in terms of existing Shona preconceptions and beliefs. But sudden and complete changes in a people's way of life are unknown, except perhaps, during a military revolution, and consequently the missionaries failed dismally: 'The natural result of attempting to suppress by force deep-rooted customs held dear by the people was to drive the practice underground' (p. 21). The Shona converts finding it impossible to abandon their traditional religion, for instance, practised it behind the scenes.

Peaden shows that there were in fact a number of practices that were irreconcilable with Christianity such as the *kuzvarira* system, polygyny, divination and possession. The missionaries, however, thought all Shona culture anti-Christian. They, therefore sought to bring about the necessary changes through education. Schools and hospitals provided the means for this. Against this background, one sees the logic of the Shona resistance and resilience to Christianity described in this book.

Peaden is not alone in this. Hastings, writing on 'The African Church: from Past to Present' observes in the same tone, 'Christian doctrine can hardly be got across to Africans who have not received any appreciable amount of Western education . . . if the missionary has not first understood something of their own thought world . . . The only way to avoid this is by a deep understanding of existing African preconceptions and beliefs and by the explanation of Christianity in terms related to them, while at the same time making clear the absolute newness of Christian faith and life.'[1]

I disagree with Peaden when he says, 'The Shona had no tradition of the Western practice of courtship as a preliminary to marriage'. The practice of courtship among the Shona is as old as the hills, and is well documented by J. F. Holleman in *Shona Customary Law*.

In conclusion one might pose two unanswered questions: What should have been done in the early days of early mission? What should be done now?

REFERENCE

1. HASTINGS, A. 1967 *Church & Mission in Modern Africa*. London, Burns & Oates, pp. 59-60.

Gwelo REVD. J. C. KUMBIRAI

MAXWELL-MASON, W. D. *and* BEETON, D. R. *eds.* 1970 *Poetry at the Grahamstown Conference: UNISA English Studies*, **8** (iii), 56 pp.

> 'No age or condition is without its heroes. the least incapable general in a nation is its Caesar, the least imbecile statesman its Solon, the least confused thinker its Socrates, the least commonplace poet its Shakespeare' (G. B. Shaw, 'Maxims for Revolutionaries: The Revolutionist's Handbook', *Man and Superman*).

The poems chosen by the English Academy of Southern Africa to be read at its conference in July 1969 have now been published but without any critical comment from the editors:

> Our purpose has been simply to provide a record of what was read. We have not seen it as our task to delete from, or in any way comment on, the work that has reached us. The people represented have all been acknowledged as writers of sincerity and standing by the fact of their invitation to Grahamstown (foreword).

As Professor Beeton has for some years been President of the Literary Committee of the English Academy of Southern Africa, the explanation has a certain circularity, but is accurate enough. Certainly the seven poets sincerely believed they were writing poetry and that they achieved it. Equally it would have been hard to find better poets than those included, a fact which bodes ill for 'The Progress of Poesy' in South Africa.

The main general impression is the striking, and almost complete, abandonment of rhyme and metre: Free Verse is everywhere but most of the poets seem to have forgotten T. S. Eliot's dictum that no verse is free for the man who wants to do a good job. Most of the poets represented seem little concerned with the cadences of their lines or their appeal either to the sense or the eye. Chopped up prose, as we so often have here, is neither verse nor good prose.

One also notices a constant striving after metaphorical expression. It is an endemic fault in much of the latest poetry arising possibly from a fear of paucity in the poets' thought or an attempt to give that thought a profundity both specious

and unnecessary. On contemplating whale-skeletons Mr. Adams (p. 25) gives a fine example of this language that uneasily combines the concrete and the abstract:

> their empty bodies' inexhaustible braille
> yielding to the mind's fingers
> the architecture of silence,
> the blue-print of timelessness and weight.

The mixture of metaphor (braille; architecture) is symptomatic and whilst 'blue-print of weight' works quite well a 'blue-print of timelessness' is hard to conceive. The justification for the elaborate use of metaphor is hard to find and a perusal of the entire poem, 'The Leviathans' fails to show any correlation between its use here and the other, unrelated, metaphors used elsewhere. At its worst this habit leads to a sort of hermetic impressionism that appears with little meaning from the writer's private inner world. Ann Welsh (p. 13) writes:

> Light smarts in armouries
> Of glassed-in-cities;
> Grit-laden red of smooth sunsets
> Backs up globe orange swelled
> From batteries of windows to ring in night
> With high explicit brilliance.

The confusion here of both thought and image is obvious: an attempted violence of language, but no clear image or idea.

Finally there is the application of a criterion which should perhaps be used only with the very best poetry. There is little attempt to realize the greater world of experience that exists outside the narrow one of the poem itself. Fragments of experience exist in isolation, threadbare in a rather pathetic meaninglessness. A particular example is a competent poem by Mr. Livingstone, 'Under Capricorn' (p. 8). The poet driving through a misty landscape encounters some goats and their herdsman. In the mist they assume a demoniacal aspect and this is well conveyed by the poet. The experience, however, is given no meaning, it remains merely a rather vivid hallucination, interesting in its oddity but possessing no general truth.

On the matter of individual poets a little remains to be said. Professor Butler is represented (pp. 1-3) by a single poem marked by the modern vice of writing poetry about writing poetry, but displaying an accomplished ear and a clarity rare in this pamphlet. Mr. Livingstone as already indicated, achieves one limited success (pp. 5-9), but his poems are vitiated by an uncertainty of how seriously he is to take himself especially where sex is concerned. Ann Welsh (pp. 11-16) and Mr. Adams (pp. 23-30) stand as common victims of the impressionism mentioned earlier, from which little emerges but a vague haze of words.

Mr. Macnamara on the other hand sins boldly and takes no refuge in obscurity, writing in a lucid chopped-up prose. He attempts the large statement and to relate single experiences to a greater whole but his work is sadly lacking in evocative power. His poem 'Glass Dragon' (p. 20) may be taken as typical of his published work both in this pamphlet and elsewhere. The poet encounters a glass-blower and requests him to fashion a dragon. Watching him the poet reflects on the evil qualities dragons have symbolized in various mythologies, then the glassblower intimates that the dragon need not be bought unless desired. The conclusion of the poem is illustrative of its intention and quality:

> On the other hand
> the *sacri draconies* in the temple of Bona Dea at
> Rome were kindly serpents;
> a dragon guarded the golden apples for
> the nymphean Hesperides;
> Norsemen carved protective dragon-heads on prows of ships;
> in China, the dragon was an emblem and figured prominently
> in art.
> Experts have said
> all these good-bad legends indicate a common root
> in far antiquity.
> I take the dragon.

The list of pleasant attributes of the dragon could have been lifted verbatim from a mythological dictionary and are expressed with no sensuous force. The gesture at the end whereby the poet accepts the Janus-nature of the dragon and thereby, presumably, 'makes an affirmation of Life' is facile and unrealized.

The poems of Mr. Clouts are readable but make no lasting impression. Ruth Miller, the last poet represented (pp. 43-50), is, in the writer's opinion, by far the best. It is poetry in a minor key at its best (when she attempts the major key her experiences appear inflated and over-dramatized as in 'Mantis'), with an honest craftsmanship and statements of genuine importance. Some of her lines are memorable; in her poem 'Spider', quoted by Professor Beeton in an obituary memoir of her printed poems at the end

of the pamphlet (pp. 51-3) she contemplates the activity of the spider, confident and unthinking, and contrasts it with her own self-conscious activity of writing:

> But when the poor cold corpse of words
> Is laid upon its candled bier,
> I, vindicate, will shed the tear
> That falls like wax, and creep unheard
> To weave in silence, grave and bowed,
> The pure necessity — a shroud.

In its humility this is moving but Ruth Miller was seldom able to maintain such excellence throughout an entire poem. It is tantalizing to ponder how well she might have written had she lived in an atmosphere more stimulating and critically astringent than South Africa can provide.

On the whole the work included is poor stuff; a sad thing to note when the very existence of the publication indicates a desire for poetry. The poets represented do not possess even the Alexandrian virtues of the productions emanating from the academic writers of Britain and the United States. Their work has grown in an atmosphere not conducive to good criticism, an atmosphere inimical to talent in that it allows complacency with what is already achieved and does not encourage perfection of the work. South African English Poetry has a long road to hoe before it can aspire to claim the attention of a serious public.

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