

Letters Lifted into Poetry

Jonathan Persse, editor of the correspondence between David Campbell and Douglas Stewart, reflects on a remarkable friendship

Thirty years ago, the National Library acquired the papers of two of Australia's leading literary figures, David Campbell (1915–1979) and Douglas Stewart (1913–1985).

Four years ago, I set out to write a life of David Campbell, the grazier–poet. Making regular trips to Canberra, I have enjoyed working in the Manuscript Reading Room at the Library. I have also been as far afield as Melbourne and Hobart, and Urunga, seeing members of Campbell's family and his friends.

The work continues, but I went off at a tangent when I read the letters that Douglas Stewart had written to Campbell—there are well over 200 of them in Campbell's papers, dating from 1946 to 1979—and found almost as many letters from Campbell to Stewart, in the latter's papers.

This two-way correspondence resulted in a very fine collection of letters that has recently been published by the Library as



Letters Lifted into Poetry. The title of the collection comes from Stewart's last letter to Campbell, in June 1979, in which he wrote, 'whatever happened to be outside the window, or seen in a morning's walk—hawk or swallow or dabchick—lifted a letter into poetry'.

In 1940, Stewart, a New Zealander, became literary editor of the *Bulletin*, a magazine that, since its birth in 1880, had fostered Australian writing. Campbell's first poem, 'Harry Pearce', appeared in the issue of 18 November 1942, though it was not until the last year of the war that the two men met, a meeting vividly described by Stewart in a letter to Norman Lindsay (now held in the Mitchell Library in Sydney). Campbell was then a Squadron Leader in the RAAF, fighting against the Japanese to

above:
Norman Lindsay (1879–1969)
Portrait of David Campbell
[between 1965 and 1978]
pencil drawing on paper;
25.0 x 20.0 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-vn3533925

left:
Michael Elton
Douglas Stewart at His Desk in
the 1970s
Courtesy of Michael Elton



above:
Unknown photographer
David and Bonnie Campbell with
Children Raina and John, 1945
Courtesy Topsy Broughton

below:
Unknown photographer
Australian News and
Information Bureau
*Walter Strong, David
Rowbottom, Nancy Hertsberg,
David Campbell, Arthur Murch,
Rosemary Dobson, Douglas
Stewart, Leslie Rees, Coralie
Rees, R.D FitzGerald, Beatrice
Davis, unidentified man and
Margaret Stewart at the
Hertsberg's—a presentation
to Douglas Stewart on the
occasion of his leaving 'The
Bulletin', 1961*
b&w print; 16.5 x 21.6 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-vn3664489

the north of Australia; by the end of the war he had risen to be Wing Commander, with a DFC (Distinguished Flying Cross) and bar.

He returned to the land after the war and, on the death of his father in 1947, took over Wells Station, on the northern edge of Canberra. His mother continued for some time to live there, and he had built a house for himself and his wife Bonnie and their two children, John and Raina. Their third child, Andrew, was born in 1958. At the end of 1961 the family moved to a new property, Palerang, near Bungendore, then in 1969 to The Run, on the Molonglo River near Queanbeyan. In that last decade of his life, Campbell spent a good deal of time in Canberra, where his second wife, Judy, had a house in Griffith. He published 11 collections of his own poems, two of short stories, and edited or collaborated on another seven.

Douglas Stewart married the painter Margaret Coen in 1945. From a flat in

Bridge Street, Sydney, they moved in 1953 to St Ives where, in their daughter Meg's words, 'the adjacent Ku-ring-gai Chase not only provided my father with bush to explore but also new subjects for poems'.

In 1961, with a change of ownership at the *Bulletin*, Stewart resigned and joined Angus & Robertson, where he worked on the publishing side of the company with the famous Australian editor, Beatrice Davis; he remained with the firm until 1972. From 1955 to 1970, he was a member of the Commonwealth Literary Fund and, until the end of his life, continued to write, both poetry and prose, and to work with the National Trust in maintaining Norman Lindsay's property at Springwood. He published 13 collections of poetry, wrote five verse plays (the best known being *The Fire on the Snow*), numerous short stories and essays of criticism, biographies of Lindsay and of Kenneth Slessor, and he edited anthologies—in all, an enormous output. He was awarded the OBE in 1960, and the AO in 1979.

The earliest letter from Campbell to Stewart in the Library, though almost certainly not his first, was written on 27 October 1946; he wrote two more before Stewart replied to all three on 11 December that year. Thus the correspondence held by the Library began, ending with Stewart's letter of 11 June 1979.

What were David Campbell and Douglas Stewart writing to each other about for nearly a third of a century? It was not politics—Menzies, Whitlam, and the prime ministers between, came and went without a mention. Nor was it international events—the Korean War and the Vietnam War likewise came and went unmentioned. Nor was it sport; nor even family life except occasionally and briefly. So what, then? Literature and the art of writing, fellow authors, fishing, nature and the land ...

Poetry is the strongest thread running through the letters. When Stewart was at the *Bulletin*, Campbell would send a contribution, mostly a poem but now and again a short story, and Stewart in reply would often give a critique of the piece, and occasionally offer suggestions or advice. Poetry, and the art and craft of poetry, the joy and satisfaction of exploring the poetic instinct, so strong in both men, are there in the letters.

Each man, too, would write when the other published a book of poems, or when one of Stewart's plays was performed. On



re-reading *The Fire on the Snow*, Campbell wrote in June 1951 that he had,

found a greater beauty in it than ever before: the crystal clarity of the lyrics; the lovely contrasts of the white and green, today and yesterday, death and life; the courage and terror; and the ideas which bind it together, which to my mind are far more valid and enduring than the shallow psychology of plays such as Auden's *Ascent*.

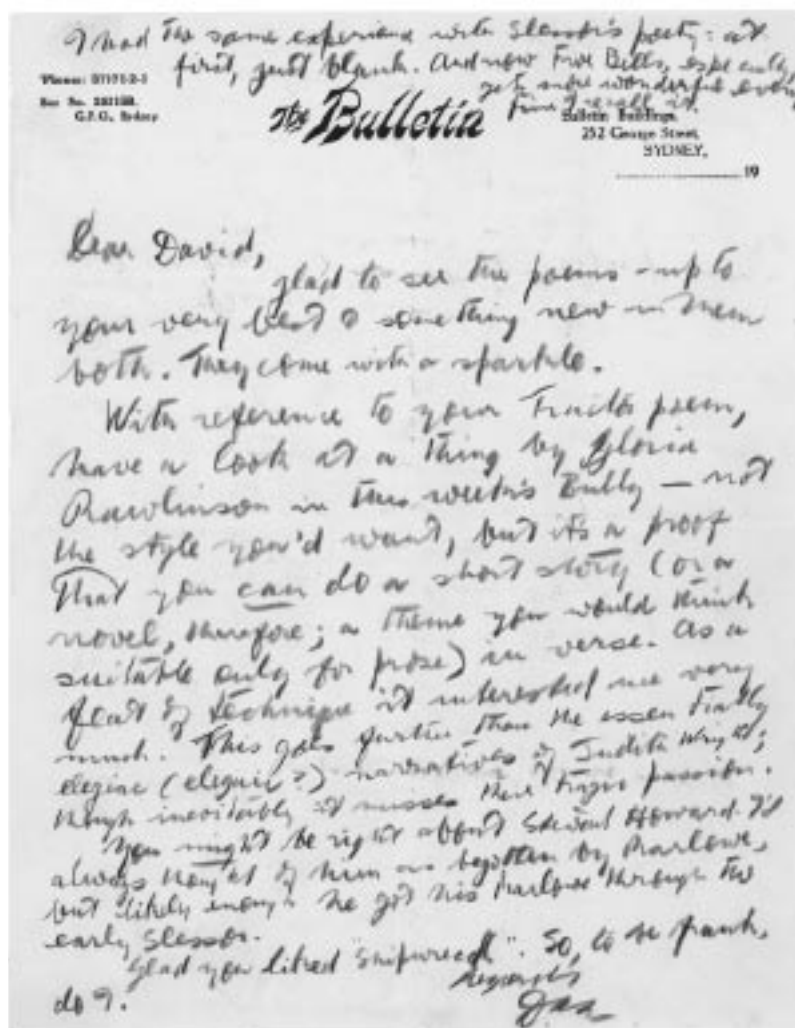
In the book of letters now published, 27 poems and an extract from *The Fire on the Snow* are included.

Contemporary poets, some of them friends of Campbell and of Stewart, and their work, are often mentioned. Judith Wright, of course, receives their attention (15 letters); after seeing a photograph of her, Campbell wrote in November 1946, 'I agree with you: she has a mouth in a million. No shabby tiger there'. R.D. FitzGerald is also the subject of their exchanges (16 letters); Campbell wrote in November 1952 of 'the fine craftsmanship and great philosophical passages' in his *Between Two Tides*. Francis Webb is mentioned in 17 letters; both Campbell and Stewart admire much of his poetry, though they are sometimes baffled by it. They are deeply concerned for his welfare, especially as his mental health deteriorated. Many other Australian writers are mentioned in the letters, especially when either Campbell or Stewart is collecting work for an anthology.

Dostoevsky is the subject of several letters in 1950. Wordsworth and Yeats are touchstones, as is Shakespeare: how well, Campbell wrote in July 1952, he 'shows the good things of life: friendship, love, honest dealing; and makes of them a yardstick for measuring evil'. Stewart occasionally compares Campbell with Byron.

It is, however, the work of several of their contemporary British and American poets that they discuss more thoroughly. Dylan Thomas comes in for praise and criticism. Neither Campbell nor Stewart warmed to T.S. Eliot's later plays. Campbell wrote, in June 1950,

I'm in bed with a cold and thoroughly enjoying it, having just read *The Cocktail Party*, *The Tempest* and *Macbeth*. What an insipid cold tonic that first is; and what a distaste Eliot has for ordinary life ... I've always believed (he) had humour, but the thin smiles in that play left me



cold ... It was a relief to leave that cold doctor and turn to the real magician of *The Tempest* ...

Letter, Douglas Stewart to David Campbell (*Bulletin* letterhead, undated)
Manuscript Collection, MS5028

Campbell also wrote, the following month, how he was,

throwing Auden out the window ... and fetching him back again to read many of his lyrics with delight when he's not trying to be clever; to admire his technique, when he's not talking in private language; to be astonished by the occasional depth of his understanding, when he's not quoting Freud ... He seems to me to have everything that goes to the making of masterpieces, except what it takes: a respect for, and delight in, life.

Implicit in many of the letters is an exploration and an understanding of the art of poetry. This becomes more explicit in some of Stewart's letters; he was, after all, one of Australia's finest critics, as well as a poet himself. Often he would comment on the contributions Campbell sent to him for the *Bulletin*, and occasionally would give advice, sometimes very specific advice,

Paleraup,
30 Jan '67.

Dear Doug,
Here with \$4 for various borrowings.
Guy, Rain's boy, has just bought a beaut cheerful little trout stream (surrounded by land) in Countagany kind of country south of Braidedool. I think we may be putting in a bit of time there. — They got married on 18 March so keep that weekend free. With 5 lb wishes to you all.
Love,
Dave

above:
Letter, David Campbell to Douglas Stewart (30 January 1967)
Manuscript Collection
MS 4829

right:
Cover of *Letters Lifting into Poetry: Selected Correspondence between David Campbell and Douglas Stewart, 1946-1979*
edited and introduced by Jonathan Persse (Canberra: National Library of Australia, 2006).
Cover photo shows David Campbell (left) and Douglas Stewart, with Meg Stewart, on a fishing trip at Countagany, 1951. Courtesy of Meg Stewart

about either the content or the form of a poem—as he did for the unpublished plays Campbell apparently wrote, and for the war novel, *Strike* (published in 2006, 60 years on). In one letter, dated October 1962, Stewart expressed gratitude to an unnamed reviewer of Campbell's recently published collection, *Poems*, calling him 'that silly fellow in the *Herald*' and declaring that he had made him 'define what I feel about the profundity of your lyrics: which lies in the lyrical music itself, and in the vision of joy and the philosophy of the continuity of life expressed quite implicitly in the simplest-seeming poems'. Both Campbell and Stewart drew much of their inspiration from nature. They loved the bush, the changing of the seasons, the trees, the orchids, the birds and animals. Campbell would often tell Stewart what he was doing on the property—planting or harvesting wheat, building a dam, dealing with foot-rot in the sheep, observing hawks or foxes. When re-reading his friend's letters and

sorting them out for the Library, Stewart wrote, in July 1977,

It occurs to me that you have in a way, and a very effective way, written that Diary of the land I mentioned to you ... your letters ... are full of your nature observations, and will undoubtedly be published some day.

They loved fishing: along with poetry, the other constant theme running through the letters. Every season they would go to the mountain streams and rivers to fish for trout, and occasionally to Lake Wapengo to join Manning Clark for some coastal fishing. Margaret Coen (Douglas Stewart's wife) sometimes went with the men, to paint, and two of her landscapes and a map painted on silk are reproduced in the book of letters.

Letters Lifting into Poetry is the record of the friendship of two of Australia's great literary figures. Both Campbell and Stewart were generous in the encouragement and the advice they gave to younger writers at the time, and they are remembered with affection and gratitude. But the collective memory fades. How very pleasing it is, then, that in 2006 not only are these letters published but also Campbell's novel *Strike*, and a new volume of selected poems, *Hardening of the Light*. Now it is time for his biography to be written, and that work continues; would someone do the same for Douglas Stewart?

JONATHAN PERSSE is writing a life of David Campbell

