

**Geoff Page. *60 Classic Australian Poems*  
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2009 has seen the publication of a number of volumes which take stock of our nation's literary heritage, seeking to shape the mass of writing produced in Australia or by Australians into something approaching a national canon. Of course, canon-building exercises are as contestable as they are useful; indeed, they are arguably useful to the same extent that they call forth contestation of the authority they claim for themselves. Thus the most ambitious of these efforts, the *Macquarie PEN Anthology of Australian Literature* (Allen & Unwin, 2009), has recently come under fire from some of our cultural luminaries for its inclusion of documents that may be of historical interest, or reflect a currently fashionable political cause, but are of questionable literary value – a letter from Bennelong to Lord Sydney's steward requesting stockings and handkerchiefs being one example. The same criticism could hardly be made of Geoff Page's anthology, which betrays his decades of experience as a high-school English teacher in its disarmingly old-fashioned selection criteria: "The poem must be: a. emotionally moving (often with moral implications); or b. memorably entertaining" (13). This essentially revisits Horace's injunction that a poem should instruct and delight, and it is the chief merit of this anthology that it does both.

Page acknowledges that there is a certain arbitrariness to his selections, and it is worth noting just how much they differ from those made in the far more compendious Macquarie anthology. Only eight of the sixty poems chosen and discussed by Page make it into that volume as well, a surprisingly small number given that both purport to showcase writings that have already established themselves as Australian 'classics'. (It is hard to imagine such a slight degree of overlap between representative collections of English verse, for example.) For the record, these are Adam Lindsay

Gordon's "The Sick Stockrider", John Shaw Nielson's "The Orange Tree", C. J. Dennis's "The Play", Kenneth Slessor's "Beach Burial", Robert D. Fitzgerald's "The Wind at Your Door", A. D. Hope's "The Mayan Books", David Malouf's "The Year of the Foxes", and Philip Hodgins' "Shooting the Dogs". Again, it is telling that six of these eight poems are by authors born over a hundred years ago: the chances of reaching consensus about what should be included in a canon tend to increase with historical distance. Further, some twelve of the authors selected by Page are missing from the Macquarie anthology, despite its having more space devoted to poetry in total. One man's canon is another's jetsam.

Each poet is represented by a single poem, not necessarily their best-known but always characteristic of their style and chief concerns. Alongside such well-established figures as Judith Wright, Les Murray and John Forbes, we encounter lesser lights like Ronald McGuaig, Elizabeth Riddell and Roland Robinson. I suspect that even those with a longstanding interest in Australian poetry will make the odd discovery. Around a third are women poets; roughly the same proportion of space is allotted to poets of Page's own generation (i.e. those born around 1940).

Page proves an amiable guide, his didactic tendencies nicely balanced by his poet's ear for nuance and grasp of technique. Each of his commentaries follows the same pattern: first an attempt is made to convey the poem's "so-called 'prose meaning'" (253) – a phrase that betrays Page's unease with the traditional content-heavy approach to teaching poetry familiar to so many of us from our schooldays ("what are the themes and issues?") as well as his continuing commitment to it; then our attention is drawn to the way the imagery works and how the prosody supports or complicates the meaning; finally we are told why the poem deserves to be considered a classic. There is no bombast or bluster in these readings, none of the supreme self-assurance of a Harold Bloom, for example; and while Page may not be revelatory or challenging in the way that Bloom, at his best, can be, he does fulfil the basic task of the good critic: he prompts us to read again, and more carefully.

If anything, Page's commentaries resemble the audio guides carried with them by visitors as they pace the halls of an art gallery, lingering every now and then before a painting to learn about the circumstances of its composition or to have their attention drawn to a detail they might otherwise have overlooked. It is in the nature of such guides that their well-informed, well-modulated patter can grow wearying after a while. But if they succeed – as Page succeeds – in making us look afresh at works whose patina of familiarity has become the greatest barrier to their understanding, they will have done their job.

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