

## ESSAY REVIEW

### POETRY IN RHODESIA

IN THIS REVIEW I try to give a brief survey of the poetry written in this country from settler days up to the present. This means treating a wide range of themes, styles and temperaments. The qualities of a pioneer poet will obviously be different from the qualities of the latest Black protest verse. Or will they? Reading the verse produced in this country reveals a common and pervasive mood in which the poet identifies himself with the country in abstract, almost mythological, terms. In this identification differences disappear and leave a great empathy between the poet and his land. It is not too fanciful to say that the country is his muse. This should not be surprising considering what a beautiful country this is, and how for most of its recent history it has been fought over in one way or another. This has resulted in the people feeling that they were, to use Doris Lessing's crucial phrase, 'a vestigial people': the Whites because they are expatriated; the Blacks because they have been subjugated. In this situation it is inevitable that a sense of identity is to be discovered primarily in an attempt to belong, physically, to the country. If there is such a thing as Rhodesian poetry or Zimbabwean poetry, possessing its own inherent characteristics, it will be discovered elucidating and affirming that relationship.

From the early settlers to the present day, the most pervading emotion of White versifiers is the strangeness of Africa which in turn immediately invokes a sense of loss for the homeland. The habitation of these poets, for the most part, has been less an inspiration than a taunt and they have replied by transforming the landscape into a suburban garden. They have responded by emphasizing, often unconsciously, their Englishness. In more pernicious ways this is the fatal arrogance of the colonial, and it has spoilt many a prodigious talent in the arts. The quality of a poem in this context can almost be judged by the freedom it strives for in the face of this over-bearing ethos — the ethos of the provincial. For the provincial in being estranged from the cosmopolitan tradition goes to great lengths to prove that he is more urbane, more civilized, more genteel, in short more traditional, than either the natives of the province or the residents of the metropolis. Provincialism is insular and ingrowing and results in mannerisms and tricks of style rather than a mature style itself. Its energy goes in forcing every alien to become as they are. Provincialism is arrogantly exclusive, often anachronistic, and uses aesthetic chauvinism as the vanguard of imperialism.

This, however, does not create a sensibility which might transform the writing into an African art; instead it remains the wistful, even pathetic, longing of the exile for home. Because there is no surrender to experience there is no innate sense of local tradition. The imperiousness of the imagination does not allow for it. Robert Frost has written a poem on American colonialism, 'The Gift Outright', where he says 'The land was

ours before we were the land's'. So the land remains 'unstoried, artless, unenhanced'. The poet must be possessed by the land. To do so, according to Frost, people must give themselves up to the land without reservation: 'The gift outright'. Provincialism holds out against the 'spirit of place',<sup>2</sup> settles it, transforms it in his own image, but keeps itself inviolate, no matter how heroic the struggle for the land may be. Regionalism, which is a different thing indeed from provincialism, is a gift outright of self: the surrender to a gradual process of transformation. There is humility not arrogance, and it needs time. Perhaps the earliest verse from this country was prematurely provincial; as N. H. Brettell wrote in 1958, poetry 'does seem to require a more ancient and stable soil than that provided by a society of pioneers'.<sup>3</sup> But the White Pioneers had their eye on Utopia; the Blacks who were taught our language were content, like Caliban, to use it to curse us. But now after almost a century there are signs that the settler is now being possessed, and the Black poet who has always been so is at last finding something to sing about.

The first collection of poetry published in English from Rhodesia was compiled by John Snelling in 1938.<sup>4</sup> The volume is uncannily reminiscent of those volumes of Georgian poetry written before the holocaust of the First World War, full of optimistic poetic awakenings heralding a new great age. So much does it fly on gilded wings that its colonial *esprit de corps* seems little more offensive than if it had been uttered by a Girl Guides' rally in Surbiton. The stately Foreword by the then Governor, Sir Herbert J. Stanley with his dedication to 'the glamour of courage, tenacity and achievement',<sup>5</sup> is as quaint as hearts of oak. The reader who dips into this dusty collection must resist the impish urge to cry 'famous last words'. For their world is not ours. As the politics of the volume are outmoded, so are the aesthetics. The obdurate Preface by Snelling asserts, 'it is only a modest little bunch of wild flowers picked from the Rhodesian countryside at random'.<sup>6</sup> The Introduction by Arthur Shearly Cripps is unashamedly belletrist. The worst that could be said for the volume according to him was, 'It was imitative and sapless, but not preposterous'.<sup>7</sup> Thus he would send it to purgatory not damn it to hell which he reserved for preposterous 'Eliotesque' experiments. The scorn of that epithet is all the warning the modern reader needs: Eliot who now is the Establishment to be reacted against, was in some ancient days, in some alien colony, still the 'drunken helot'. Rhodesian verse began two generations behind the times, isolated in some distant province of the Empire.

Being lost in time, like some frozen mammoth with a daisy in its mouth, does not necessarily result in poetic failure. There are traditionalists adhering to poetic values which never vary: Robert Graves is the splendid example in our time. But it would be a mistake to believe that he knew little or nothing of the experiments of modernism. For to write as if nothing had happened in the arts in the fifty years which the anthology covers is wilfully philistine. Picasso, Stravinsky, Eliot all happened — although one meets

\*The phrase belongs to D. H. Lawrence, *Selected Literary Criticism* (London, Heinemann, 1973), 301.

<sup>2</sup>'Three Rhodesian poets', *Rhodesiana* (1958), III, 29.

<sup>4</sup>*Fifty Years of Rhodesian Verse*, ed. J. Snelling (Oxford, B. H. Blackwell, 1938).

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, 14.

many Sunday artists who wish that they had not. Gentility alienated from the centre of cultural change, whether it be Europe or New York, results in gaucherie and ignorance. And to be in 'exile', as these Rhodesian poets felt that they were, makes them all the more defiantly conservative. Cripps's advice to readers coming to Africa would be to bring the Bible and Theocritus! This 'desert island disc' approach to literature is too precious. 'Provincialism', in the words of one modern poet, 'is the enemy'.<sup>8</sup> This has debilitated, but worse, cheered up, the writers in this first anthology. They fall back on the pride of their achievement which, however justified socially or economically, does nothing for art. Pride nourishes rhetoric not poetry — and insular rhetoric at that.

The impression of life in Rhodesia, if we are to believe the anthology, is of Rhodes statuesquely gazing 'northward where the wide Zambezi gleams', while the leather-faced Pioneers spend their whole time in bended-kneed reverie at nature's mystery. Like the Georgians before them, nature poetry is all. Roy Campbell satirized the Georgians with this catechism:

1. Have you ever been on a walking tour?
2. Do you suffer from Elephantias of the Soul?
3. Do you make friends easily with dogs, poultry, etc.?
4. Are you easily exulted by natural objects?
5. Do you live in one place and yearn to live in another place?
6. Can you write in rhyme and metre?<sup>9</sup>

And unfortunately the Rhodesians in this volume answer unashamedly in the affirmative. Nature here gives impulses from a vernal wood as incessantly as alternating electrical current. 'Lend an ear to Nature's deeper call'<sup>10</sup> say these poets; 'Are you easily exulted by natural objects?' There seems a considerable effort to insist that African nature can be at least as spiritually uplifting as the Lake District. Nineteenth-century poetic afflatus is active in the veld where 'Nature sweeps away life's carping littleness'.<sup>11</sup> Or, in Cripps's more famous poem, it is the veld 'That gave me my lost manhood back'.<sup>12</sup> But it is all too consciously literary; you cannot see the veld for the vellum.

The worst poems in the volume fail in feeling — through a pride which is too diffuse and all-enveloping, and through sentimentality, and worse, through a factitious heroicism. It may be invidious to point out the very worst poet in the volume, N. H. D. Spicer, who is bad by any standard, except that he is commended by Cripps in his Introduction. He has a poem elaborating on the motto 'Play the Man' of Milton School, Bulawayo, which 'No backward look thy spreading fame has marred'.<sup>13</sup> The adjectival rash, a homage one imagines more to the poet than to the school's founder, is a symptom of reliance on patriotic rather than poetic emotions, on impulses which one lost generation may have considered apt for poetry but which now fail hopelessly. But thankfully and mercifully, the volume is redeemed

<sup>8</sup>Ezra Pound, *Selected Prose 1909-1965*, ed. W. Cookson (London, Faber, 1973), 135.

<sup>9</sup>'Contemporary poetry', *Scrutinies, By Various Writers* (London, J. Cape, 1928), 161-80.

<sup>10</sup>*Fifty Years of Rhodesian Verse*, 116.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 88.

politically by Spicer's impish *alter ego*, L. M. Hastings, who satirizes the values which Spicer adulates. Hastings is like a cheeky Rupert Brooke in the midst of an older, more staid generation, trying to shock and shatter complacency. He has a true gift for the comic as he mocks the mad-dogs-and-Englishman Jones:

Now if a lewd night shape moaned at Jones  
Or an eagle  
Ten times larger than life  
Fell like a bolt out of the sky upon him,  
He would faint:  
He would have angina pectoris, nasal catarrh,  
Bright's disease, congested liver,  
And duodenal ulcer.  
His blood pressure would go up horribly,  
And he would die of a stroke  
About five in the afternoon,  
Leaving his wife  
And all the rest of his mouldy relatives  
Scrabbling among the policies.<sup>14</sup>

The best poets in the book are those who recognize the interplay, often at times inscrutable, between human, one would almost say English, values and the alien nature of Africa. And in this volume it is a surprisingly rare phenomenon. There are very few figures in the landscape. Most poets are too busy endowing nature with their own exulted emotions and intently conning its inscrutable face for a glimpse of themselves. The exceptions are Cullen Gouldsbury and Kingsley Fairbridge. The latter, I suggest, has a good case to be considered the first White poet we may want to call 'African'. Saying why is difficult and controversial, for it is a response to something pervasive yet unmistakable. It means more than using Africa as a subject, or even having African paraphernalia in the poetry. I can only use Frost's phraseology: he is 'possessed by' Africa. The country was certainly under the skin of Fairbridge, who in the following poem has all the pathos of W. H. Davies, but the exotic startling quality of newer, stranger work. The poem is 'Burial', recalling the burial of a child without ceremony:

Alas! I am old, and you are the last—  
Mwanango, the last of me, here on the hillside.  
The dust where you play'd by the edge of the kraal  
Is sodden with rain, and is trodden to mud.  
The hoe that I use to fashion your dwelling  
Is caked with the earth that is taking you from me.  
Where now is Dzua who ripens the rukweza?  
And where now are you, O mwanango kaduku?  
Alas! Alas! My little child!  
I bury you here by the edge of the lands.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 122.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 69.

Such poets see more, and see more clearly than their contemporaries. And they do so because they have responded directly to their environment and stayed honest to their own experiences. The melancholy twilight of nineteenth-century Romanticism is not disguised by blue skies and brown veld. The worst defect of the volume is a debilitated antiquarian diction which is a sure sign of a debilitated response to an intimidating land, which Fairbridge has avoided through his tenacious empathy.

The scenario of a typical Rhodesian poem of the time is 'a glad spring morning', usually with a 'crimson dawn'; or, if the poet is a later riser, a 'blazing sapphire sky'. Sometimes we are asked to believe 'skies of blue' shine where 'green grass grows'. Then among 'leafy glades' or 'leafy combes', 'silver streams' flow to 'elfin grotts'. The unwearied sojourner may find 'shady grotts' with 'sudden rills', or 'murmuring streams' where the musing bard catches glimpses of 'nymphs of fount or spring', or even an occasional 'elfin chain'. All of this to the accompaniment of 'heavenly singing birds' who sing from 'feather'd throats'. While these 'sweet birds jostle' the 'jocund' poet is in 'deepest wonder steeped', or, after lunch, in 'abject dread' or 'wan hope' he indulges in a 'witching thrill'. And at all times in 'reverie' his 'spirit wended' its way to find rhymes for 'Nature's guerdon' and 'silver birches burgeon'; or for 'deign' and 'twain'. It is all some sickly sweet confection made up from the degeneracies of Spencer, Milton and Wordsworth. The poetry is choked with these parasitic literary weeds as if the very sun and the rain had stimulated them. At times the impertinent green fingers of the critic itches to weed out the true blooms. 'Only A Pheasant Calls'<sup>16</sup> by Spicer really begins quite well; the reader senses an almost Lawrentian directness:

The pool lies calm and peaceful;  
On its face  
No ripple stirs to break the tracery  
Of trees reflected in its amber deep.

Take away 'peaceful' from the first line; omit the personification by having surface not face; tracery is good; so far it is salvageable:

Silent the world  
Between the noisy moon —

I am not sure about the haunt of Miltonic rhetoric here, but to continue:

Shrill with the hum of myriad insect wings —  
And that sweet hour when all the countryside  
Is glad with song and melody of birds  
New waked from shaded slumber 'mid the leaves.

Here the critic throws up his hands in defeat when the clichés and the banalities come thick as myriad insect wings. The cargo of poeticisms which these poets carry on their trek through the bush finally exhausts them, and they lie dying among their family jewels and trinkets to find they have had no room for quinine or mosquito nets.

Arthur Shearly Cripps has seemed to inherit the title of Rhodesia's poet laureate and, to be sure, he has something patrician and zealous suitable to that office. But his poetry remains darkening like some ancestral portrait which has hung in the sun too long. His eminence comes from his attempt to

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 38-9.

give words to the fundamental strangeness of the African landscape, its intimidating 'this-ness' which sends the poet into his own reverie as the light sends cockroaches scurrying:

How shall I paint and how personify  
Her close-lipp'd land?  
How will you best her secrets understand?  
First learn to love and live with her as I?  
Then leave for exile. Ere you come again —  
Trust her to make each wistful secret plain!<sup>17</sup>

It is a 'close-lipp'd land', but as to a silent companion we talk all the more volubly to hide the embarrassment, so do the poets in this volume. And they talk of themselves: the natural backcloth is only a painted curtain. The culture of the English language overpowers any regional locale and history proves more potent than place. An adjective can be the agent of imperialism. In Cripps it is seen as a fatal fascination for the adjectival compound; he is like some frantic sub-poetical Hopkins. Poets can be sent back to experimentation in language by experiences which are strange and intimidating. Hopkins needed the compound adjective to describe his guilty ecstasy; Cripps seems motivated by a similar paradox: as if he were aware he was anglicizing the landscape but could not resist doing so. But at least it is Hopkins and not Wordsworth or Milton. He is also totally obsessive — a sign, as it is in Hopkins, of an inability or nervousness of matching word to thing: 'tough-shelled', 'sunrise-ruddied', 'thunder-gloom', 'harsh-rayed', 'noon-thirst', 'breast-high', 'rain-mellowed', 'wind-carven', 'plough-soils', 'brown-tussocked'. One poem<sup>18</sup> especially is an orgy of incestuous coupling: 'hoe-head', 'hoe-shine', 'eye-shine', 'sun-shine', 'fire-shine'. Of course he is trying too hard because he knows he will fail; or worse, he was afraid of succeeding. Others do not even see the problem. But Cripps has nothing as successful as 'The Song-Maker' or 'Burial' by Kingsley Fairbridge.

In 1948, Snelling presented *A New Anthology of Rhodesian Verse*,<sup>19</sup> though still prefaced as that modest nosegay of veld flowers. But on the whole the new book is a great improvement. Gone are the Sunday, if not Wednesday afternoon, poets, in favour of a more comprehensive selection from the better known. Gouldsbury and Fairbridge remain essentially as they appeared. Hastings, who stuck out in the former anthology like a ragged urchin among choirboys, shows a marked extension and deepening of his talent. Still the wry and mordant satirist, especially in 'Snapshot of Menelaus', he has all the breezy irreverence of Auden or classical jauntiness of MacNeice. Yet absence from Africa does not always make the heart grow harder as the fine lyrical poem, 'Waterloo Bridge' makes clear. Here the poet moves from the Thames to Africa:

Dawn on the river, the dark river, the dark  
shining river of Africa  
Where in a live silence  
Flamingoes swing in rosy circles,

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 33.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 66.

<sup>19</sup>*A New Anthology of Rhodesian Verse*, ed. J. Snelling, Oxford, B. H. Blackwell, 1950).

And in reedy pools  
 The crocodile, the everlasting,  
 Dreams marshy voluptuous dreams  
     Of long-dead cities  
 That fell flaming amid the assegais  
 And stank delectably in the marsh.<sup>20</sup>

We have come a long way from 'elfin-grots' to the 'marshy voluptuous dreams' of the croc.

The aberrant anthology, *Thudding Drums*, by G. M. Miller, published in 1942, was intended as a school's anthology of the traditional poets like Chaucer, Milton and Wordsworth, but which incorporated Rhodesians like Cripps, Fairbridge and Gouldsbury and South African poets like Francis Carey Slater.<sup>21</sup> It is the immigrant's old Victorian china. Here most clearly is the expatriated view of poetry in the colonies. The need for local colour added to the austerity of history: the silver tea service glinting in the tropical sun. It is cursory, quaint and ridiculous. But it has been the tone of every anthology from Rhodesia. Brettell wrote in 1975:

Nearly all our poetry so far has been, like the daffodils in our gardens and the horse-brasses in our parlours, the poetry of exile, tinged with the nostalgia that is the symptom of a young and uncertain culture.<sup>22</sup>

And he is being generous. The mistake anthologists have made is to try to brazen out the uncertainty and strangeness of exile with a British stiff upper lip. So the anthologies are all bravado — like the blanco on the tennis shoes on which was founded an Empire.

The anthology by D. E. Finn (the poet D. E. Borrell), *Poetry in Rhodesia: 75 Years*,<sup>23</sup> is ten years old. And already it is as dated as a house-boy's white gloves. Cripps, Hastings, Fairbridge manage fine, but they are all taking tea with spinster school-teachers and retired civil servants. It is cosy and terribly, terribly genteel. It is all 'African Tea' under 'The Tall Jacaranda Trees'. Far too many poems are vitiated by a sentimentality towards oneself and a patronizing 'slap on the back' familiarity with Africa. There is a self-congratulatory feeling about the volume which is more than patriotism, it is the arrogance of the provincial. Especially the arrogance of the provincial with an 'heroic' past. I doubt whether anything as vulgar and banal as Olive Robertson's poem has been written since the cataclysm of 1914 scourged poetry of the heroic nationalism of the will:

That hard, indomitable will,  
 That passion to possess alone  
 So vast a land, dominates still  
 Those who have claimed it as their own.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., 80.

<sup>21</sup>*Thudding Drums*, ed. G. M. Miller (Blickley, Kent, Univ. of London Press).

<sup>22</sup>'The place of poetry in Rhodesia's history', *The Rhodesia Science News* (1975), IX, 352-7.

<sup>23</sup>*Poetry in Rhodesia: 75 Years*, ed. D. E. Finn (Salisbury, The College Press, 1968).

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 17.

To make my point absolutely clear let me contrast her 'Inheritance' with that wise poem of Frost's:

But we were England's, still colonials,  
Possessing what we still were unpossessed by,  
Possessed by what we now no more possessed.<sup>25</sup>

You do not possess the land; Africa, whatever Olive Robertson thinks, is not her 'inheritance'. The meek it is, who inherit. As Frost knows, it is in giving of oneself, 'The Gift Outright', that the land possesses. Regionalism, the respect of place, comes from humility not 'indomitable will'. It is archaic arrogance to feel and write of the will to possess; it is probably vicious to publish it. Whatever political message it has, it slanders poetry; it slanders art, which is also a gift outright, not a demand.

The blatancy of the anthology is easy to trace back to provincialism and dilettantism. The more isolated and exiled one becomes, the more intimidated one becomes by an alien environment, then the more attractive insularity looks. So the more determined is the effort to nurture a 'little England'. Bridge-parties, Gilbert and Sullivan, gin and tonic: the lost culture of the expatriated. It is defensive and paranoid. Too many poets in the book are complacent about themselves and wilful about others. And invoking 'law' not 'love' makes rhetoric not poetry. This is a shame, for there are good poets here: Douglas Livingstone, Hastings, Brettell; and honest ones: Fairbridge and H. Finn. But an anthology is like an apple barrel.

At the bottom of the barrel, at the back of the book, are a few fairly undistinguished Black writers. Henry Pote is the only one who seems to show any real vein of poetic feeling. 'To a White Child'<sup>26</sup> is a touching and guileless address to a friendly alien:

Will your trust vanish when you grow older?  
Will you think you alone can order?  
It cannot be: you're already too wise  
To somersault and move anti-clockwise.

To most readers this anthology will be merely drab. It is, I suppose, not an important failure. But a bit more austerity in art and generosity in feeling might cultivate a better literary climate for a true poet to emerge: for it is often the case that a true poet — a Wordsworth — emerges from the poet-tasters of this world.

The Poetry Society of Rhodesia, which is made up of many of the versifiers in Finn's anthology, is not untouched by the provincialism they have inherited as inevitably as their grand-parent's doilies and cake-plates. But it has turned over the soil regularly so, if a poet should come along, his first tentative shoots will not be strangled by weeds. Since 1952 it has put out a biennial pamphlet, *Rhodesian Poetry*, the 1976 issue of which is the thirteenth.<sup>27</sup> This volume is introduced by the chairman, Vernon Crawford, and for once there is creeping into the ambience of our verse the political groundswell which is rolling over Southern Africa. But in effect the piece is

<sup>25</sup>The Poetry of Robert Frost, 348.

<sup>26</sup>Poetry in Rhodesia: 75 Years, 61.

<sup>27</sup>Rhodesian Poetry (1976-7), XIII, 36 pp., Rh\$2.00.



no more than a reassuring whisper in the poet's ear (there is a separate Preface for 'readers'), that such events do not really concern us. Crawford's words are a response to the Preface by Douglas Livingstone who congratulates 'Today's selection, mercifully sans overt politicising, which does Rhodesia and its people credit.'<sup>28</sup> Perhaps a little smug? Livingstone, I suspect, is motivated by a generosity, which is absent in his poetry, perhaps because generosity is the hand-maiden of condescension.

The faults of this collection seem different from the faults of the past. Modern verse is generally somewhat anarchical and the critic is on less certain ground because the dispensation of the best poets insists that anything does, indeed, go. In an age of frantic experiment, who bothers to wait around to see if the litmus paper turns blue or not. This collection is full of tentative and strident experiments which show some kind of awareness of something. But my litmus paper remains as stubbornly pink as when I put it in. Maybe I am doing the wrong tests. In fairness, however, most are ambitious failures.

D. E. Borrell (D. E. Finn), despite her wilful honesty, I find a little precious; Brettell as tough and crabbed and haunting as ever. But why go on, the poets are all very conscious, educated in the latest techniques, and indeed interesting in their manoeuvres. But there is something missing in most of them that is only found for example in the poems of Charles Mungoshi, which are the most feeling and felt of the whole volume.

It becomes clear that Rhodesian poets are trying to master the experimental and sophisticated, but that technique is turning against them. It is not enough to construct the artifact; it needs a spirit of its own. Poetry, said Emily Dickinson, is 'a house that wants to be haunted'.<sup>29</sup> There are many nice modern bungalows here but the only haunted house belongs to Mungoshi. If I cannot describe a ghost, let me show you one:

Dotito is our brother.

He is strange . . .

He could walk for hours  
in a heavy downpour and never notice.  
Father caned him for it once and now when  
it rains he just sits by the window looking out,  
sometimes talking — opening his mouth  
and saying strange noises to the rain.  
When he is tired of talking to the rain  
he blows breath onto the glass pane  
and draws the same weird things as on the scraps of paper . . .

We are a little afraid.

Strange people point and stare at us on the street —  
even when Dotito isn't with us. We know what they  
are saying too even when we don't see them open their mouths.  
We can't go anywhere without meeting them.

They are talking about how we are Dotito's people.<sup>30</sup>

Poetry needs no veneer of verbal sophistication if it simply has this rightness, this ability to go straight to the heart of the matter. I think that 'Goodbye

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., 4.

<sup>29</sup>*Selected Poems and Letters*, ed. R. N. Linscott (New York, Doubleday, 1954), 15.

<sup>30</sup>*Rhodesian Poetry* (1976-7), XIII, 25.

Poem' by Enetia Vassilatos<sup>31</sup> has the same simple ability to frighten, though it is a more friendly ghost. Words can scare away the power they are meant to invoke.

Unfortunately, the most recent number of *Rhodesian Poetry*, for 1978, shows a great decline in quality, lacking any of the vigour of the previous volume. This is more sad since the Preface begins with these words: 'This should prove an historic issue of *Rhodesian Poetry*, since it is quite possibly the last that will bear the name.'<sup>32</sup> And the book does have something valedictory about it: unfortunately it is painfully ironic that this should vitiate its mood. Many, too many, of the verses are trite evocations of the 'pity of war'; 'Night Patrol'; 'The Briefing'; 'Night Deployment'; 'Wartime/Timewar'. In poems like these the writer relies too casually on the event and does not work hard enough at dislocating it into art. The result so often is partisanship or failure to communicate. The volume also has its old chestnuts like Phillippa Berlyn's 'Botswana Border', or Broughton Gingell's cranky mystical poems. What seems most absent is any personal force of feeling. Most of the verses seem like little remorseless rhetorical machines churning out their iambs. And it is surely no coincidence that this volume pays less attention to younger writers or Black writers. Of its 38 pages, only 6 are by Blacks. Politics apart, recent alternative publications suggest that this is no adequate reflection of the local poetry scene.

I think it is time for a truly selective anthology of Rhodesian verse which would emphasize the poets not the versifiers. It would begin with, nervously, Cripps, then continue more certainly with Kingsley Fairbridge, Cullen Gouldsbury, and L. M. Hastings from the settler generation. It might jump then to Brettell and H. Finn, and appropriate early Douglas Livingstone on the way. It would come up to date with only the very best of contemporary writers like Mungoshi. Here I think we would have enough for a respectable volume which might equal South Africa, Australian and Canadian anthologies; and this would be a respectable summing up before the changes which are surely on their way. The days for dilettante window-dressing are well over.

The need for such an anthology is more urgent than the individual volumes now being published in the *Mopani* series. The first volume in the series was *The Sunbathers and Other Poems* by Hugh Finn.<sup>33</sup> Finn is a poet whose one essential preoccupation is to search among the insignificant for significance: he rummages through clichés hoping to find something which has come back into fashion. Hence he dwells perhaps negligently among the usual, everyday commonplaces where most of us dwell all the time, but from where we often look for poets to lead us. Finn offers little to this hope; if we do sense the mysterious, the arcane, it is among the obvious. So a wooden figurehead fished up among the soles and the dogfish is suddenly identified with during its repose on the seabed, to allow the poet to extract a frisson: 'One could look with its eyes/Upward through the years of luminous green oblivion . . . /One might see death in one's own face looking down'.<sup>34</sup> And then seeing a beetle ravish a flower, the poet shifts his typical poet's reaction in surprise at discovering 'The beetle war far lovelier than the flower'.<sup>35</sup> In

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 30.

<sup>32</sup>*Rhodesian Poetry* (1978), XIV, 38 pp., Rh\$1.50.

<sup>33</sup>H. Finn, *The Sunbathers and Other Poems* (Salisbury, The Poetry Society of Rhodesia, 1977), 44 pp., Rh\$1.35.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., 6.

rummaging in the dusty lumber-room of commonplaces for wisdom and truth Finn reminds us of Auden but he lacks Auden's fierce panache.

His poetry lives stolid and comfortable, and with the determination of the middle class, in the suburbia of Helicon. He is a modest and domestic poet; and very successful too within his discreet aims. He lives in this suburban attic, going through dusty trunks searching for what he will never find: the unremembered postcard, the old sailor's suit of childhood, his mother's yellowing ballgown, the discarded balding teddy bear, which could bring back the past. Finn is a poet of loss and therefore of nostalgia: 'those times gone by,/Gone by,/Gone by'.<sup>36</sup> Unlike Brettell, however, whose gaze is also often backwards, there is no regret, no self-questioning and not even self-laceration. Finn is content and graciously indebted to his muse for the sudden illumination, the lost souvenir, which his searching reveals. In the title poem, a finely recreated return to the Cape, the poem gives back the poet's past to him by seeing six black cormorants:

as I watched them . . .  
The fluid memories crystallized  
Into home —  
In those six black strokes of the bright remembering brush  
On the waiting world  
A whole sea-enchanted childhood blossomed again.<sup>37</sup>

Mnemosyne is the mother of the Muses: she offers a cosy hearth, a home-cooked meal and a homely affection. She is not the capricious Aphrodite; the poet is secure and assured, if awkwardly aware that she is a bit frumpish. Finn is the modest poet of a modest muse. There is a poem called 'After a Surfeit of Tennyson' where the poet reluctantly admires in the laureate 'magic in his sighing'.<sup>38</sup> Finn would seem to know his own susceptibilities which point the faults and the achievements of his verse. But Tennyson is a dangerous master in his langour and in his coy verbal felicitiousness. Finn has his mannerisms of sentiment: 'And knowing the single heaven that's life/Is gone', or 'the loveliness I'd somehow lost forever'.<sup>39</sup> He also has Tennyson's tricks of style in attempting to startle with clichés transformed into triple compounds: 'brandy-bottle-heavy', 'travel-brochure-blue', 'blue-gum-memored'.

Having said that, it is necessary to affirm that there are many local triumphs to be acquired from security and a sense of the certainty of one's gifts. The serenity of Memory's hegemony allows the poet self-assurance. So he can look at life from his quirky angles, from his eccentrically clichéd viewpoint. Like Gulliver, the archetypal bourgeois, Finn watches things through a mania for modesty which distorts reality. In 'At Grass Level'<sup>40</sup> he watches 'ants samsoning a pole—/Two inch-twig'; like the Lilliputians this awakens a satire on man's desired omniscience:

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., 19.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., 31.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., 3.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., 29.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., 9, 5.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., 20.

And here I sit, on white-ant hill.  
 By vastness grown invisible —  
 Omniscient god, whose questing eye  
 Can yet not read his destiny!

To give the poet his due, he is supremely aware of himself. If at times his expression is arch or his adjectival ebullience clever, his sense of self is a generous compensation. In the poem, 'Brown with a Dusting of Green',<sup>41</sup> he likens his verse to growing vegetables from the mulch of dead roses, 'its onion by-rose/Reflect my verse's virtues . . . pollen as much as perfume lures the bee'. But I feel the reader will go to him for roses from onions and the humble values of a Sunday afternoon's pruning: for peace, contentment, with just the hint of the sadness of the passing of the seasons. Though sometimes the reader might feel the reserve is a mask and cry out 'well moused lion'. For Finn is tempted to become Sir Oracle: 'I will not tell how lonely Man must be.'<sup>42</sup> So many poems end with gratuitous sententiae: 'With nothing left but love at the end of all.'<sup>43</sup> These may be the lessons of the past and experience is, as someone once said, a hard school but the only one which fools will learn in; but I prefer the wry to the wrathful. Finn's mouse is much more attractive than his lion for it does not tempt him to derivative Audenesque stoicism:

the recurring itch  
 Named lust, that man must humbly own  
 Can sometimes make him less alone.<sup>44</sup>

Finn ends his first collection with eight poems from the Afrikaans of N. P. van Wyk Louw. In one sense it is invidious to have a poet with a vision placed next to a poet with merely a point of view, but Finn's meticulous filligree proves more than apt to its task. Van Wyk Louw is obviously hag-ridden, his Muse is no fire-side frump. Every reader should be grateful for these wonderful translations. What could be more grotesque or fiendishly fearfully African or Afrikaner than 'Satan-Helios'?

Suddenly on to the wall of the kraal  
 black and white a he-goat sprang up;  
 lightly skipped up from the stone enclosure  
 and carelessly fitted hoof to chink,  
 looked round a little, and with beard askew  
 shifted his cud slightly against his cheek;  
 then with his scabby knees on the wall he knelt  
 worshipping the light of the noonday fire.<sup>45</sup>

*Season and Pretext* by N. H. Brettell is the second in the *Mopani* series, and it is well overdue.<sup>46</sup> Brettell has been a much admired poet since 1950

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., 28.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., 34.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., 7.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., 35.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., 41.

<sup>46</sup>N. H. Brettell, *Season and Pretexts* (Salisbury, The Poetry Society of Rhodesia, 1977), 62 pp., Rh\$1.60.

when his first volume, *Bronze Freize*, appeared.<sup>47</sup> This new volume shows a certainty and focus which was submerged under detail in the previous collection, though there are some fine moments in the first book in poems like 'War and Peace'. What the curious reader misses in this new book is a sense of chronology of the poetry. This is not an impertinent biographical whim but a response to a marked difference in mood and precept between the poems grouped 'On Leave' for instance, and the sequence of 'Season and Pretext'. The former is suave and nonchalant, while the other poems are shot through with regret and compassion.

'Threnody in Spring',<sup>48</sup> the first poem of the book, is *in memoriam* of A. S. Cripps:

You chose the time well to die:  
Our air still tingles with the latest frost.

It is the southern hemisphere's spring, the time is ironically apt for it is the season of generation, so making death less poignant, more heroic, as it imperatively must be in Brettell's earlier verse:

The cassia's golden cup  
Lifts its shrill monstrosity to the brooding sky.

In contrast to a Rhodesian spring, Brettell places a Kentish 'high summer' of Cripps's boyhood. The fulsomeness of that season and harsh African spring 'go hand in hand' in the third poem. Here the dying falls of a Keatsian Autumn is slandered by Africa's 'opulent spring'. The violence of life and of birth are in these poems a reproach to death:

Watch us, and understand  
Spring, surging in us, quickens the seed at last.

Brettell puts into words the halting stupefaction of the exile in such a new and strange land. At last Rhodesia has a poet possessed by his country; but amazed, almost reluctantly possessed.

Brettell in these poems wills himself to be the poet of fecundity, vitality and priapic ambition. In 'Columbus'<sup>49</sup> he contrasts the insouciant and glum intent of the emigrant to Africa: 'If we don't fancy it, need anyone care?/ You can get back, they say, in eighteen hours by air'. Against this is the reckless heroism of Columbus:

Pinning his life to the just possible miracle,  
He stares across the empty star-board sea,  
With hair blown back, the arrogant Admiral.

Brettell is the celebrant of what he calls in one poem 'Cataclysm'.<sup>50</sup> At times he is seduced into stridency: in 'The Children'<sup>51</sup> when he invokes the reproach of 'the monstrous mushroom, cauliflower-topped' over Hiroshima. But he is a richly contradictory poet. Rather the poems present the struggle in the poet between the revolutionary heroic egoist like Columbus, and the modest

<sup>47</sup>*Bronze Freize* (London, Oxford Univ. Press, 1950).

<sup>48</sup>*Season and Pretexts*, 6-8.

<sup>49</sup>*Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>50</sup>*Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>51</sup>*Ibid.*, 30.

bourgeois come to 'have a shot at Building Manchester/In Africa's far and vaguely promised land'. In a poem which comes from the latter part of the book, 'New Year',<sup>52</sup> the poet presents himself torn between two extremes, like a 'petulant stream' which has been tamed by a weir:

Between the green pool and the cataract,  
I wait with Janus, chameleon, the swivel-eyed:  
Before, the savage catclaws of the rapids,  
Behind, the sullen measurable flow.

He is a poet annoyed at the sullen, and one imagines afraid and aghast at the savage. And he is a poet who has found in the nature of his homeland a contrast to that of his habitation. The ideals of each are contradictory and paradoxical. It has been the poet's task to hold himself to this dilemma by the force of his will.

A recurrent self-imposed identity of the poet, especially in the earlier sequences is 'the necessary clown': Feste in *Twelfth Night*, or the clown in *King Lear*; not often the hero. He is too tentative, too phobic. But like the clown, you must 'pick your ditties out of the wind's teeth'.<sup>53</sup> With a hey, nonny, hey, nonny, no. But by this submission to the climate of Africa he is not cheering himself up, as a whole generation of Rhodesian poets before Brettell had done. His love of the veld and Africa is not a whistle in the dark. In 'Deri-Deri',<sup>54</sup> poems are like the wild flowers which thrust their fragile but insistent beauty through the 'tumbled stockpit rank with ancient rubbish':

Called deri-deri: why, I wonder?  
Not the insistence of the old refrain,  
When the gay nonsense of the prancing blood  
Fumed upward through the crevices of words.

Brettell is a poet of disappointment. Unnecessarily stoic, betrayed, but above all disappointed. This is perhaps a little cynical out of its matrix in 'Seasons and Pretext' but looking backwards in 'Envoi',<sup>55</sup> he talks of 'Brave words I'll never use again'. But the majority of poems in the volume aspire to be gayer and more urbane; typical of this mood is the poem, 'The Cabbage Seller', which is wry and slick, as it remembers the English savoy cut in two: 'curled/Petticoat on petticoat archly tinged with rose'.<sup>56</sup> He is a master of natural description which means he is masterful of an eccentric diction.

His section of 'Beasts and Birds' is a virtuoso performance of charm and celebrated innocence: an innocence which is to be displaced by fortitude in his later poems: 'Our innocence can hold the trick/To solve what odd arithmetic/Spins the incalculable earth'.<sup>57</sup> Giraffes are beautifully and scrupulously caught forever in Brettell's description: 'Innocent, epicene . . . grave quaint harlequins'.<sup>58</sup> So in the 'Duiker Doe' the poet emblazons with glory these animals, unicorns of a tropical latitude. He is against

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., 46.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid., 24.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid., 58.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., 62.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid., 22.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., 55.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., 35.

The beasts of truth, the wolves, the scavengers,  
 The surly rams of capricorn  
 See lion, falcon, unicorn  
 Dragged from their scutcheons, stripped of their blazonry.<sup>59</sup>

Not that he dare expect too much of us, or of himself. 'Weathercock'<sup>60</sup> is a poem remarking the fact that 'The Cathedral of St Mary and All Saints in Salisbury is now surrounded by skyscrapers'. The winds which should direct the weathercock are now 'thwarted and craven'. Like the frustrated vane:

We veer and flinch and hedge the consequence;  
 fashions inveigle, assurances recede.

The poet's values and needs should be apparent by the contrasts he makes with 'the brave cypress on the cloister lawn'; like another fabulous creature:

Phoenix talons clench in the secret soil  
 Phoenix plumes flare green against the blue.

Brettell is querulous about the city of civilization; he is a poet of the 'metabolism of the ancient salts: / The fire, the spire, the faith, the evergreen'.

The poet's voice is quietened though not defeated in the later sequence, 'Quartet: Ex Libris'.<sup>61</sup> The past haunts with remorseless regret; the future potential, disappointing. The sequence of four poems is contemplative and wise. Here the Autumn nightfall, 'after drought', summons up a great sense of loss and irrevocable hope:

The first star stabs the west awake  
 And day discards what the moon takes over,  
 Enormous murmurings that next year's seed  
 Can never again recover.

'The colours of Autumn come too late.' In 'Winter', the wind 'jostled with the sky, / Straining the tight big-top to splitting point'. The poet goes back to a primeval scene as he dozes with his cat before the camp fire. He imagines ancestors on a painted cave wall:

We've come a long way, cat and we,  
 He from the roaring forest, we from the cave  
 Where once our fancies pranced across the walls  
 In rust and ochre profile: primp of toe  
 And pendulous of buttock, nimble as sparks,  
 Dancers, hunters, mourners, stream across the frieze  
 Imposed upon the eland's succulent bulk  
 Target and tally of the lost venators.

This is perhaps the poet's most ambitious attempt to impose a kingly sense of order upon 'the gay nonsense' of the mystery which, as a clown, he sees. The climax is modestly but frighteningly apocalyptic when:

<sup>59</sup>Ibid., 36.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid., 26.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., 47-52.

the ultimate wrench  
 Snap the last guyrope, and  
 The billowing canvas split  
 Between us and the infinite.

The poem ends complacently, however, by invoking Hamlet's word to his father to be at peace; the past and the future are redeemed by now: 'True-penny, peace; this is my afternoon'. The long poem has tremendous dignity and solemnity which for once stills the questioning, restless, deeply concerned ideals of the poet.

Other poems I would like to have had space to quote at length, are: 'Skid' about a vivid and ecstatic moment when life in the face of death is frozen and enticing; 'Felled Wattle' another poem typical of the way Brettell can make tremendously authoritative statements about life in the grand manner by concentrating on the eccentric. Here woods which are too inaccessible to be taken as firewood, so without 'fire, frenzy, no fume of innuendo':

But with the cold hurtless fire of corruption  
 Smoulder in innocence away.<sup>62</sup>

It is obvious and heartfelt that in many ways Brettell feels this about himself: the earlier poems of heroism and idealism are in a way unfulfilled. Unbelievably one feels his own sense of failure. But the poet achieves the solemnity of innocence which, too, has its dignity. There is certainly no need of disappointment or frustration in the eyes of the reader. Brettell has written some of the best, most heroic, poetry to come from Rhodesia. What is more he has written in this book a few poems such as 'Eavesdropper', 'Quartet: Ex Libris' and 'Wind and an Eagle Owl', which should be read by all readers of poetry in this country for as long as they read. I wish I could quote all of the last poem for you for it is a finely wrought achievement. It is a poem of guilt and regret beyond words. I feel, even with my admiration, that I do not know how good it is.

To do shameful injustice to the subtlety of the details and the orchestration of the mood: a couple quarrel over nothing and turn from each other in bed 'like sullen girl and boy,/Denying all, denying all'.<sup>63</sup> After a night of strong wind, the dawn brings reconciliation 'And you were kind, and you were kind'. The couple go riding and find an 'eagle owl' trapped and dying blown by the wind onto their fence: the last verse, marvellously lucid and crystal clear goes:

I tie my timid filly up  
 To get a stick to kill you with;  
 With pity brimming like a cup  
 I come deliverer in disguise:  
 Your great beak gaped in savage grin,  
 Your great stare narrowed to a frith  
 Of gleaming horror and surprise —  
 And oh the wells of hatred in  
 Your wildwood eyes, your wildwood eyes.

Brettell's sad and wonderful poetry.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid., 59.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid., 60.



Rhodesia seems to have appropriated the startlingly peremptory talent of Douglas Livingstone who lived here for about five years while writing some of the poems of his first volume, *Sjambok*,<sup>64</sup> which are familiar and immediate through their strong allegiance to Africa. Far less wilful than Brettell, he is more naturally devoted to a sense of place. Ironically, his theme is fear of the land and the White man's retreat. He is always being threatened: to be carried off by some Pteranodon; or shamed by the carcass of an elephant; or made to move out of a She-Jackal's place in the sun; or swallowed by Leviathan. In the title poem of his first volume, we feel for the first time the truly acrimonious note of disgust and shame for the excesses of colonial zealotry. The poet, ironically, is possessed by the land, though he cannot possess it. And the landscape, its flora and fauna, are vividly and surprisingly captured: the stork ready to migrate with the flush of an Autumn morning:

The dawn struck and everything,  
sky, water, bird, reed  
was blood and gold. He sighed.  
Stretching his wings he clubbed  
the air; slowly regally, so very tired . . .<sup>65</sup>

Or the She-Jackal which embodies for the poet the hostility, and exotic shabbiness of Africa:

Evilly passing and smiling, a jackal  
stood near: razor ribs, warty shrivelled dugs,  
hourglass loins and lean wire legs quivering;  
The plump feeding ticks studding her bare flanks.<sup>66</sup>

The vulture approaching his prey:

Slack neck with the pecked  
skin thinly shaking, he  
sidles aside, then stumps  
his deliberate banker's  
gait to the stinking meal.<sup>67</sup>

Here is Africa, the spirit of place seen by an outsider but seen all the more deliberately and astonishingly for that. It is all that we are likely to get, for no insider will be more struck by its strangeness. It should not be surprising that there is no Black African poet who we can legitimately say is concerned with the visual manifestation of the imagination. African verse has been either rhetorical or metaphysical: in either case it is man's hesitant finding of his voice. Perhaps the imagistic approach is attenuated and somewhat decadent; or, which means virtually the same thing, more sophisticated and determined.

The faded gentility of colonialism is captured by Livingstone in 'The Clocks'; the coercive arrogance and mystique of independence: 'If you earn

<sup>64</sup>*Sjambok: And Other Poems from Africa* (London, Oxford Univ. Press, 1964).

<sup>65</sup>*Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>66</sup>*Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>67</sup>*Ibid.*, 24.

£120/a year, or have cattle, or if you are/a pensioner, here's votes, the latest magic'.<sup>68</sup> Or 'The Peace Delegate' who 'leans back from the green baize tables where break/the nations' hearts like billiard play'.<sup>69</sup> He watches man with as cold an eye as he does zebras galloping:

through the thorny lasts of liberty,  
soulless and without humour,  
as if they know  
as if they made it so  
this meat is rancid.<sup>70</sup>

Look at the modulation of rhyme and half-rhyme all to create an urbanity, a clinical distance from the lion, from 'The King':

Can catch them still of course,  
the horny old claws combing crimson  
from the velvet flanks in long scores,  
here in the game-park's environs;<sup>71</sup>

No matter how observant and accurate the description, it is distanced, quite deliberately. It distances because Livingstone accepts that he cannot belong to the land. It is the considered expression of the exile aware that the refined resources of his poetic heritage are as inappropriate to Africa as a pin-stripe suit and a bowler hat. Here is a diffidence which is the opposite of the imperialism of the imagination which Cripps and the first generations of Rhodesians used to impose Victoria on the veld.

He loves eccentrics and loonies in the animal kingdom and in the human world, and he treats them all as a lepidoptrist does the Clouded Yellow: he sticks a pin into it and mounts it. His poetry is anthropomorphic and dignified by an ancient polytheism. His later volume, *Eyes Closed Against the Sun*,<sup>72</sup> written after his move to Durban, has a different context. It is urbane and cosmopolitan; like Scott Fitzgerald's hell, it is always three in the morning; there is a cool blue sax playing; the South African champagne is a little flat; prostitutes and sailors jostle the poet's arm as he gets on with his inexorable cataloguing. He is certainly one of the cruelest, remorseless poets writing in Southern Africa. A tremendous talent, which has left behind in Rhodesia his parochialism and his sense of exile.

Times of crisis have always thrown up writers aspiring to transmute into art the searing of the soul and the perishing of the flesh. I am sure among the ruins of Pompeii lie countless charred bards poised at their desks, empty scrolls in withering hands. Historical exigencies have, I must admit, made poets: witness Wilfred Owen. But more often than not, history traduces the poet into rhetorical self-importance, and he stands around like Jesus in Gethsemane. Political and social crises are poetic vehicles only in a most unreliable sense. For one Wilfred Owen there are fifty Henleys. And to paraphrase E. E. Cummings, all the poet gets from jumping on and off bandwaggon is athlete's mouth. Inspiration like the wind bloweth where it listeth. The Muse does not go whoring among the troops of either side.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid., 8.

<sup>69</sup>Ibid., 34.

<sup>70</sup>Ibid., 25.

<sup>71</sup>Ibid., 33.

<sup>72</sup>*Eyes Closed Against the Sun* (London, Oxford Univ. Press, 1970).

The recent *The Queen's Prayer and Other Poems* by Broughton Ginell<sup>73</sup> is obviously a symptom of what the poet himself calls 'a beautiful and perilous time'.<sup>74</sup> The volume is an unconscious reflex, like locking your windows at night. But poetry is never merely a reflex. So far as literature goes, is it the poetry itself which is interesting or only the occasion behind it? Is it another occasion like the sinking of the 'Titanic' for the generous outpouring of anodyne poetry meant to make us all feel better?

Ginell's message is a florid and extremely ornate genuflection, though the poet is somewhat surprised at himself to find that the church has been turned into a beer-hall. 'Show me the tracks of God'<sup>75</sup> he keeps invoking. There are more 'surelys' in his invocations than there are in the Psalms. The volume is full of capitalizations of Lord Silence, Lord Passion, Lord Darkness, Lord Blood and Lord Love. Like medieval alliterations these serve the purpose of keeping the scribe's mind on God instead of Fame. It must be very rarely that a volume comes out in such purple and gold with such certainty about the world. There is none of that uncertainty or unease which in N. H. Brettell's words could 'activate the dough of national conscience'.<sup>76</sup> Ginell has a hot-line to the Almighty:

Since God's shining instrument of love —  
A two edged sword — lies bright and naked  
Here before me, I shall examine it.<sup>77</sup>

He leaves no room for uncertainty: the author has Archbishop Patrick Chakaipa introduce his work. After putting God straight, Ginell modestly reprimands Blake, despite his genius, for 'having but small talent for life'. But he later forgives him because of 'Jerusalem':

Be kind to Blake, O God, remember  
Who wrote Jerusalem . . .<sup>78</sup>

With Blake's morbid hatred of old Nobodaddy one wonders that Ginell is not struck down by Blake's two-edged sword. 'The road of excess leads to the Palace of Wisdom', however much we distrust it, is a rousing piece of advice for young poets.

*Quarantine Rhythms*<sup>79</sup> is the first volume by a young Black Rhodesian, Mudereri Kadhani, now living in exile at the University of York in England. It happens also to be the first single volume by a Black Rhodesian. Kadhani too, I suspect, has been forced precipitously into poetry by the political events of his time: he was detained for 'riotous assembly' in 1973 when he was twenty-one. Events can catch up quickly with a sensitive man of that age, and this idea of 'We grow up too young, amigo,/Too young'<sup>80</sup> is an

<sup>73</sup>B. Ginell, *The Queen's Prayer and Other Poems* (Salisbury, Longman, 1977), 55 pp., Rh\$1.25.

<sup>74</sup>Ibid., 5.

<sup>75</sup>Ibid., 36.

<sup>76</sup>Brettell, 'The place of poetry in Rhodesia's history', 354.

<sup>77</sup>Ginell, *The Queen's Prayer and Other Poems*, 22.

<sup>78</sup>Ibid., 12.

<sup>79</sup>M. Kadhani, *Quarantine Rhythms* (Aberdeen, Palladio Press, 1976), 53 pp., £1.45.

<sup>80</sup>Ibid., 34.

obsessive theme in the volume. In its reverse idea it emerges as a savage pride, a feeling of being 'called' which gives the revolutionary fervour to the poetry. 'Housefly' which is about a second-coming, is Yeatsian and rhetorical, arrogant and bitter and confident:

A fly shall be born!  
 A fly shall be born!  
 The scum of your household  
 The filth of your bellies  
 The mucus of your noses  
 The pus of your wounds  
 Shall be the territory of his sovereignty;<sup>81</sup>

If the volume is over-full at times of emasculated loins, black tears, drumming hearts, 'insurrecting resurrections', and 'black dawns', it doubtless would have appealed to Blake the revolutionary.

The problem is, as always, what may be legitimate politically, sincerely motivated personally, may emerge as poetically obtuse. Though the poet may be fired by admirable motivations, if these are supra, or sub-poetical, then the effect is sure to be inappropriate in some way. Though nothing could seem further from the poetry of Gingell, it suffers from the same defect of being provincially myopic. Kadhani, of course, in different ways is the victim of Rhodesian isolation.

Self-involvement in an almost pathological degree is the first temptation of provincialism. Here is the old romantic desire to make the rest of the world mimic the closeness of one's own society. It therefore tempts its adherents to self-indulgence and stills the questioning conscience. It leads to nationalism, coercion, and finally tyranny: for anyone who is not as me must be made over as me. It is 'ignorance plus a lust for uniformity'. It is the artistic limit which all writers of Europe and the United States have resisted in this century. Politics may be concerned with nationalism, but art is international. Imperialism has been a more virulent aspect of provincialism and has behind it some nasty emotionalism. Racialism is the pathology of provincialism: Black and White. Provincialism perverts literature into propaganda, and propaganda in its desire to save the soul has often burnt the bodies of those who objected to its methods.

When the poet at last faces circumstances which make demands on resources not exercised by the somnambulism which provincialism nurtures, then the effect is a kind of rictus of expressiveness. Many of Kadhani's political poems, like Gingell's, are misbegotten because the poet has not had the experience to mould and define himself. The effect is not new in African poetry: it is a shrillness of tone, a distortion of communicative potential which was common in early protest poetry or the poetry of commitment, or the more self-conscious of the early negritude movement. It goes along with a reliance on the raw material of the poet's social identity at the cost of ignoring what the doing adds to the poem. In the final account it is pretentious and gauche, and a sentimentalism or a romanticism of experience. The inquisition in 'Reception' shows him being quizzed by the prison officer:

<sup>81</sup>Ibid., 26.

Tribe? Human being.

Religion? Doing good.

Occupation? Going to Prison.<sup>82</sup>

Here and elsewhere the question is not whether it is good poetry, but whether it is poetry at all. Peter Levi who introduces the volume is sincere and concerned in words like this: 'Their material is the experience of life, and most of that is in the strictest sense of the word terrible. What else are we to expect from a Rhodesian African poet at this time?' Well, we expect poetry, I suppose. Poetry is not content to be 'the experience of life', no matter how horrible. It needs its transmutation which here it lacks. The poets of the First World War in Europe were faced with all the obscenity man is capable of, but they needed to find the method of dealing with it. Such has been the case too with poets in Africa — Brutus in *Letters to Martha* almost created a new form to deal with new experiences. Kadhani does not. Nor does Gingell. Save us from propagandists, O God, damn Blake — Remember who wrote 'Jerusalem'.

Judging from the number of books of verse which land up on the reviewer's desk, Campbell's description of the poetess: 'Housekeeping with her fountain pen/And writing novels with her broom' is still apt. Merna Wilson's *A Ring Has No End*<sup>83</sup> is another Sunday visit to aunty spent among the memories and photograph albums. The book is, it must be said, wholly unobjectionable. There are poems on mother's day, her children, the death of friends. It is a very, even embarrassingly, personal collection of pieces, nearly all of which would be more fittingly left with the pressed flowers in the family Bible. I think I understand why they were written, but I do not understand why these, and countless other such books, are published.

A person's right to exercise her soul is one we will, on Judgement Day, all testify to respecting. But it is an airing which is better done in private. Yet it is true, and it is a paradox which faces most of us, that at depressingly regular times in our life, verse comes irresistibly and undeniably to our lips as consolation and compensation. Unfortunately for poetry and us, the most voluble of the emotions are the ones we must be most sceptical of: 'the lady protesteth too much'. This is not a sneer. Verse, usually bad verse, is a comfort in the face of death. And death is a recurrent theme of this book.

*Flight of a Bee*<sup>84</sup> by Colin Gordon-Farleigh is innocuous and unassuming: full of poems which are privately felt mementoes. In the harsher public light the clichés, banalities and sentimentalities seem more awkward. When the writer wanders into the public realm, as he does with 'Terrorist Strike' he becomes embarrassing.

Heed not your Religion if it takes you from Christ,  
Rather listen to the silent words of your conscience  
As my blood congeals on the parched brown grass.

Sentimentality is an excessive amount of feeling when what is needed by the poet is more hard work. The poet, the reader feels, is most saved by his work.

<sup>82</sup>Ibid., 17.

<sup>83</sup>M. Wilson, *A Ring Has No End* (Salisbury, Gazebo Books, 1977), 59 pp., Rh\$1.50.

<sup>84</sup>Colin Gordon-Farleigh, *Flight of a Bee* (Salisbury, Gazebo Books, 1977), 64 pp., Rh\$1.25.

G. S. Tynan-Blundun, however, in his privately printed *A Quiet Corner*,<sup>85</sup> does offer unashamedly to his readers such banalities and clichés as:

The Wrinkle from a Smile  
You can keep all the while  
Take care . . . TINY

There is no point, of course, in being purely destructive and negative in criticism of poetry which is privately conceived, and should be privately kept. Yet the same faults, easy sentimentalism and spiritual enthusiasm affects more pretentiously aspiring poets. *Two Tone* is a quarterly of Rhodesian poetry which began in 1964. The 'Jubilee Issue' of June 1977 tells us that 'we have published 1 333 poems . . . by 392 authors of whom 68 are Shona or Ndebele writers'.<sup>86</sup> This in one way is an achievement, but in another sense it is one of the most perverse things a society of poets will do. For these figures disguise the obvious fact that the journal is primarily an outlet for a closed minority of writers with meagre talent. And meagre talents should be guarded not flaunted. How ingenuous seems the comment that 'our most prolific author is none other than our own Board member Phillippa Berlyn whose 83 poems include eight Shona translations'. The complete poetical works of T. E. Hulme number five poems; Eliot's *Complete Poems* number around sixty; according to Robert Graves the 'survival rate' of his poems is 'five years'. If *Two Tone* has stimulated the facile and the cheap then it has done a great disservice.

The habit of having a rotating editorship only glosses the faults rather than corrects them. Kizito Muchemwa, who has just edited an anthology of Black writers, did the June 1976 issue, where he complains that 'The established poets have dominated the literary scene in this country for a long time . . . their voices are too familiar'.<sup>87</sup> The accusation of insularity has been foreseen. Vernon Crawford in an 'Editorial' in the September 1977 issue defended elitism from 'Marxist' attacks.<sup>88</sup> He argues that 'separatism and elitism' are the assurances of liberty to 'foster imaginative literature'. So we must promote 'a hierarchical structured society, where people are encouraged to hive off, forming enclaves, "elites", separate sub-groups'. This sounds a bit shrill politically. But he assures us: 'An important point is that such elites are not closed: they are not just Cambridge, or Bloomsbury, or even *Two Tone*'. Come now Mr Crawford, the argument has got nothing to do with Marxism. It has to do with the idea that there ought to be something elitist about an elite. Bloomsbury had Meynard Keynes and Virginia Woolf; *Two Tone* has got Phillippa Berlyn and Olive Robertson. And, I am afraid, that makes all the difference.

*Two Tone* through smugness and reluctance to be self-critical is serving the mere fringes of a dilettante minority. It is all as cosy and as genteel as can be, but is it stimulating real aspiring writers? It has usually been an innocuous and harmless little magazine which has at times achieved mediocrity. This is not to say that some good poems are not included; they

<sup>85</sup>G. S. Tynan-Blundun, *A Quiet Corner* (Gwelo, privately, 1976), 70 pp., no price indicated.

<sup>86</sup>*Two Tone* (1977), XIII, June, 19 pp., Rh\$0.50; see the editorial by V. Crawford.

<sup>87</sup>*Two Tone* (1976), XII, June, 5.

<sup>88</sup>*Two Tone* (1977), XIII, September, 18 pp., Rh\$0.50; see the editorial by V. Crawford, 1-4.

are, but they are choked by the dalliance of amateur anthologists. The December 1977 issue is a so-called 'anthology' of war poetry.<sup>89</sup>

As Dick and I drove back  
from Inyanga last week,  
along a road edged with the  
pale gold of wattle trees in flower,  
I had the chance to think.  
There is not often enough time  
to think in today's rushed existence.<sup>90</sup>

I wish I had said that! And this is only the introduction to the volume by Philippa Berlyn. But the reader gets the point. And the volume lives up to this meretricious philosophizing. It is puerile and banal and, worse, pretentious. It is really too bathetic to quote from.

Even the more recent numbers,<sup>91</sup> despite the changing political and cultural scene, remain patronizing in both senses of the word: it cosily supports the White literati, and condescends to the really new energetic Black talents. The last three numbers of 1978 have their token praise-song; or if they do include, by accident, a real poem like Bonus Zimunya's 'Zimbabwe', it is only because the double-edged irony is missed. The policy of *Two Tone* remains one of accommodating the thread-bare remnants of English cultural chauvinism. Small magazines are noble enterprises and the people who have to run them must be a tough breed. But such enterprises can die: by losing their readership, or worse through self-indulgence. *Two Tone* avoids the former by hoping 'that all contributors will become subscribers'. But the enervated elitism is surely creating a vacuum which will finally buckle.

This all sounds a little ungrateful. The September issue does have some treasures by Brettell, D. F. Middleton, Charles Mungoshi, Bonus Zimunya and John Eppel. The last named poet seems to me to be the most authentic and promising of the new White poets struggling to be heard against the clamour of the clique. He has a tough modern diction and a sharp outlook on life which is toughened by biting irony. This is very apparent in his poem 'Talking Weather':

Remember how the rains  
Destroyed the roads,  
Drowned a cat  
And choked the laughter of the drains.  
When hooves of cattle burst like ticks  
Too blown with blood to dodge the boot.

And now the dusty little boys  
Are lounging on the gravel dumps  
With shrieking pockets full  
Of Christmas beetles. And the lumps  
That bloat their hollow cries  
Are worms begot of maggot flies.<sup>92</sup>

<sup>89</sup>*Two Tone* (1977), XIII, December, 25 pp., Rh\$0,50.

<sup>90</sup>*Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>91</sup>*Two Tone* (1978), XIV, March, 25 pp., Rh\$0,50; June, 25 pp., Rh\$0,50; September, 21 pp., Rh\$0,50.

<sup>92</sup>*Two Tone* (1978), XIV, March, 20.

*Two Voices*<sup>93</sup> is a collection of verses put out jointly by the prolific Phillippa Berlyn and the dauntless Olive Robertson, two of the original sponsors of *Two Tone*. The volume is puffed by a Foreword by Brettell who talks of 'this courageous book': 'courageous not only because the authors must inevitably face the disappointment of a small circulation, but because they will be hanging out their hearts for daws to peck at'. Here, Brettell inadvertently brings out the characteristic failing of much of the current verse: a naive susceptibility for baring the soul. What has putting one's heart out to do with poetry. To paraphrase W. H. Auden, the poet should wear his heart up his sleeve, not on it. Spiritual incontinence spreads like an epidemic. These two versifiers enthuse and drown their very subjects in a gush of lachrymose sentimentalism. It is pure and doubtless therapeutic blood-letting, but is it poetry? Here is Berlyn's 'Bullfrog':

Unlovely beast,  
squat creature of the night,  
Mongolian-eyed, unseeing;  
you wait in all your slimy glory  
to pounce on your insect meal,  
amphibian and green, and yet  
exactly like a very human being.<sup>94</sup>

Only someone intent on the glamour of their emotions could miss the internal rhyme of 'green' and 'being', and the resulting comic deflation. 'Regardez-moi' say these poems. And they are as quaint and charming as performing seals. They are the result of an insular self-congratulation and a failure to criticize honestly.

But in Olive Robertson, Rhodesia has found its own preposterous McGonagall. 'The Weathercock':

Was it a jest — or sober search  
That set you on your giddy perch  
High on the Presbyterian Church?  
You seem unknowing of defeat,  
To clutch the spire with gilded feet  
And shriek defiance up the street.<sup>95</sup>

Even if *Two Voices* or *Two Tone* were 'the king's new suit of clothes', what is the point of the reviewer shouting: 'The king, look at the king'? It is not to humble the king but to get rid of the court's pretentiousness and so allow the honest tailors to make a decent living. It may be the case that it is possible for a country to publish too much poetry, or at least to publish it prematurely and without the due critical amelioration of time. I am aware of judging astringently some gentle and timid poems. But I have done so only when they ask to be judged by the standards of published poets today. And indeed Brettell and Livingstone and others are obviously up to this. As for the more numerous, less frangible work, can it be useful to offer apparently negative criticism? But one also wonders can it be useful to continually condone the

<sup>93</sup> P. Berlyn and O. Robertson, *Two Voices* (Salisbury, Two Tone Publications, 1974), 112 pp., Rh\$2.00.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.



puffing of negligible, perhaps non-existent, gifts? Elitism without quality is merely a conspiracy against the good. And provincialism is a hot-house of 'elitist' propaganda, which usually means no more than the dictatorship by the few of the many. And the smugness of the enclave can be a dispiriting business if one is on the outside.

But finally, the reviewer is left dissatisfied not by any technical limitations but by an absence of generosity of spirit. The emotions are crabbed and have compassion only for the poet. When the sense of integrity and the strangeness of other people and other ways of life is lost, then the sense of wonder, which is the spirit of poetry is lost. Let me quote part of an early and naive poem by Doris Lessing to show what I mean:

I would listen when the wiser blood derides  
the amnesties we make with time, the fences  
that we build to hold our days; defences  
lest we see too close the flowers of hate.<sup>96</sup>

This was written in 1945; it is one of twenty or so poems in *The New Rhodesia*, which came to light with *A Bibliography of Rhodesian Writing* published recently.<sup>97</sup> It is a little jejune, of course; and Mrs Lessing is said to have forgotten that she had published these poems. But it has all the disinterested largesse of an art which is cosmopolitan in sympathy. It indicts much of Rhodesian verse for its parochial, rapacious demands on our less liberal feelings. Doris Lessing knows, to quote another poem, that we 'must keep watch on our hearts'. 'The Song of a Bourgeois' puts her case against the provincial ironically:

Let us draw our curtains, and pretend  
That we do not hear the rising tides of life  
Swinging, beating against our walls,  
The walls we built.<sup>98</sup>

In her hands the bourgeois seems pathetic because it is deflated by her irony. But poets are echoing these ideas seriously and sentimentally thirty years later. It is not a good poem for it fails for the same reason that more modern ones have done, by approaching special pleading. There is no room in poetry for polemics whether it is propositioning for politics or spiritual uplift. Doris Lessing knew that; her 'Fable' is a finely achieved work, which deserves to have the dust blown off it. The penultimate stanza returns to evoke a warm mellow-lit room of childhood recalling *The Grass is Singing*:

But for a while the dance went on —  
(That is how it seems to me:  
Slow figures weaving, stepping unhurried through  
The pools of light, which lay in dim gold on the floor.)  
It might have gone on, dream-like for ever.<sup>99</sup>

If we want to talk about Rhodesian poetry, and of a uniquely Rhodesian sensibility, do we not have it here? It is disappointed rather than defiant muted not arrogant. Above all it is a lyric sensibility, but surely reserved and

<sup>96</sup>'Poem', *The New Rhodesia* (21 Dec. 1945).

<sup>97</sup>*Rhodesian Literature in English: A Bibliography 1890-1974/5*, compiled by J. Pichanick, A. J. Chennells and L. B. Rix (Gwelo, Mambo Press, 1977).

<sup>98</sup>*The New Rhodesia* (3 Mar. 1944), 17.

<sup>99</sup>*Ibid.* (3 Sept. 1943), 22.

abashed. The reader will find it in the best poets of this country: Fairbridge; surprisingly in Hastings; in the later poems of Brettell; hiding behind the imperiousness of Douglas Livingstone; it is virtually the oeuvre of a new poet, Samuel Chimsoro, whose first book of poems *Smoke and Flames* has just been published by Mambo Press.<sup>100</sup> Here is the end of a love affair:

The strength of the spun fibre  
Has been forgotten;  
The strain that broke the rope  
Has been forgotten;  
They move through streets  
Like litter in a whirlwind.  
Like sticks in a flooded valley,  
And everything about them  
Like the smell of the vanished smoke  
Of their burnt love letters,  
Has been forgotten.<sup>101</sup>

If this is the sensibility of Rhodesian Poetry, it is telling that it could have been written in any country at virtually any time.

It should not be surprising to discover this same sensibility in the work of all new Black poets in this country. Mambo Press has also just published *Zimbabwean Poetry in English*, edited by K. Z. Muchemwa.<sup>102</sup> Though the editor's Introduction is polemical and at times defiant, the poems, with certain exceptions, are muted, nostalgic and full of poignancy. The dominating theme of the anthology is love of the land; she is mother, lover and muse. Charles Marachera, one of the more interesting poets in the book, contrasts the time when 'I was yours/and you were mine' with the disenfranchised present:

Now a man  
in exile from the warmth of your arms  
and the milk of your teeth  
the breath of your secret whispers in my ears  
shall I not stride back to you with haste  
rout all my enemies and bind the wicked husbandmen  
Shall I not kneel to kiss the grains of your sand  
to rise naked before you — a bowl of incense?  
and the smoke of my nakedness shall be  
an offering to you  
pledging my soul.<sup>103</sup>

The political situation in this country is thus seen through a mythical and allegorical glass. Only in this way can the poet begin to cope with the dilemmas of his political situation.

<sup>100</sup> *Smoke and Flames* (Gwelo, Mambo Press 1978), 53 pp., Rh\$0,85.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>102</sup> *Zimbabwean Poetry in English, An Anthology*, ed. K. Z. Muchemwa (Gwelo, Mambo Press, 1978), 150 pp., Rh\$2,40.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

Explaining the reason for the 'loss of love' in a letter to a White missionary friend, Bonus Zimunya explains:

a grandad from the backwoods,  
he knows not what Rhodesia is,  
what Zimbabwe is or what this war is all about!  
conscience lambasts you  
like a gust of the August wind  
disappears like a wisp of cigar smoke  
questions unanswered block your thinking  
frustration fumes and fumes

Now where is the room  
for love?<sup>104</sup>

When 'questions unanswered block your thinking', there is only the drastic simplification into myth. So in the collection there is little overt political poetry. Yet it is probable that nearly all the poems have been written in reaction to White minority cultural oppressiveness. Reading between the lines, with the help of the Introduction, the reader can sense a kind of pressure upon the poets to try and establish some kind of Black-Zimbabwean sensibility. And when it emerges at its most convincing it seems ironically to sound the same note of devotion to the land in abstraction as we find in Fairbridge, or Doris Lessing. When Zimunya, in his poem 'My Home', stops berating the 'defilement' of his own 'old chaste tradition', he returns to an acceptance and celebration of home:

Never mind sister  
this is our home  
houses full of smoke  
and pendent soot  
full of the odour of life  
you see those umbrellas of tawny grass thatch  
piping dark blue wreaths of smoke  
from rowdy beer-fires?  
They shelter our people  
poor in clothes and heart  
moonshine cheerful in eyes and lips  
and us too.<sup>105</sup>

This poignant bitter-sweet mood is also the dominant emotion of Charles Mungoshi's 'Sitting On The Balcony':

Sitting on the balcony  
fingering a glass of beer  
I have bought without any intention to drink —  
I see a little boy  
poking for something  
in a refuse dump —  
looking for a future?

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 10-11.

I am afraid, the stars say  
 your road leads to another  
 balcony just like this one  
 where you will sit fingering  
 a beer you have bought without  
 any intention to drink.<sup>106</sup>

Charles Mungoshi and Bonus Zimunya are by far the most accomplished poets in the volume: indeed they are proving themselves to be among the very finest writers of this country. They may, if the White poets have proved to be in effect expatriated British poets, be the first true poets of this country. Though Mungoshi and Zimunya share a common response to the social and political events of this country, they are very different poets in temperament. Mungoshi is thoughtful and meditative: his poetry moves with a calm deliberate poise. Zimunya, on the other hand, works much more through description and image which are often startlingly original. Here is his poem 'Old Granny':

A little freezing Spider  
 legs and arms gathered in her chest  
 Rocking with flu,  
 I saw old Granny  
 at Harare Market;  
 It was past nine of the night  
 When I saw the dusty crumpled Spider —  
 A torn little blanket  
 Was her web.<sup>107</sup>

He shows how pathos and emotion can be caught simply by the right image and is content to leave it so.

Mungoshi, on the other hand, meditates over his images and points us to their significance. It is a much more conscious craftsmanship working in a more sophisticated form. But it is also potentially very moving and poignant. One of the most important poems in the anthology — important because it re-affirms values in danger of being forgotten — is his 'If you Don't Stay Bitter for Too Long':

If you don't stay bitter  
 and angry for too long  
 you might finally salvage  
 something useful  
 from the old country  
  
 a lazy half sleep summer afternoon  
 for instance, with the whoof-whoof  
 of grazing cattle in your ears  
 tails swishing, flicking flies away  
 or the smell of newly-turned soil  
 with birds hopping about  
 in the wake of the plough  
 in search of worms

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 79.

or the pained look of your father  
a look that took you all these years  
and lots of places to understand  
the bantering tone you used with your  
grandmother and their old laugh  
that said nothing matters but death

If you don't stay bitter and angry for too long  
and have the courage to go back  
you will discover that the autumn smoke  
writes different more hopeful messages  
in the high skies of the old country.<sup>108</sup>

The poem is pointing to a personal, not a political, solution to the dilemmas of poets who would not be wrong in believing that they were, in a sense, exiled from their homeland and their culture. It is a small victory in some terms but an important sign that the Black Zimbabwean poet can affirm that he belongs to and is possessed by the land. And from there comes his inspiration.

*Zimbabwean Poetry in English*, though uneven in quality, has many high spots. And to remember that the poetry here is chosen from only the past twenty years or so, it may seem remarkable that such a comprehensive and worthwhile selection could be made. The book is really a landmark in the literature of this country: a sign that people can and must find their authentic voice.

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