

Poetry and patriotism

By Mark Reid

“*To be a poet in Australia, wrote Dransfield, is the ultimate commitment*”. More than thirty years after his death this often quoted fragment rings as true as ever.

Even in that brief window of optimism post Menzies and pre dismissal Dransfield and his *generation of 68* contemporaries felt the pressure of a culture suspicious and resentful of, even hostile to, *Culture*.

Now in this era of prosaic materialism poetry sits uneasily. Abstract notions such as poetry become unproductive in a culture that requires concrete verification, they risk neglect or even aggression, becoming *unAustralian* to a cultural ear quick to take offence.

The pathological rubbishing of anything that can be seen to be difficult or requiring specialist knowledge as *elitist* inhibits all speech and scorns poetry with irrelevance.

We love the nation-building 1890s bush-balladry with its schoolroom mnemonics and celebrated hagiographies of national character, but we shun a true poetic, the language of psyche, emotion, poetic intellect. We have dreams of prosperity and they are coming true.

Paradoxically our material prosperity is characterised by an increasing meanness of spirit. Health, education, social security and of course the arts, cuts to all social services at a time when we have never been more able to afford them.

Those who seek asylum from tyrants so brutal we send our military to overthrow them, are branded illegal and false in their claims and punished.

Our leaders espouse traditional Australian values – mateship, a fair go.

But what traditional Australian values?

If we look at the Australian poetic tradition most valued, the aforementioned 1890s bush balladry, we find a propagandist drive toward turn of the century Federalism. If Banjo Patterson was alive today he'd be a campaign manager. Lawson would be a founding member of One Nation.

Mateship and fair go have always been mock heroics, a crude Trojan Horse in which to smuggle political and commercial agenda, as manipulated as Gallipoli or The Don or Vegemite.

Did we, as a young nation, not have the opportunity to cement any notion of *national character* before the onset of 20th century modernist anxiety and its uncertainty of identity? We are so easily led, vulnerable to flattery. We don't know what we stand for.

The book from which I took the earlier quote, Michael Dransfield's *Streets of the Long Voyage* is dedicated:

or friends

and for Australia – a dedication of both personality and nationality, where the personal is political.

Dransfield does not champion particular causes though the era he lived and wrote in might have invited him too; he uses the personal as access to the wider cultural psyche, the national subconscious, self as microcosm; the street-level is elevated not just to the state of literature but to an exemplar of the democratic ideal. The radical becomes a conservatism and dissent an expression of patriotism. Dissent is patriotic because our capitalist democracies enshrine it; even as they package and market it back to us. Even as we pay for it, our freedom is the gotcha in their argument. Just *being* an Australian poet is patriotic. It is a privilege.

What do we Australian poets do if no one listens or responds or they do so in derision? What to do with our images, metaphors, our abstracted thoughts, our passions?

We do what we have always done – only more so.

In the midst of the dissolution of principle, we keep to our principles, we guard our integrity because it's all there is. We keep at our work knowing we may be in our own dark ages but that history is ultimately ornamental, the cycle will turn and we will find as individuals and as a nation, that prosperity comes and goes but we, through our poetry, remain.

Poetry/art is a natural function of humanity. Ever since we first scratched images on cave walls any number of civilisations have come and gone, but the fundamentals remain: mutual love, religious or spiritual practice and the practice of art.

We are true to our love(s), our god(s), our art(s). In Australia today this is pure dissent, it is radical action. We speak truth as distinguished from fact. The rest is politics.

We are poets. We are unAustralian. We are patriots.