

Corroboree to the Sun by Ian Mudie (1911-1976)

Review by Dave Mack 31/7/14

*A Poet 'will clearly see that there is a cloud floating in this sheet of paper. Without a cloud, there will be no rain; without rain, the trees cannot grow, and without trees, we cannot make paper.'*<sup>1</sup>

From this observation the duty of the radical / progressive poet becomes clear: To recognise and understand the significance of the interconnectedness of things and report those observations to others who will not or cannot see. The poet is Watcher, Gatekeeper of Truth, Whistleblower, Elder, and true to his cause, Contrarian.

Ian Mudie is all of this. His poetry (as represented in this fine collection) speaks from the heart with conviction and vigour. Employing vivid, elemental images of nature he pulls no punches and makes no concessions to those in his sights.

*Let us, oh sun, take fire / from your bright heat, let bush fires rage / about the scrub and ranges of our hearts; / let all the dross be burned, and, as the wattle seeds / that crack and sprout not until a fire has passed, / let then our hearts, our minds, burgeon at last / in growth too strong for little minds / and little men ever to cramp again. (Corroboree To The Sun)*

This poem opens the salvo against the invasive forces that have blighted much of this unique and special country, Australia. Fiercely nationalistic with a strong sense of justice and equity (he is described as 'gregarious and fiercely egalitarian' in a biography by Phillip Butters<sup>2</sup>), Mudie is driven by the conviction that white man has much to learn from our Indigenous cousins and bemoans the destructive influence of (British) Imperialism, in particular, its detrimental impact on the Australian environment and its original custodians. Note his observations of a once proud site of custom and ancient meaning, now a place of disarray covered with the refuse of *yesterday's tomato sandwich -stained / dull news of Europe's dull hysteria...But litter, litter, litter, old tins / and broken beer bottles, a wooden spade, / where once was order. (Moana Increase-Site)* He speaks of an invasion of *the aggressors... in a war upon the ancient earth / whose slight defence is beauty... who*

---

<sup>1</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, 1983

<sup>2</sup> Phillip Butters *Australian Dictionary of Biography, Vol. 15, MUP, 2000*

*destroyed the trees that held the feeding drops... and introduced their sheep and the man-made rabbit curse... I see a land once lovely turned to barrenness, / made dead by lusts of men / that raped her wealth, her earth...'* (Wool-Cheque)

Mudie confidently draws from Aboriginal custom that is deeply entwined with belonging, using sensuous images of landscape to highlight what he sees as a distinctly Australian relationship to Place and its significance to identity. He juxtaposes the destructive influence of those who came from other lands and were ignorant and indeed scornful of the uniqueness of this country and who expressed nothing but ridicule about their new home. For instance:

*Kangaroo, Kangaroo! / Thou Spirit of Australia! / That redeems from utter failure, / From perfect desolation, / And warrants the creation / Of this fifth part of the Earth / Which would seem an after-birth...*<sup>3</sup>

Mudie's savage retort: *In their looking backwards is a twisted vista: / light bends for them, perspective takes a kink / and swings to the Europe-world... for them there is no oldness in this land- / white flesh, for them, and Europe tales, / wiped out the stories of our earth.* (Mental Expatriates)

As noted by historian Henry Reynolds, prominent legal scholar R. T. Latham, 'remarked that when the first settlers reached Australia "their invisible and inescapable cargo of English law fell from their shoulders and attached itself to the soil on which they stood."<sup>4</sup>

Mudie also attached himself to the soil on which he stood but for vastly different reasons. Born on March 1st. 1911 in the Adelaide suburb of Hawthorn, South Australia, he left school before completing his Leaving certificate and married at the age of 23. Writing occupied most of his time, while occasional temporary jobs kept his family provided for. He published his first poem in 1931 but his career as a poet didn't really thrive until his work was featured in the *Publicist* in October '37. He was attracted to the idea of Nationalism through his writing associates, moved to Sydney and was elected to the executive

---

<sup>3</sup> Barron Field (NSW judge) *First Fruits of Australian Poetry*, Sydney, 1819

<sup>4</sup> H. Reynolds *The Law of the Land*, Penguin Books Australia, 1987, p.1

committee of the 'Australia First Movement' at its inaugural meeting in October 1941.<sup>5</sup> This fledgling, pro Australian group grew from the Rationalist Association and the Victorian Socialist Party and vigorously advocated independence from the British Empire. It attracted such luminaries as Adelia Pankhurst Walsh, Xavier Herbert and Miles Franklin and in 1938 ill-advisedly advocated a political alliance with the axis powers of Germany and Japan.<sup>6</sup> In 1942 this led to the arrest of some of the group's members, who were suspected of direct links with Japan. Mudie had moved back to Adelaide by this time and there was 'no evidence that he showed sympathy for the German or Japanese governments'. (But he was committed) 'to encourage the development of a distinctively Australian National Culture in Australia.'<sup>7</sup> And as this collection illustrates, his poetry has done precisely that.

*SO THIS is treason, that a love of land / strengthen and circle in our hearts / through every hour of every day?... If love of land a dastard treason be, / then black glows the sun and solid is the sea.* (If This Be Treason)

But Mudie is not merely raging against the dying of the light. He is shining the light on a better way forward through knowledge of culture and awareness of place for both black and white and asks us to reflect on who we are and where we are going. The notion of Past and present in order to highlight the question of 'progress' forms a central theme in his work, as illustrated by the poem 'Farm', one of the more powerful images of hope and despair in the collection that asks "did the early settlers make progress, are we making progress or does man, in his ignorance, ever make progress even when he thinks he does?"

*Here, where the road forks, the old farmhouse / stands in its tress and its unkempt garden, / with the sea below, and the old port / with the few piles to mark where the jetty / stood like a black finger pointing out to sea / Until the wheel of progress revolved / (did the iron*

---

<sup>5</sup> Butterss *op cit.*

<sup>6</sup> Wikipedia

<sup>7</sup> Butterss *op cit.*

*tyre turn forward or back?) and broke it...'* We are enticed by a glimpse of time past and are invited to reach out and touch in order to consider *its* future, our future:

*The heavy gate strains at my arms, and then / flops back neglectedly, askew on the rotting post, / and for an instant of unhitched time my hand is clasped / by the pioneer who placed the fence here ninety years ago... rammed home the post and hung the gate, / then stood here looking forward into the years / and saw prosperity ahead and years of sons to till / and build his memory into the fertile earth ... and then he went alone across the hill / to where coarse grass grows above him now / and she-oaks sigh all night across the stoneless graves... (Farm)*

Ian Mudie later formed an association with the Jindyworobak poets, writing and editing their Anthology and was called up for military duty in 1942. He later edited *Poets at War* in 1944 and after the war received a Commonwealth Literary Fund fellowship to research paddle steamers on the Murray Darling river system. He published *Riverboats* (1961), a collection of stories from river people, two histories, numerous newspaper articles and short stories, collaborating with his friend Colin Theile in *Australian Poets Speak* (1961). He later returned to poetry and published a number of collections that are seen as less strident and more reflective and tended to focus more on city life rather than the classic images of the Bush. In later life Mudie was very active in the Australian literary scene, became editor in chief at Rigby Ltd. and organised the Adelaide Festival's world renown Writers' Week from its inception in 1960 to 1972.

A man of many talents, Mudie has left a rich vein of images, notions and emotions derived from razor sharp perception and insight. He helps to remind us of the things that really matter in our lives and forces us to reflect on the State of Things as they stand today. And this is his greatest legacy. He reminds us that life, like the environment that sustains it, is fragile and tenuous as well as unique. And it is up to us, the guardians of the present and future to learn from the past and respect those customs and practices that sustain life and respect the land on which it depends. Mudie reminds us that we walk on a knife edge in a world that has lost its balance; and if we are not careful we could find ourselves at the tipping point in an instant.

*when I faced the hollow tree, / in case the prophet called from there, / the great black crow  
stared back at me. / 'One breath could blow the candle out,' he croaked. / Let all great  
men beware / who seek to set the world alight; / one breath could blow the candle out.'*

(As I Walked Out On Earth Alone)

A Poet *'will clearly see that there is a cloud floating in this sheet of paper.*

It is left to each of us to decide how to respond to that revelation.