

***Letters Lifted into Poetry: Selected correspondence between David Campbell and Douglas Stewart, 1946-1979.* Ed. Jonathan Perse, Canberra: National Library of Australia, 2006, 268pp.**

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Jonathan Perse and the National Library have done the professional literary community and the wider reading public alike welcome service with this handsome, nicely illustrated and worthy volume, which features about 200 letters exchanged between the poets David Campbell and Douglas Stewart throughout their parallel literary lives from 1946-1979. The general public is the greater winner since there are a few reservations about the book as a fully professional—that is to say—academic enterprise. I will return to these qualms below; first I want to address the book's considerable strengths and value.

In 1977 in a letter to David Campbell, Douglas Stewart wrote that he had been sorting vast amounts of his personal and professional papers with an eye to donating them to the appropriate archives. In the long run Stewart's material was split between several holdings. For instance he donated most of his own papers to the Mitchell Library, in Sydney, while Campbell's letters to Stewart went to the National Library's manuscript archive in Canberra, joined with the rest of Campbell's papers. A number of other 1977 letters between the two men discuss some of the aspects of the processes of sorting, donating and so forth, and as one might expect, with Stewart at least, aspects of the legal issues.

More important than all of these practicalities, was Stewart's much more brief observation that—with a modest nod to his own part in the correspondence—Campbell's letters to him, full as they were with biographical, professional, and poetic content, would without doubt one day see the light of publication. Indeed it is from one of these letters—among the last between them in 1979, just before Campbell's death, that the book's title derives. Stewart, warming to his theme, argues that as any letter unfolds its ideas, both he and Campbell's seemingly simple letters weave their way from the quotidian to the poetic. And so, he observes that on many occasions Campbell's prose “lifted a letter into poetry”.

This “lifting” is indeed what happens, and is equally true of Stewart's letters. In its awkward even jagged physicality the metaphor mimics quite nicely the way the letters often work—moving from material living to artistic insight.

On the whole, the letters chosen and the editing of them bring out the best of the exchanges, adding insight to the way both men thought in, through, and about their poetry and that of others. Persse's task as editor has wisely seen him leave in enough material from the more day-to-day parts of the men's lives to help us see this. Certainly it is the case that he has "edited out" most of the mundane, some other elements about other less focussed material—neither man seems to have spent much time relating intimate family matters beyond seeking after general well being—and of course Persse has had to select some letters as "better" than others. In most of the 200 letters, we can trace the lively exchange between two quite different lives: Campbell's daily life as a farmer living in the southern plateau area of NSW and in particular around the Canberra region; set against the professional bookman in Stewart, who was a publisher's reader or editor and critic for the *Bulletin* and Angus & Robertson for substantial years of his Sydney-based life, the last part spent in the northern suburban St Ives. Brief hints at their respective families are detailed—we get more of Stewart's family, daughter Meg and Margaret Coen, than we do of Campbell's. But we get large amounts of what was an essential part of both of their lives—the shared pastime of fishing. So central to their lives and that of their wider circle of friends is fishing, that it was for these men almost the alternative way of living, and it generates quite a lot of their art. When not arranging a hasty sortie into the southern plateau or a quick coastal cast or two, they discuss their art. And what insightful and delightful discussions they are.

Both men had been central to the Australian poetic life from the 1950s through to Campbell's death in 1979 and Stewart's in 1985. For both, the seventies had been prolific times of creativity and increasing status. Since their deaths there has been a steady if slower declining stream of bibliography, re-edited, and occasionally "lost" works. While Campbell was still recognised as notionally a major part of that mid-twentieth century Australian "canon", Chris Wallace-Crabbe, sometime in the mid-1990s, observed that Stewart, among others, had in all likelihood fallen out of the canon. This would appear so for both his poetry and drama. His few little books on fishing appear from time to time. Campbell's status had the revival turn in 2006 with a new *Selected* and the publication of his suppressed war novel *Strike*, but neither man has received much major critical work for some time.

But the letters of both, and, in Stewart's case other texts, remain largely unavailable and therefore unread. It remains puzzling that such a prolific and important contributor to the Australian theatre—as Stewart's many numerous plays attest—is rarely if ever performed. By way of an initial

redress, this book has made a very thorough and useful new contribution to the ongoing reputations of both men. It might be hoped that both will be read in more detail as a result, and in Stewart's case in particular, that much more of his unpublished work, and also the very substantial out-of-print back list, will be issued or re-issued.

This book gives us, in depth, and over 30 years, insight into the life of the intellect of two very talented poets. We can see how they react to a physical circumstance often derived from their material life or from the sensuality of their recreational moments. The sheer joy of their consistent relating of variations on "the-one-that-didn't-get-away" is revelatory and often humorous. Regularly the sights of fish, birds, a tree or a flower, more largely a landscape, seed a poem and often several. As well as the letters, often we are given a relevant selection of the major "nature" poems of both men, and as Perse has seen fit to append full texts, we can see many poems in generation and then as finished work.

The book will prompt many readers to go back to the primary texts and re-read their full oeuvres. But, their exchanges over some of the poems add that extra insight into how a professional poet writes and reads. Stewart and Campbell were both practitioners of the kind of readership we once called "close readers"—giving a close and quite specific attention to language. The modulation of their "daily" language into passages in which they may be said to "turn on" their critical minds makes exhilarating reading.

Campbell's letter of 3 November 1949 appended his attempt at a medieval ballad ("Hogan's Daughter" after the well known "True Thomas"). Stewart's reply of 7 November, takes the poem apart, pretty nearly word by word, focusing on its generic failings as a contemporary ballad, rather than as an *ersatz* antiquity; this would be a lesser work according to Stewart. His modernism is on show in this letter and many others. The strength of their friendship is evident in the strident honesty—Stewart tells Campbell that without the new touches "I think you are marring a very good poem".

By 27 May 1952 that honesty continued, as Stewart declined a story describing the prose as "stilted and stiff" implying that since this story did not come from the usual Campbell country themes where his prose was usually sparkling, Campbell had limited himself and was almost trying too hard for an expansive mood and style. The full paragraph makes Stewart's case clear in no uncertain terms: Campbell had not achieved his usual brilliance. Campbell seems almost always the more enthusiastic of the two, less inclined to be brutally critical, but the nuanced moments of mutual support and

occasional—indeed regular—ironies and flat criticism chart the wonderful dynamics of their relationship.

Sprinkled among the fine letters are many of their best poems; outstanding are parts from “Ariel”, Campbell’s volumes *Poems*, and *Deaths and Pretty Cousins*, many nature poems from Stewart’s *Sun Orchids*, and a few snippets from his as yet unpublished “A Treat for St Joseph”, a very late text which while problematic should be in print.

In addition to the primary letters and these poems, Persse and the National Library’s designers have added selected photographs, facsimiles, and illustrations—paintings and drawings by Stewart’s wife and their friend Norman Lindsay. We have as well Persse’s clear and well-written accompanying notes, numerous succinct biographies of the third parties mentioned throughout the letters, and the addition of selected reading lists of primary and secondary material. All of these make this a very respectable volume and should add to the incentive to make many of its readers seek the primary sources.

All in all then *Letters Lifted into Poetry* is a welcome and useful volume. Well made and designed, it looks good, and has enough secondary material to explain the contexts and debates over its 30-something years of evolution. There are, however, a few qualms. When Stewart wished for that edited book of Campbell’s letters in 1977, the kind of book he envisaged would not have been quite like this. I think he would have liked a complete edition. Certainly, Stewart had an eye to the financial constraints of his profession and, from both sides of the editorial desk, the letters are often replete with critical issues masking actual financial constraints. For example, the sheer constrictions of post-war Australia not having enough cheap paper to publish 3000 word stories at apparent editorial whimsy lies behind the extremely detailed reading of Campbell’s short story. My memory of Stewart’s many other letters to prospective writers suggests that Campbell was not the sole recipient of such financially-shadowed critiques. Understanding that undertone argues that this volume has had to meet the constraints of a readership and a publishing industry that mutually can accommodate 200 selected and edited letters of about a 250-page typescript.

While I would not carp at the restrictions of publishing volumes of a certain size, I am concerned that as we are allegedly moving into the electronic book medium that we didn’t apply that new mode to this kind of book. What is restraining the production of a volume in which all of the letters between

Campbell and Stewart are digitally reproduced? Say *Letters Lified into Poetry on CD*, or better: *The Complete Letters between Douglas Stewart and David Campbell on CD*. For most of the readership consulting the actual archive is impossible, and in the long run damaging to the documents. Furthermore, should an editor of a certain kind make the decision about what is relevant to the writer's milieu?

There would appear to be few technical restrictions in this case. None of their holography was impossibly illegible, and, if the hands are illegible, transcriptions could be added. To be sure, there is considerable academic value added here, but there are other values to be gained from such full-text reproductions. Digital facsimiles enhance the reading event; we could see from a facsimile whether Campbell writes and types irregularly or always writes, see that Stewart types under letterhead more often than not. It is important that we see that a well-placed poet often misspells some words and worries at others, as Stewart occasionally does, but which Persse doesn't annotate. An academic editor would very likely not have ignored the orthography, certainly would not have tidied it up (although Persse does so imperfectly) and at least annotated it. While I admit to loving books dearly, in cases of such archivally useful material of this kind, the e-form wins.

In conclusion: I like Persse's book, am pleased to see the material, however limited, in print, and hope dearly that it will encourage many of its readers back to the main primary texts. If we cannot have the complete e-texts or even digital facsimiles in hard copy, then I suppose we may be lucky enough to see more of this kind of production.

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