Tennant, she is much surer of her ground. Tennant's 'romantic realism', perfected in her early novels *Tiburón* and *The Battlers*, worked by juxtaposing 'lyrical romanticism with a kind of hardheaded laconic realism of speech and characterisation,' she writes (p. 51). These are qualities that Hewett would develop in the fiction she was beginning to write with the encouragement of Frank Hardy. But she is fierce in her criticism of Tennant's later work which gets lost 'in a maze of the grotesque and the bizarre, rejects of society' (p.47). She accuses Tennant of 'sensationalist reportage' and 'contemptuous naturalism,' standard post-war Marxist critiques of working-class writing which fails to 'extend' realism to 'that heroic concept of man and woman in a social context' (p. 52).

As the 1960s wear on, Hewett becomes more critical of Communist cultural policy, and some of the most interesting essays in the book trace the stages of this critical engagement. In 'Eat Bread and Salt and Speak the Truth' she argues for the need for creative imagination as well as political analysis, and accuses realist writers of being afraid to 'free their characters to question, suffer and grow' (p. 149), while 'The Times They Are a' Changin'' welcomes the ferment of anti-establishment ideas, arguing that there is no more need for a separatist Party magazine like *The Realist Writer*. 'The Russian Writer,' apparently the text of a lecture, sets out clearly the conflict between 'humanism and dogma' that Russian writers constantly do battle with, and ends with a question she must have been asking herself more and more often in these days of the 1960s—is it simply too limiting to be always caught up in such a 'violent dialectic'? (p. 167). 'Excess of Love,' her notorious obituary for Katharine Susannah Prichard written at the time of Hewett's apostasy, answers firmly 'yes'.

The essays on theatre all date from the period of Hewett's success as a playwright, and they constitute an engaging narrative about Australian theatre overcoming 'the stranglehold of naturalism' (p.220) and reclaiming its roots in musical hall and melodrama. Patrick White is hailed as the one who delivered the first blow in this attack, anticipating by some 20 years the experiments of the late sixties associated with the *Nimrod*, the *Pram Factory* and *La Mama*. Her well-known essay, 'Shirts, Prams and Tomato Sauce' ends with a plea for many kinds of theatre, but above all 'a theatre in which "faking, distant perspective and theatrical illusion" are all at a

premium' (p. 218). In 'On the Open Stage' Hewett describes her use of such techniques, inspired by the open-air Fortune Theatre at the University of Western Australia, to create 'epic theatre' where the play is a parable, the stage is a world, and an 'altar for ritual acts' (p. 257). Her comments in this context on *The Chapel Perilous* (her most famous play, soon to have its 40th anniversary) are illuminating. She tells, too, of her own formation as a playwright under the influence of childhood enchantments with musical theatre and the movies ('Can't Stop the Music'), and describes the commanding presence in her imagination of figures from her earliest youth—her father, mother and sister and inhabitants of the wheat-belt town of Wickepin ('Drawing from History').

This collection is a most welcome one, and offers a generous selection of work. An editorial decision I would question is the omission of Hewett's footnotes from articles which originally had them. As well, the proof-reading leaves something to be desired: spelling errors possibly introduced by the scanning of printed documents leave us with 'Miss Doeker' for Patrick White's famous Cheery Soul, for instance. But these are minor points. Fiona Morrison's selections are judicious, and her excellent introductory essay offers new perspectives on Hewett's critical preoccupations. Although she provides some information about the initial publication of these pieces, and some of the events alluded to, I would have welcomed even more of this context-setting given that, as Morrison so memorably puts it, Hewett was 'part of a generation of women working before second wave feminism and in the context of mid-century political modernity, which has been, until quite recently, a kind of "blind spot" in the rear-vision mirror of Australian letters' (p.2).

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