

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Collected Poems: Francis Webb edited and introduced by Toby Davidson (UWA Publishing, 2011)

Academic and poet Toby Davidson's publication *Collected Poems: Francis Webb* is a timely endeavour, in the sense that it has been a considerable while since Webb's poems have been in circulation beyond anthologies. Davidson argues in the Introduction that 'if Francis Webb (1925-73) is not Australia's greatest poet, he is certainly one of Australia's great poets' (1). *Collected Poems* reaffirms Webb's reputation.

Webb's early poems show a poet who is already in possession of a terrific eloquence and linguistic malleability. Webb published his first book, *A Drum for Ben Boyd* (1948), at a young age. The young Webb's second collection, *Leichhardt in Theatre* (1952), confirmed his powers as a poet. The playwright, poet and literary editor of the *Bulletin*, Douglas Stewart, was amazed at the youthful Webb's inventiveness as well as maturity. Later sequences like 'Eyre All Alone' or 'Ward Two' justified early critical praise even as his talent extended itself. Throughout his work Webb displays extraordinary verbal artifice, while also having an ear for everyday rhythms. Davidson has elsewhere said 'that Webb is many poets in one, a hybridiser of styles, themes and chronologies.'¹

Collected Poems was first launched at the Perth's Writers' Festival in March 2011 and has had several launches since. The publication includes all of Webb's poems, from his earliest surviving poem to his last unpublished poems, and his verse plays. Davidson states in the Introduction that 'with the advantages of hindsight and scholarship, a definitive Webb corpus can now be established through a series of long-overdue renovations' (2). Davidson's recent essay in *Island* magazine on editing Webb, in which he draws attention to some errors, is illuminating in this regard, when he writes that 'editors also need certain mercies', including 'the opportunity to adjust the ebook version due later this year'.² Davidson's ambitious undertaking in *Collected Poems* and beyond is impressive precisely for his objective to give us the full Webb corpus and to render that corpus correctly. Davidson's erudite edition, including a hundred pages of notes, marks a high point in Webb studies and interest.

For scholars, Davidson's Introduction outlines in brief but sufficient detail corrections already made and other important details in regard to the poems, but for the general reader *Francis Webb: Collected Poems* is a rich opportunity to explore Webb's work. *Collected Poems* confirms for a new generation of readers and recalls to those already familiar with his work the poetic faculty and vision of this poet throughout his writing career. His influence can be felt across the fields of contemporary Australian poetry. As Davidson highlights, 'successive generations of Australian poets have acknowledged Webb's significance or influence' (1).

Readers familiar with Webb will already have their favourite poem, like 'Five Days Old'. Craig Powell tells how Webb 'regarded it as his finest poem and the one

¹ Toby Davidson, '2011: A Year of Francis Webb', *five bells* (Spring 2010) 129-131.

² Toby Davidson, 'Breath, Laughter, Creation: Launches, Reviews, and Errata For Francis Webb *Collected Poems*', *ISLAND* 126 Spring, 2011 and available online at http://www.islandmag.com/upfiles/im/cont/126_poetry/toby_davidson.pdf

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he most wanted to be remembered for'.³ There are numerous contenders for that accolade among Webb's poems. To read and re-read *Collected Poems* is to be reminded how strong a poet Webb was throughout his career. Even early poems like 'Vase Painter', which predates *Ben Boyd*, or 'Dawn Wind on the Islands', and the exquisite, 'On First Hearing A Cuckoo' (the latter two poems which appeared in *Leichhardt in Theatre*) put him in a fine category of remembrance, as do his middle and later poems, including 'Lament for St Maria Goretti', his last completed poem.

In a poetry vocation stretching across many years, Webb wrote on a variety of subjects, but to emphasise this is to narrow his work to a smorgasbord of themes. His range of subject matter, from his historical to his religious poems, shows him utterly involved in the complex challenge of the world. He writes of sulking love in 'Achilles and the Woman' and equally of wondering love in 'For Ethel' – lesser known poems perhaps – but he also sees the lonely foreigner in 'The Song of a New Australian'. This attention in 'The Song of a New Australian' to what is outside the purview embraces Webb's extraordinary reach but which opens one utterly to the outsider in searching poems like 'The Canticle', a sequence about St Francis of Assisi.

Webb published sufficiently to be a force in his own time. He partook in the currents of his time as much as he resisted them. Both *Ben Boyd* and *Leichhardt in Theatre* were written at a time when Australian artists like Sidney Nolan were exploring a national mythology. Other poems address singular concerns. Later poems like 'Back Street in Calcutta' or 'Poet' reveal the complexity and depth of his preoccupations. *Collected Poems* shows Webb is a thoroughly modern poet who assimilates into his work the kinds of aporias that trouble the modern consciousness. Kevin Hart has suggested that 'Webb may not have believed in God's death, as Nietzsche imagined it, but all his verse was written in a world that had heard of it and that in some cases had already ceased to be moved by it'.⁴ Webb shows that he knew the consequences of such a thing. In 'A Man' from 'Ward Two' sequence, Webb writes:

The clock in its tower of worked baroque stone
Holds at three o'clock and has always done.
Nothing else shuffles, works, is ended, begun,
There is only the solid air, the solid wall. (321-2)

Throughout his work Webb's language is intricately rich, not with empty verbal play, but in the sense that it gestures constantly to the sublime tension of living, not as a burden, but as a profound obligation. Bernadette Brennan has suggested that 'for Webb, poetry, creativity, comes out of a space of cancellation, a space of nothing'.⁵ Even at its most dense his language retains its suppleness. Webb should be read out loud for the musicality of his language which never overwhelms the poetry, such as 'Wings, song, and sundown, wide outburst of orange, / And the beauty of the passing' (219).

³ Craig Powell, 'The Nameless Father in the Life and Poetry of Francis Webb', *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry* 32 (1998) 488-495.

⁴ Kevin Hart, 'Francis Webb: Unsayings Transcendence'. *Southerly* 60.2 (2000) 10.

⁵ Bernadette Brennan, 'Tracing the Spectre of Death in Francis Webb's Last Poems', *JASAL*, 9, 1-13
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It is rather regressive to argue from the personal to justify the sincerity of the experience contained within the poetry, but in Webb's case such regression is rendered mute. The poetry he writes about his experience of mental illness is immensely powerful. The sequences, 'Electric' (247) and 'Ward Two' (315), are brilliant. Powell writes that Webb said of himself that '[a]ll my life has been chaos and horror, but I have tried to create order and beauty in my poems'.⁶ It is an extraordinary order and an even more extraordinary beauty, in which the speaker says in 'Socrates' that 'Daylight calls me to birth' (203).

Webb's work moves beyond the far fringes of his own interests to intersect at that collective level where poetic sensibility opens to the world at large. He is a twentieth-century poet whose questions about human existence set him among the likes of poets who have realised this questioning at the level of the poetic and of its very stuff: language. Davidson suggests in the Introduction that 'Webb's life-long empathy for the vulnerable, marginalised and oppressed is continually reaffirmed from "The Hulks of Noumea" to "Ward Two" and it is indistinguishable from his Catholicism' (3). Webb is a poet of awesome inquiry. It is through the richness of his metaphor-making that Webb places an original strain on the language such that he creates a world of rich inquiry. This publication of his poetry brings his work again into proper public view.

Tina Giannoukos

⁶ Powell 488-495.