

Steal Away Boy: Selected poems of David Mitchell

Edited by Martin Edmond & Nigel Roberts.

Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2007

(RRP: \$34.99)

Reviewed by Terry Locke, University of Waikato

In 1985, out of a job and mouths to feed I was offered a reprieve by Jim Tully, then an editor at the *Auckland Star*, who suggested that I might work as a proof-reader at the newspaper. David Mitchell was one of my workmates. We exchanged few words, though we were acquainted with each other. Having read the editor's introduction to *Steal Away Boy: Selected poems of David Mitchell*, I can see that he had begun a retreat into silence, into the kind of strategic withholding of self which appears to have characterised his relationship with editors who sought to pin his poems sprawling to some page or other. In this respect, Edmond and Roberts have done a superb job in enticing Mitchell out of the tomb.

To be honest, seeing Mitchell sitting at his desk in the proof-reading room of the former daily for the first time created an awkwardness in me. He'd actually pissed me off because he'd failed to pay Barry Mitcalfe the regular \$30 guest appearance fee for reading at the Globe. Having done a guest spot myself, I'd suggested to David that Barry was a worthy guest and would be prepared to come up from his home in Coromandel to read... which he did. Somehow, though, looking at David sitting at his desk, I realised it would have been a pointless exercise raising the matter with him. In my heart, I knew that I was square and he was undeniably hip and therefore above such trivialities. Later, I realised that such signifiers are ultimately empty, and in his later years, mumbling his way around the streets of Mt Eden, Mitchell might have had a point in finding sanity in poems *without* words.

Apropos to this is the beginning of "words", the last poem from *Pipe Dreams in Ponsonby*, the slim volume that Stephen Chan managed to wrest from Mitchell and publish in 1972.

who
seeks wisdom in words

seeks best &
first
the signs
below their bland faces
&

between th lines...

Such a text needs to be thought of as a notated script for performance. It is a reminder of the way in which the inflections of speech change the meaning of an utterance. Take the word "the", for example, sometimes called a definite article or determiner. If you say the sentence, "He's the man," and emphasise "the", you are drawing attention to particular qualities in "man" that you expect your audience to recognise. If you say to someone, "I'm going to the movies," you are unlikely to be drawing attention to particular movies and, in fact, are likely to barely utter the "e" in "the". Notating this use of "the", you might decide to write "th".

What about the ampersand? Certainly, its use marks a particular discourse originating with American Black Mountain poets such as Robert Creeley and Robert Duncan and taken up by a number of New Zealand poets in the 1970s. My understanding of it as a notational device links it to Charles Olson (poet and theoretical guru of the Black Mountain "school") and his famous pronouncement in his essay "Projective Verse" that "one perception must immediately and directly lead to a further perception". As I read it, the & can be thought of as a moment of suspense, a silence at the core of the poem whence the new perception emerges as part of a poem's momentum. If the poem is a dance in a field, then the & marks a new move in the dance.

For those with or without hippy pretensions, who were reacting to the Vietnam War and associating with some or

other version of the counter-culture in 1970s New Zealand, *Pipe Dreams in Ponsonby* was an iconic book. (And yes, I have it on my shelf.) More than anyone, David Mitchell found a poetic to match the mood of the times. The poems I'd identify as signifying that mood are "at pakiri beach" (addressed to yet another woman), and the pair, "my lai / remuera / ponsonby" and "ponsonby / remuera / my lai".

The first of these is a love song in defiance of the double antagonist that stalks this volume: time and pain. Here is the beginning of maybe the best piece of erotic love poetry in the New Zealand corpus:

here
I sing th green branch
th lost hymn
to earth's green blood
& sap
& slime
to hold back time...

let me here give praise & tongue
to your bright flesh & hair & bone
to mouth & nostril / salt & lime
to breast & belly & that cool line
from throat to thigh: to all yr mouths
& voices / winedeep / lovestung
to silken down beneath th sun / about
th nipple
& all along th length of supple spine...

*so hold / time ! & let us stand
since we are naked & th blood is up
stay your bitter hand !*

Reading this poem again after a number of years, I'm struck by how old it is. It calls up a tradition of love poetry that had never put down roots in puritanical New Zealand but was certainly alive and well with the troubadour poets of Western Europe. Despite the forward slashes (which you can think of as like caesuras, or like the pauses for breath signaled by the dashes in Emily Dickinson's poetry), this is iambic verse and it is the iambic which gives it forward momentum and an incantatory quality which makes it a pleasure to read.

If "at pakiri beach" is a chant to keep time at bay, the two anti-Vietnam war poems (while both meditations on time in their own way) use montage to juxtapose a New Zealand

"reality" with the world of pain represented by the My Lai massacre in Vietnam. To quote Wikipedia:

The My Lai Massacre was the mass murder conducted by a unit of the US Army on March 16, 1968 of 347 to 504 unarmed citizens in South Vietnam, all of whom were civilians and a majority of whom were women, children (including babies) and elderly people. Many of the victims were sexually abused, beaten, tortured, and some of the bodies were found mutilated. The massacre took place in the hamlets of My Lai and My Khe of Son My village during the Vietnam War. While 26 U.S. soldiers were initially charged with criminal offenses for their actions at My Lai, only William Calley was convicted. He served only three years of an original life sentence, while on house arrest.

None of this gets overtly into "my lai / remuera / ponsonby" which begins:

she
holds th mirror to her eye

whole villages burn

2 million years have provided nothing
she

did not already know.

th lines on hr hand
speak out clear &

serene

also those beneath her eyes
& in between...

In comparison with this, James K. Baxter's poem "Thoughts of a Remuera Housewife" is an unsubtle and misogynistic rant. The spaces, of course, say it all. In their own way, also, they invite the reader into the theatre of the poem. It is a

damning invitation to complicity. We are all complicit in “children burn”.

I would like to compliment the editors on the quality of their introduction and Auckland University Press on the overall production values of this book. The introduction is judicious, kind and eloquent. Here’s the opening of their little essay on Mitchell’s verse:

Silence was always a salient quality of Mitchell’s poetry: not the silence of absence or self-abnegation but one replete with the crackle of possibility, like the anticipatory or recollective pause before and after a lightning strike.

The last poem I want to mention in this review (also from *Pipe Dreams*) is “george raft hat”. I mention it because it seems prescient of the kind of withdrawal from poetry that Mitchell underwent in later life (not too dissimilar, I think, to Keats’ abandonment of poetry with the impasse of the “Hyperion” poems). The poem emerges from a walk from Grafton to Ponsonby, and you can track the speaker’s progress easily enough via the naming of places and monuments. I can say a lot about this poem, since to me it is the closest Mitchell comes to articulating a poetic in this collection. However, I’ll confine myself to a few lines:

coming “home” without my mind
again
watching th stories & poems
th people make
passing along th kerb
against th railings of th day
& rantings
of th dead –

The editors have some incisive things to say about the meaning the Globe readings project had for Mitchell, and we find a foretaste of it here. Put simply, I think that for Mitchell, poetry was a *doing* or an enactment. Words were the medium, but it was always words as inflected by the voice, words in performance, words in conjunction with whatever props were at hand. The introduction contains numerous testimonies to Mitchell in role, and being taken over at times by the role. When the words went the mime remained – page upon page of poems written in beautiful handwriting with invisible ink.

Banquo’s Son

By T.K. Roxborough

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Reviewed by Rodelyn Avila, Catholic Cathedral College

When I was handed the *Banquo’s Son* I immediately felt elated. The cover looked great and promised a great story I know we shouldn’t judge a book by its cover but this one gave me a promise of adventure.

When my English teacher proceeded to tell me that it was a follow up book of some characters from *Macbeth* the elated emotions I felt quickly disappeared. We had just finished studying *Othello* for ten weeks and it was the most tedious study I have ever had. However as I began to read I felt myself slowly begin to warm to it.

The character of Fleance was a great mystery and was one of the reasons why I kept pressing on. I felt the story at the beginning a little tiresome and moved slowly: it is a good read but failed to create an emotional bond consistently between the reader and characters in the book. As the story progressed however it stepped up onto a new level and began to unravel a more exciting tale and it is here we truly feel a sense of empathy towards Fleance.

This story is filled with love, hope, loss and adventure but only in love and loss do we truly feel the raw emotions that the author wishes to show the reader.

My final verdict of the book is that although it was a slow journey to begin with the sequels offer great potential.

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