

**William Oandason. *Round Valley Songs* (Minneapolis: West End Press, 1984) 64 pp., \$4.50 paper.**

William Oandason, Senior Editor of the *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* and editor of his own journal, *A, a Journal of Contemporary Literature*, has published other books of poetry, *A Branch of California Redwood* (reviewed by Kenneth M. Roemer, *Explorations in Sights and Sounds*, Summer, 1984) and *Moving Inland*.

In the brief introduction to this book, Wendy Rose (Hopi Miwok) describes the collection of poems as a ceremony and argues, "that it is a ceremony is not a trite phrase; instead it is a statement of fact." As with any ceremony we are presented with a priest/poet who speaks for the community; a subject, here the experience in time of the Ukomno'm or Yuki of Round Valley; and the purpose which Oandason explains as "the reader can see how my People have not broken their ties to the oral traditions while becoming literate."

In the "Preface" Oandason introduces the image of the California Sequoia "the oldest continuing life form in that region of the world" and identifies it with the Ukomno'm, "the oldest culture in existence on that section of the West Coast." In the dedicatory poem, "Grandmothers Land," we read "blood, flesh and bone sprouted/inside her womb of redwood." Oandason calls grandmother "Jessie" associating her with the biblical Jesse, father of King David, and the iconography of the "Tree of Jesse." Unfortunately the image of the redwood which might have given greater imagistic unity to the work is not developed in the body of the work.

The main part of the book is divided into four sections: "The Voice," "The Past," "Ukom and No'm," and "Dreams." Each section is made up of twelve spare four-line poems. In "The Voice" the poet speaks initially in the first person but concludes "Tayko-mol has not left us/but lives in the pulse/of our words, and waits/in the azure for us all." In "The Past" ordinary images—a willow basket, the wind, a white haired woman—are associated with the collective experience of the people. In "Ukom & No'm" we find personal images from the immediate world, "Turner Creek's the core of winter/but blackberry birds flare again/and transform the light of spring/fire enough for another year." In "Dreams" the poems are elements in a sustained narrative which concludes with the poet's prayer, "may the rich brown clay, the feather/and foam, the narrow of our ways,/not be the ash of memory in print/but cold mountain water."

The ceremony is finished. We close the book and return to the cover photograph of an "old time" ceremonial Round House of the Ukomno'm. As Betonie in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* tells us, "the ceremonies as they had been performed were enough for the way the world was

then...elements in this world began to shift; and it became necessary to create new ceremonies.” Oandason has created a new ceremony in his collection. Unfortunately, with only forty-eight, four-line poems the ceremony is brief, too brief one suspects to do justice to the Ukommo’ of Round Valley. We can only hope for more poetry from Oandason.

— Victor Macaruso  
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**Okot p’Bitek. *Song of Lawino and Song of Ocol.* (London: Heinemann, 1984) 151 pp., \$6.50, paper.**

Heinemann’s reissue of two early works by Okot p’Bitek includes *Song of Lawino* in Okot’s own translation from the Acoli published in 1966 and his shorter companion piece, *Song of Ocol*, 1967, composed in English only. The volume includes an introduction and brief biography of Okot and a critical analysis of the two poems in the light of Okot’s background and other works, written by George A. Heron in 1972. Heron includes a comparison between the Acoli and the English versions of *Song of Lawino*, and a comparison of the traditional poems inserted into the songs with some of the traditional folksongs collected and translated by Okot himself.

Okot p’Bitek was varied and accomplished in his many artistic pursuits. In college he danced and acted in theatrical productions and composed an opera. Later he was to become active in the Uganda Cultural Center, even creating a Gulu festival of folk art to celebrate his country’s independence in 1960. When he returned to Uganda after completing his European education, he wrote *Song of Lawino* and treatises on oral literature and on African religions. An early novel written in Acoli (Luo) *Lak Tar* is now required reading in local schools.

*Song of Lawino* was the first of his works to be couched in a book-length, recitative form. Okot’s mother was a “great singer,” also named Lawino, and was a major inspiration for this first poetic work, although her own songs were shorter poems sung in traditional Acoli style. Okot wrote the English translation of *Song of Lawino* in blank verse. In it, Lawino, a traditional Ugandan woman, voices a long complaint. She feels her husband, Ocol, has become corrupted by Western ways. He despises Lawino, his first wife, and prefers his second wife, who can speak English and who follows modern fashions.