

The Company of Poets -

Lisa Gorton explores the meeting of minds of some of Melbourne's poets of the 1960s

Deliberately lucid, deliberately plain: the poems that Ron Simpson and fellow Melbourne poets wrote in those decades after the Second World War keep within the range of social talk. If this marks their limits, it also defines their strengths. The poems of that time have for the most part an oddness, a way of working against their own contrivance, which is peculiarly affecting. The National Library's collection of Ron Simpson's papers includes letters to other Melbourne poets, which help to define the tone as well as the background of his poems.

Take his poem 'Going Past', for instance: a lyric, or song poem, which keeps to such plain speaking it has the inward obliquity of a dramatic monologue. The first stanza has only a half rhyme but the second stanza has a rhyme scheme that closes it up like a lock. In effect, this suggests that a prose speaker

MELBOURNE'S EIGHT BY EIGHT GROUP

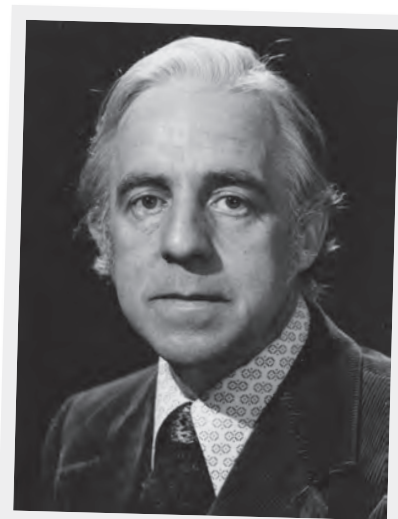
has been caught by some accident of art in the form of a poem. Perhaps that discrepancy is what gives this small and lucid poem such an ache of unsaid feeling.

In 1963, Jacaranda Press published eight Melbourne poets in a collection called *Eight by Eight*. The introduction, which the poets wrote together, declares:

This book brings together poems by eight Melbourne poets united only by friendship and geography. Our group has no name and no common theory of art or life. But we meet together, and we share a respect—not necessarily a terribly solemn one—for poetry.

It is this group Ron Simpson remembers in his poem 'Company of Poets' (*The Impossible and Other Poems*, 1998).

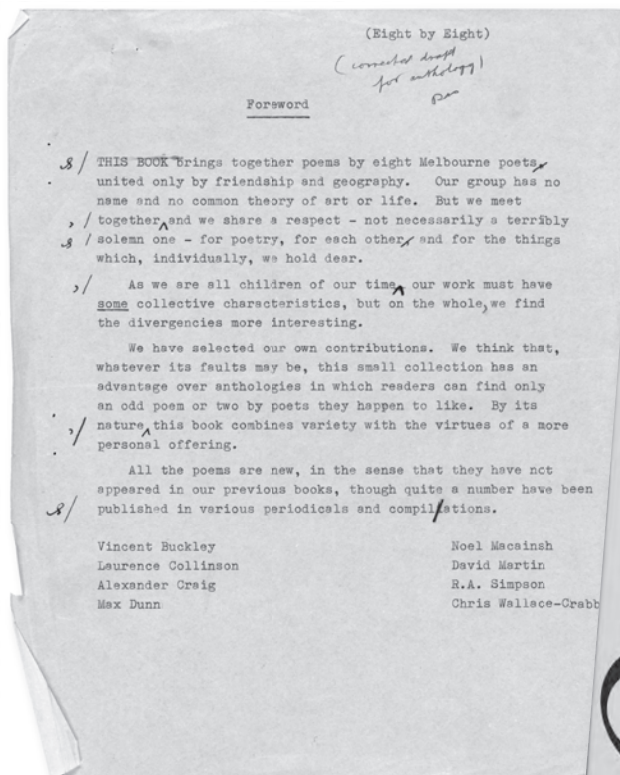
Vincent Buckley, Laurie Collinson, Alexander Craig and Maxwell Dunn: Ron's poem lists some of the poets in the *Eight by Eight* group. Over the years, the group also included Bruce Dawe, Evan Jones, Noel Macainsh, David Martin, Peter Mathers, and Kel Simmons, as well as Ron Simpson and Chris Wallace-Crabbe. These are,



above:
Unknown photographer
R.A. Simpson 1976
Manuscripts Collection
MS 5575

below left:
edited draft of the foreword to
Eight by Eight
Papers of Ronald Albert Simpson
Manuscripts Collection
MS 5575

below right:
Cover of *Eight by Eight* by
Vincent Buckley, Laurence Collinson,
Alexander Craig,
Max Dunn, Noel Macainsh,
David Martin, R.A. Simpson
and Chris Wallace-Crabbe
(Brisbane: Jacaranda Press, 1963)
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above left:
Laurence Collinson (1925–1986)
*R.A. Simpson, Bruce Dawe and
Chris Wallace-Crabbe at about
the Time When Eight by Eight
was Published* c.1963
Manuscripts Collection
MS 5575

above right:
Virginia Wallace-Crabbe (b.1941)
Peter Mathers 1993
gelatin silver photograph
24.3 x 17.5 cm
Pictures Collection
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below:
Jacqueline Mitelman
Vincent Buckley, Writer, 1982
gelatin silver photograph
40.4 x 30.5 cm
Pictures Collection
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of course, markedly different poets. The character of their meetings might suggest what their poems nonetheless shared: not only a suburban setting, but also the commitment to a given social world, which made self-consciousness something equal to the consciousness of other people.

In fact, the poetry of that time relates so closely to its social world that Chris Wallace-Crabbe's account of his friendship with Ron Simpson and other *Eight by Eight* poets may help to characterise the particular idiom of their poetry. It may also suggest some more complex ideas of influence: not the idea that poets would borrow styles and subjects from one another, but rather, the idea that a group of poets, insofar as they constituted one another's audience, could influence that most defining and hard-to-define aspect of any poem—its tone of voice.

Chris Wallace-Crabbe met Ron Simpson at Mac's Hotel in Franklin Street in 1959. Ron had spent some years in London, and he was looking for a metropolitan poetry akin to the work of Peter Porter, Alan Brownjohn and John Wain. Wallace-Crabbe remembers: 'The notion was built up that a bunch of us should get together and bounce our poems off one another'. Under the influence of Vin Buckley and David Martin, they formed the *Eight by Eight* group of poets who met at each other's houses to eat and drink together and read poems.

'We were all aware that poetry was an art without (in Australia, at least) present glamour—a modest, quiet, uncelebrated and little paid art.' Wallace-Crabbe's remark suggests how the characteristic style of these Melbourne poems in itself constitutes historical awareness. In his poem, 'A Wintry Manifesto', the habit of 'painful, plain, contracted observations' works as an emblem of the era. The poem ends with this ambiguous praise:

Finding our heroism in rejection
Of blank Utopias and of thieves' affection:
Our greatest joy to mark an outline truly
And know the piece of earth on which we stand.

In this way, the Melbourne poems treat suburban existence as a state of mind as much as a fact of place. This gives their everyday settings an odd imaginative power: the scarcely comforting effect of solid building on weak ground.

Wallace-Crabbe comments that:

There was always the sense that we were
playfully working out the communist and anti-
communist, or the pastoral and inner-urban,
mythologies by which we lived.

Perhaps the meetings introduced a social energy, in the widest sense political, into the poems: the idea that devoting the best of days to a modest, quiet and uncelebrated art might be said to equal the predicament of life in the suburbs.



Yet Wallace-Crabbe's phrase—'[the] mythologies by which we lived'—also brings into play that undermining intelligence, that sense of what is merely social, which complicates and strengthens the best of the Melbourne poems.

An anecdote from Wallace-Crabbe about his poem, 'Melbourne', may serve to define how the group worked. This poem treats the city as an emblem of its citizens' inner states. As such, it illustrates a defining characteristic of the Melbourne poems, where social lucidity and isolation seem like aspects of one another.

The final line of it was originally: 'though much has died here, nothing has been born'. Kel Semmens said, 'Chris, the final line of your poem is not true. Melbourne is one of the great centres of the world in medical sciences.' I bowed to him and changed that final line to: 'though much has died here, little has been born'.

Certainly, Semmens' comment demonstrates an attitude essential to the Melbourne poetry of that time: its unexaggerated sense of what is agreed true. Yet Wallace-Crabbe's bow suggests why the poetry of that time is often something more than of its time: the best poems give this oblique, almost satiric, energy to the language of outward fact they accept and use.

Perhaps for that reason, Wallace-Crabbe's poem for Ron Simpson, 'The Executor's Tale', works with short lines and line breaks that make corners and diagonals in every stanza. In this way, Wallace-Crabbe creates a form akin

to that obliquity of style, which puts 'bread and semi-dried tomatoes/in place of the archaic, sweet/divine afflatus'. 'The Executor's Tale' is printed for the first time here.

The Executor's Tale

In the upshot

Ron's papers turned out to be
nothing short of astonishing,
every poem in several copies
with or without discrete approval
by the observers AA and C,
Gravesian readers over his shoulder:
annotations everywhere.

What a wad of manilla folders,
each with half a dozen sheets
of dutiful A4.

So that

editorial bewilderment
shunted me through to lunch
with bread and semi-dried tomatoes
in place of the archaic, sweet
divine afflatus.

These were

the categories of death and life,
his tussles with a non-performing god,
his pure tesserae of the greatest nothingness.
So many folders boxed here,
such black ink,
so much paper.

Read them diagonally and
you see the footprints from a life:
probably George Bell and Jehovah
were his lasting problems,
in the upshot.

Chris Wallace-Crabbe

LISA GORTON lives in Melbourne. Giramondo is publishing her poetry collection, *Press Release*, in November this year. Her novel for children, *Cloudland*, is coming out with Pan Macmillan in 2008

The transcript of Lisa Gorton's interview with Chris Wallace-Crabbe, on which this article is partly based, is available at <http://www.nla.gov.au/pub/nlanews/2007/nov07/transcript.html>.

Wolfgang Sievers (1913–2007)
Mac's Hotel, Franklin Street, Melbourne, Victoria (Protected Building), 1964
b&w photograph; 19.3 x 24.3 cm
Pictures Collection
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