

## BOOK REVIEWS

*A brief note from the editors — NQC encourages an exchange of views by having overseas reviewers comment on New Zealand books and local critics write on texts from abroad. Literature is not our main concern, but rather all subjects dealing with human modes of communication, whether in English or not, sophisticated or tribal, written or oral, verbal or graphic — all come within our ken.*

### NOT EASILY SUSCEPTIBLE

Roy MacGregor-Hastie. *Poems for Our Lord and Lady*. Hamilton: Outrigger Publishers Ltd, 1976. 36 pp. Reviewed by S.R. Collins.

Roy MacGregor-Hastie has set himself a difficult task in writing twenty-two poems, all but one (a translation from A Nostalgia di Jacob by Jose Santiago Naud) with intent to explore the personality of the Christ, and at the same time "to answer the awkward questions I was beaten for asking as a boy."

Religious poetry is so easily susceptible to sentimentality and surface scratching of emotive words. But not so in the hands of craftsman MacGregor-Hastie. In his *Ascension and Assumption* he writes: "We are all translators/into and out of different areas of experience/poems, plays, peace and war."

This collection has been broadcast several times. It should appeal not merely to the theologically inclined but to any general reader.

### ECHOES OF AUDEN

Alistair Paterson. *Cities & Strangers*. Dunedin: Caveman Press' 1976' 44 pp' Reviewed by Joost Daalder.

If I am not mistaken about the matter of influence, Mr Paterson writes effectively in the tradition of W.H. Auden in many of his poems. One might for example compare:

*The best whiskey is always distilled  
from  
the finest grain' Horses provide  
transport  
& can be eaten' If women & rum are  
needed  
ensure that the rum is two-thirds  
diluted.*

(Paterson, 'The View from Borodino')

and

*The longest aqueduct in the world is  
already  
Under construction; the Committees  
on Fen-Drainage  
And Soil-Conservation will issue very  
shortly  
Their Joint Report; even the problems  
of Trade Cycles  
And Spiralling Prices are regarded by  
the experts  
As practically solved...*

(Auden, *For the Time Being*)

The debt seems rather obvious, but in no way damaging to Paterson. He fully makes the Auden manner his own, and generally writes well and interestingly. His particular strength, as evident here, is perhaps the ironic handling of the cliché. As in Auden's case, success is dependent on deft manipulation of certain strata-gems (here notably what one traditionally calls 'enjamment').

I do not want to make too much of the Auden or any influence, however, for ultimately there is much in Paterson that is not easily traced back to any source.

Form matches content well, generally, as in 'A Night on the Town', where the meandering beginning, repeated at the end, brings the emptiness of the life described full circle; and the intelligent wryness, too, is successful:

[I] wait for your face to switch on

for you to reply to what I'm not saying...

Occasionally the language lacks tautness, however, or is merely flat ('we were children then/ with time to spend/ in search of new directions'); and there are more misprints (e.g. on pp. 15 and 22) than recorded in the 'Errata'. More significantly, though, one wonders whether what is being said is not rather monotonously nihilistic: to the question, 'discover — but what is/ there left to discover?', I would reply, 'Much more than what we are offered here.'

But, these matters apart, this seems to me a volume of very competent, and technically at times quite exciting verse.

### FOULING THE NEST

Patricia Beer' *This Fig Tree Has Thorns*, Martinborough: Alister Taylor, 1976. 44pp. Reviewed by John Martin.

Poets should not foul the nest of language, for they are trustees of it. Nor should they confuse invention ("There is no poetry without formal invention" William Carlos Williams: Introduction to *The Wedge*, 1944),

with the writing of a new and obtuse language. True, there is a tradition of experiment in English language writers (Joyce, and the writers in dialect, such as MacDiarmid), but this is mostly out of a proper concern to represent language as spoken in a more effective poetic form' None will quarrel with a genuine attempt to deal with a living subjunct of the English language, such as colonial/native patois, or the vibrant tongue of the Blues. Any other tampering must work, or will otherwise be rightly viewed as a modernist pretension, and soon forgotten.

*This Fig Tree Has Thorns* is unfortunately in the latter vein, and for this reviewer, at least patently fails to work. Ms Beer apparently wants us to travel with her into a weird labyrinth of oppressive imagery, a chamber of horrors of her mind, which she somehow seeks to make more real with her decidedly odd grammar:

*i cannot paint this woman  
with your penis rising out of her head  
her finger nails ore white  
mine are black  
this fig tree has thorns  
there is none light  
there is none light  
this fig tree has thorns  
her clitoris is dark red  
the hill is burnt*

*cannot paint this woman with your penis  
rising out of her head*

This poem (they are all untitled) sums up the whole book. They are all like this. In the previous poem to the one above Ms Beer says "i am sick of words". Too right. Unless this sort of thing is your meat, give this collection a firm miss.

The book itself is beautifully produced, with colour photographs on the cover of Ms Beer's "Clay Paintings", which in this reviewer's opinion are also