Book Reviews

H. H. Anniah Gowda, ed. *The Colonial and the Neo-colonial in Commonwealth Literature.* Mysore: University of Mysore Press, 1983. pp. 243. $10.00.

A collection of papers delivered at a seminar held at the University of Mysore in September 1981, this volume demonstrates very clearly the present state of literary criticism both in departments of English throughout the Commonwealth and of the academic discipline of Commonwealth Literature. Surprisingly, most of the papers (unlike those at many academic meetings) are, in fact, relevant to the announced topic; many make significant contributions to and understanding and evaluation of writers and influences.

Professor K. R. Srivivasa Iyengar, the distinguished critic of Indian writing in English, provides in the opening paper as succinct a statement of the situation in the Third World nations of the Commonwealth as any; he laments "The apes and thugs and hoodlums" who have taken over and who have substituted megalomania for melioration, material success for value. Thus he reads Naipaul's *A Bend in the River* as "an apocalyptic warning to the people of the ... Third World generally." And he sees a "new dark or brown despotism more naked and shameless and ruthless in its operations than that of the 'white' rulers of yesterday." But he sees, in addition, that "everywhere the situation is in a condition of flux and uncertainty and disturbance," and that "Commonwealth Literature today is rich in ... recordations of the contemporary human condition." A somber and sobering overview, but in its way most salutory and appropriate for a collection of essays that are, in general, concerned with the darker rather than the lighter aspects of the subject.

In "Beyond Nationalism: The Evolution of Canadian Literature," Rosemary Sullivan alludes to George Grant's *Lament for a Nation* (1965) as crucial in the redirection of Canadian literature: whereas "Canadian literature found its focus in a declaration of defeat," it is now "pursued at a profounder spiritual level" and is "rejecting spiritual colonialism." But paradoxically, she notes, "the novels being

written now are pioneering novels, family or cultural histories; and the poems are often documentary narratives." This theme is re-addressed by Kevin Crossley-Holland, who asserts that Earle Birney's poetry adds up to "something essentially Canadian" and then specifies that "something" as his curiosity for the novel, his satiric disposition, and "the loneliness of the traveller trying to commune with strangers," all of which combine to produce a "moral gravity."

Essentially, then, these two authors seem to suggest that Canadian literature today is not so much neo-colonial as delayed-colonial in its attitudes; that the old, former struggle against British cultural domination has been continued, but against American cultural domination, and that true nationalism has not actually been achieved (and hence not followed by a neo-colonial experience).

This phenomenon is addressed by both the editor and by K. S. Ramamurti with regard to India. They wonder why there is no powerful anti-colonial literature in English in the Indian tradition — apart from oratorical literature. The editor finds the explanation in "the personality of India itself — a personality which had to witness racial strife; which simply cannot comprehend the enormities of racial abuse represented by exploitation"; and Ramamurti discovers it in the fact that "the Indian experience of colonialism has never been traumatic or fraught with tragic implications." To many from outside India, these explanations would seem to overlook historical evidence and depend on special definition and distinctions — for instance those of race and caste, tragedy and misfortune, religion and nationality.

T. R. S. Sharma nonetheless criticizes Chinua Achebe for whitewashing the widespread and persistent deficiencies of African neo-colonialism and attacks V. S. Naipaul for both his being "unattached" and for his failure to note that the ordinary Hindu has two faces (the worldly and the spiritual). Satyaranain Singh cites Wole Soyinka's attack on Achebe's "skimpy treatment of the Godhead" and argues that the deity in Achebe is immanent rather than transcendent, while D. A. Shankar, in "Chinua Achebe as Critic," argues in favour of Achebe's new aesthetic, which he sees as having departed, at long last, from the pernicious Eliot-Leavis-Brooks syndrome, replacing it with a community-related aesthetic.

But perhaps the most incisive analysis of Achebe (as essayist rather than as novelist) is that by the editor himself, who endorses Achebe's stand against " universality" and praises the writers for his "solicitude for the integrity of words," noting also that Achebe — like himself — demands in the manner of Matthew Arnold criticism that transcends the purely regional.

Achebe's own contribution is thoughtful. In "The Nature of the Individual and His Fulfillment," the writer asserts that the Western

emphasis on the individual "casts its shadow more and more over other cultures" and reminds his audience that Alexis de Toqueville used individualism pejoratively, "as a threat to society, as akin to selfishness." Egocentrism, he maintains, "troubles the non-Western mind so conscious of hierarchies above self," and results in young Africans migrating to Eurocentric communities fully convinced that they have left behind "a culture that failed." To Achebe, the ideal of literature is to create a society "which combines freedom for the individual and the safety of society." Achebe's ideas are explored in some detail by both Prafulla C. Kar ("The Image of the Vanishing African in Achebe's Novels") and D. A. Shankar ("Chinua Achebe as Critic").

In addition, there are studies of Judith Wright, Rudyard Kipling, Katherine Mansfield, and colonial autobiographical and travel books.

University of Mysore A. L. MCLEOD

Joan Kirkby, ed. *The American Model: Influence & Independence in Australian Poetry.* Sydney, Australia: Hale & Iremonger, 1982. pp. 178. $19.95, $9.95 pb.

The ten papers which comprise *The American Model* were given at a Macquarie University conference in 1979, centred on the topic of American influence in Australian poetry. The book as such does not fully cohere, but the conference must have been great fun — and the best of its material is stimulating and thought-provoking. Reading it has been like reliving some of my intensest experiences. For a dozen years or so in New Zealand in the 1950's and 1960's I was heavily influenced by the two American anthologies repeatedly invoked here — Geoffrey Moore's *Penguin Book of Modern American Verse* (1954) and Donald M. Allen's *New American Poetry 1945-1960* (which seemed so revolutionary when I bought my copy, which I still have, either in London in 1960 or Auckland in 1961. Already in 1958 in San Francisco I had met Duncan, Jack Spicer, Ferlinghetti, and others).

Two Americans appear among the Australians in *The American Model.* Each is somewhat disappointing, but particularly Louis Simpson, who has little new to say in his piece on William Carlos Williams. Writing about Whitman, Galway Kinnell is not new either, and appears to be unaware of the influence of opera, especially recitative, on Whitman's poetry. Disappointingly, he also states the gratuitous (and stale) opinion that D. H. Lawrence is a much greater poet than novelist. But Kinnell is always engaging and his feeling for Whitman (and for Lawrence's poetry) has a typical fresh-

ness, as does his comment that: "there is in existence some kind of rhythmic motion which is the beginning, and . . . poetry is the effort to bring it back into our bodies, into our mouths, and to unite it with our intelligence in a way the other arts don't quite do." Some sort of perception like this is, of course, at the root of Allen's anthology.

Kinnell is followed by the fine Australian poet Thomas Shapcott, whose theme (reached after several pages recounting his personal experience of American poetry) is that it is "the act of becoming the vulnerable being, that most permeates the wide arc of recent American poetry." (He beautifully locates Whitman at the beginning of the tendency.) This, he feels, was a salutary discovery for Australian poets, constricted as they were by a culturally induced habit of close-to-the-chest understatement (in parallel, or partly, New Zealand's academic critics in the 1950's made mandatory Eliot's separation of "the man who suffers and the mind which creates.") American vitality, new forms, spontaneity, have energized Australian poetry, Shapcott believes, to the point where it can (as it must) go its own way.

For Chris Wallace-Crabbe, one poet indebted to the Moore anthology (and one to note that the first wave of American poetry was filtered into Australia by British editors), it was the strangeness, the exotic and mandarin aspects of the Americans (Stevens and Marianne Moore, for example) which first exhilarated him, plus an awakening to the possibilities of regionalism. He too notes the "raw subjectivity," "the American poet's acceptance of the narcissistic self as the necessary core of their poetry."

By his own reckoning, Andrew Taylor was the first Australian to discover the Allen anthology (in 1961 — its influence would not become widespread down there until the late 1960's). Through it he discovered poetry's potential as a means of inner exploration, which need not lead to solipsism, but to the "powerfully representative." Along with this "sense of inwardness, which most Australian poetry studiously avoided" he realized the value of viewing poetry as process (rather than artifact. He came to it through Stevens, not the now more common route of Black Mountain poetry). Stress on the image (rather than discursiveness), awareness of city life (other writers here also find this important) and the value of eclecticism, all these came into focus from his reading of the Americans. As a poet in the same period in the culture "next door," I can confirm making these discoveries and am grateful to have them so cogently recorded.

Fay Zwicky writes here as representative of an ethnic minority (Jewish) and looks to the American fiction writers rather than poets. She is penetrating when she speaks of Hemingway's "overriding cop-out of self-pity that lay beneath a style that paradoxically seemed to

be rejecting it." To such an unsatisfactory paradox, she prefers the stubborn, questioning ambiguity of Bellow. Through him she discovered a salutary emphasis on city life, in contrast to the provincial tendency of Australian writers who, in a land populated largely by city-dwellers, write as strangers in from the country. Her pages on Bellow are sympathetic and useful, though she virtually loses sight of the theme of the American model in Australian poetry.

Another Donald Allen proponent is John Tranter, who traces two strains of Australian poetry. One, the more traditional, and based on a moral vision of society, is here exemplified by the work of Vincent Buckley, the other by Rae Desmond Jones (whose poem "The Front Window," used to illustrate, is very much post-William Carlos Williams). Quoting a classic statement of George Steiner's, Tranter rejects the notion of a poetry in the service of humanism and vaunts (through the Rae Jones example) "the work of art having a life of its own." After an aside on the possible value of structuralist criticism, he turns to Frank O'Hara's cavalier and liberating poetics: "You just go on your nerve." Some Australian poets have done this, turning away from the "Colonial" tradition (though several speakers at the conference were aware of the danger of a new cultural colonization, by the Americans), but Australian criticism has remained post-Coleridge Colonial.

In many ways, Robert Gray's "Poetry and living: an evaluation of the American poetic tradition," is the richest paper in *The American Model.* Contrasting with Tranter, Gray welcomes a link between poetry and ethics, and is able to quote Wittgenstein to the effect that "Ethics and aesthetics are one and the same." He goes further and vaunts "the generative, vitalizing effect of content upon language" (he is, as one discovers, being deliberately anti-Poundian), seeing poetry as "wisdom which is derived from being sensually aware." On Whitman and Williams, Gray is fresher than either Simpson or Kinnell. He is especially good on the "visceral" quality of Whitman's language and his linkage of word and thing. Said Whitman: "The art of the use of words would be a stain, a smutch, but for the stamina of things." Gray's teacher and master, though, was Williams, and he praises the American's devotion to "reality as a real matter." On the other hand, he rejects the followers: Olson, "derivate ... pompous, obscure, contradictory and bullying" (I suppose the point is irrelevant, but Olson, like Williams, was, in fact, a "gentle" man); Creeley, "one of the most boring and self-regarding of all critically-boosted poets" (strong words, but the best of Creeley's work is still very good); Levertov, "narcissism ... a prominent part of the voice. ..." Such comments signpost the recent downturn in the influence of the Black Mountain poets, but they are also usefully corrective and needed.

Along with Whitman and Williams, Gray's other hero is Williams's contemporary Charles Reznikoff, of whose work we are usefully reminded here. The fully quoted "Leaving the beach on Sunday" is a fine, moving poem. It graphically illustrates Reznikoff's "method of allowing physical details to evoke emotions," and should send us to the Black Sparrow *Collected Poems.*

In closing, Gray reiterates a point which one wants to echo from the highrise tops, that "an innovative technique is only of value if it arises while trying to express a worthwhile content."

Several of the best pages of *The American Model* are in Vincent Buckley's "Ease of American language." In a rich paper, he offers a great deal, from the lapidary phrase ("the sensation of *noticing*") to the raising of valuable questions where he poises the technical suppositions of Olson and the Black Mountain poets against what might be called the "new traditionalism" of Michael Schmidt and the British poets associated with *PN* magazine. Both sides, says Buckley, are too vague in their theoretical terminology. Set forms have something to offer, so (on the other side) does "ease of language." Here (almost as if to balance up Gray's strictures against Olson and company) Buckley allows some timely iconoclasm: "Some poetic habits inhibit both form and meaning, or fail to let meaning emerge by failing to let language have its due resonance. In these cases (in the average product of Philip Larkin, for example) we may suspect that something is wrong with the poet's daily language, both mental and spoken, as well as with his self-image as poet, which governs his intention."

What Buckley wishes to do, in the end, and wisely, is to cling to the liberating "ease" which has been afforded to Australian poets, but without being trapped by American stereotypes.

The last paper, by Bruce Dawe, is not the best conclusion for the book (Buckley would have been better), nor is it clear why it is so placed. Dawe is another poet influenced by the Moore anthology, and his links with the Americans are, he suggests, incidental and unprogrammatic; but perhaps that is the point of letting him have the last word. Much said by all the Australians in *The American Model* rings true. Easy to believe, then, that the Macquarie conference was "highly charged." Commonwealth Literature specialists should find the book most useful.

University of Victoria MIKE DOYLE

Wilson Harris. *The Angel at the Gate.* London: Faber and Faber, 1982. pp. 126. £7.50.

The reception of the work of any great innovative writer can usually be charted in a familiar form — attack, rebuttal or minute

analysis and exegesis, followed by desire to grasp the significance of the work as a whole. *The Angel at the Gate* belongs to the last stage. This slim volume of 128 pages arrived before lunch on *Deepavali* (feast day) November 15, 1982, inscribed to me and to my wife; before and after I could not resist the temptation of enjoying the poetry of the metaphors which make up the mythopoeia. As one familiar with Harris's work since the days of his *Palace of the Peacock*, with its journey to the mythical golden city in the South American heart, which began the tetralogy, I moved through *The Secret Ladder* (1963), where he sees the rivers of the interior as the rungs of a ladder whereby the modern man, can "climb into both the past and the future of the continent of mystery"; and through the encounter of cultures and confrontation of the conscious and the institutional demonstrated in *Tumatumari* (1968) and *Ascent to Omai* (1970), with their dense but precise symbolic style. The new density partly unravels assumptions, travels back into deep-seated forgotten perspectives (to establish a real dialogue into the past) even as it moves through the living present into new dimensions.

The Angel at the Gate is based on the automatic writing of Mary Stella Holiday, an assumed name of Father Joseph Marsden's secretary and patient; the novelist has used "the notes Marsden has compiled in conversation with Mary Holiday," his own note reads. It continues: "Mary suffered from a physical and nervous *malaise*. . . . Through Marsden — the Medical care he arranged for her and the sessions he provided in Angel Inn which gave scope to her 'automatic talents' — that illness became a catalyst of compassion through which she penetrated layers of social and psychical deprivation to create a remarkable fictional life for 'Stella' (apart from 'Mary') in order to unravel the thread that runs through a diversity of association in past and present fictional lives."

Automatic writing provided the idea to W. B. Yeats and his wife, whose *A Vision* is mentioned, that "all ancient vision was definite precise." But Harris maintains a measure of distance between the vision and "actuality," as ambiguity and evocativeness may sometimes get lost in translation. The metaphors of patterns, the metaphors of process bring many of the contemporary events before us: "the famine in Ethiopia, fires in dance hall in Dublin, a hotel in Las Vegas and the house in London in which thirteen young west Indians were burnt alive, the attempted assassination of President Reagan and the threat of Russian invasion of Poland."[1] Brixton riots, 1981, and also Reagan's budget, the marriage of Mack the Shark or Knife and Lucy (twelve-year-old) the child-bride near Mysore, "The mark of Gandhi transferred reverse multi-faceted Joseph and vice-versa to encompass judgments of the land beyond personal dogma or wall of bias." In this image of marriage, the

cultures of East and West meet. Marsden as a young man had worked in India.

In Mary's discourse, she is divided into Stella and Mary. As Stella, she marries Sebastian, a pathetic drug-addict, unemployed, and Mary is his sister. The whole narration moves around the triangular incestrous relationship watched over by Father Marsden, "a great man, a holy man," whose table at Angel Inn is adorned with Sir Thomas More's *Utopia*, Joseph Proudhon's works, William Morris's *News From Nowhere*, Karl Marx's *Das Capital* and Mahatma Gandhi's *Reflections*. He is distinguished from Anancy, a West Indian trickster of Ashanti origin, as black and masked, and stands at the gate. Harris's ingenuity in creating and splitting personalities is seen "Judgment-day paradoxes lay in every foundation of human paradise. Mysore Gandhi existed in Angel Inn. Stella in Proudhon Utopia, Lucky in Khublall's child-bride." Khublall, the Jamaican Jackson, wheeler, Don Juan of science are "angels." As we follow the story of Father Marsden, the prose thickens, twists and becomes musical, with flashes illuminating situations like sunshine on rainy day.

"Lucy Brown in India and Sukey Tawdrey in Paradise Park had taken in the process a step-father. Infant bride had turned the clock topsy-turvy into infant bridegroom when Sukey Tawdry appeared." Marsden who is fatally hurt, "had spoken without speaking"; Mary recalls the anguish he had experienced when typing an article he had written on the Soweto riots in South Africa. His "death" or "withdrawal into his mirror of space" at the end of the novel leads to a sort of life beyond life; "the riddle of death," the vision suggested. The ending of the novel is in contrast to the violent events, mysterious blood relations documented so suggestively. Harris's art is subtle and it weaves an organic pattern; the use of the cat-and-mouse metaphor is as bewilderingly rich as pattern of a rainbow in a clear Indian sky. One returns to *The Angel at the Gate* to discover Harris's imagination growing in a book after book; the articulate energy bursts and spreads like the fragrance of a jasmine.

University of Mysore H. H. ANNIAH GOWDA

NOTES

[1] J. P. Durix, "Blood Relatives," *TLS*, November 15, 1982, p. 1141.

G. A. Wilkes. *The Stockyard and the Croquet Lawn: Literary Evidence for Australia's Cultural Development.* Port Melbourne: Edward Arnold (Australia), 1981. pp. 154. Unpriced.

The Stockyard and the Croquet Lawn is one of a series of Studies in Australian Culture, the aim being to help readers understand the

present state of Australian society better through an awareness of its cultural heritage. Wilkes's approach is to look at the literature in order to interpret the culture. His emphasis is on modern Australia: he gives a broad historical survey of the literature and society, but the survey is always subordinated to his aim of showing how the present evolved. "Present" for Wilkes means "recent" (up to 1970) rather than "presentday" (from 1970 on), so that the chief value of his book lies in its consideration of the background and nature of Australian literature and culture in the period between the end of the Second World War and the late 1960's.

Wilkes's method of looking at the literature in order to interpret the culture is the reverse of the traditional approach. The great advantage of his method is that it enables him to provide a necessary and useful corrective to a too general acceptance of the Australian legend, the notion that the man of the outback embodies the essential Australian virtues of stoicism, resourcefulness, energy, democracy, and egalitarianism. (Women were ignored in the Australian legend and have continued, by and large, to be ignored in Australian life.) Wilkes cites evidence from the literature that there were cultivated Australians at all periods of the country's history and points out that the notion of what characterizes an Australian needs therefore to be expanded. The croquet lawn (Wilkes's symbol of affluence and cultivation) has always existed alongside the stockyard (his symbol of the outback and its special variety of the noble savage), that is, but in the Australian legend the stockyard has ousted the croquet lawn. Wilkes looks at the same basic texts that previous critics have used, but does so without their preconceived notions, and accordingly sees aspects that were previously slighted or not discerned at all.

The weakness in Wilkes's approach is that literature is an incomplete recorder of a culture and tends to idealize it. Literature does not simply mirror life but selects from life and orders it; it especially records the intellectual rather than the popular culture, so that there are many and significant omissions in its representation of a culture. The lack of tender love stories in Australian literature, for example, reveals a great deal about Australian society: relations between men and women in it are rarely enriching. The literature gives little evidence of the misogyny that is rampant in Australian life: "Misogyny," recently wrote Shirley Hazzard, the country's most distinguished expatriate writer, "is part of the Australian wound." And the lack of satire of Australian attitudes until the last two decades suggests a thorny and insecure society rather than one bursting with idealism and concernedness such as Wilkes describes.

As a vehicle for the interpretation of a culture, literature needs to be supplemented by a consideration of historical events and, in more

recent times, by an examination of extra-literary forms such as the comic strip and the film, which reveal aspects of the culture not clear in the literature itself.

Earlier investigations of Australian culture mostly began from a consideration of the history of the period and looked for corroborating evidence in the literature; the weakness of that method was, as said, that it tended to ignore evidence in the literature that did not support the notions it began with. But in eschewing a consideration of historical events Wilkes renounces any attempt to explain changes in literary attitudes beyond recording them — and explanation can radically change the nature of one's observations. One does not dispute the fact of what Wilkes finds, only its significance. He stresses a new idealism and concernedness in Australian literature after about 1955, accepting them at face value rather than explaining them. But is modern Australian society idealistic and concerned? A native Aboriginal would find it for the most part indifferent, a recent migrant excluding, a visiting observer cynical. The idealism that appears in recent Australian literature can be explained by a number of factors. Prime among them perhaps is the new affluence of puritan Australia: the onset of material wealth seems to have engendered a national sense of guilt that sought atonement in expressions of idealism. The coming of the Jet Age at the end of the 1950's also played a part in the new "idealism" in literature as it brought Australia within easy reach of the rest of the world and fostered the growth of a world-consciousness. For the Australian of the last 20 years life offers expanding possibilities instead of a chronic preoccupation with Australian uniqueness; in literature, this consciousness finds expression in idealism and a concern for world issues.

A study of such extra-literary forms as the comic strip and the film also reminds us that the idealism in recent Australian literature gives a misleading impression of the culture as a whole. Australian comic strips show a pervasive anti-feminism and pleasure in the humiliation of someone, qualities that do not support the literary image of Australians as democratic and egalitarian, an image that Wilkes accepts. The Australian film *The Road Warrior*, which has been widely shown throughout this continent, portrays a society whose moral vision of a better world does not extend much beyond the keeping of contracts and the enjoyment of a good life by the sea in the sun. Hedonism rather than idealism seems to prevail in the culture.

As a result of the omissions in the picture of Australian culture offered by the literature, Australian society looks a good deal more attractive than in fact it is. In failing to note the omissions, Wilkes seems to have been controlled by two qualities which are very marked in present-day Australian culture: nationalism and a

defensiveness about the culture. He is notwithstanding a thoughtful and temperate critic, with a deeply impressive knowledge of the range of Australian literature. If one considers the work he has produced over his lifetime, clearly Wilkes emerges as the best critic that Australia has so far produced. *The Stockyard and the Croquet Lawn* is not quite his masterpiece, but it is a well considered book that makes for well considered reading.

Castleton, Vermont JOHN B. BESTON

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