

Poetry at Auckland University Press

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Weathers on this shore want sorts of words.

(Kendrick Smithyman, 'Site')

Auckland University Press might never have been a publisher of poetry were it not for Kendrick Smithyman. It was his decision. As Dennis McEldowney recalls, a letter from Smithyman on 31 March 1967 offering the manuscript of *Flying to Palmerston*, pointed out that 'it is to the university presses the responsibility is falling for publishing poetry. . . . Pigheaded and inclined to the parish pump, I would rather have it appear in New Zealand if it appears anywhere'.¹ Dennis, who became Editor of University Publications in 1966 and in the next two decades created a small but perfectly formed university press, claimed he lacked confidence in judging poetry. But Kendrick and C. K. Stead, poets and academics both, became his advisors and he very quickly established an impressive list. At its core were the great New Zealand modernist poets. Dennis published five books by Smithyman, three by Stead and three by Curnow starting with the marvellous *An Incurable Music* in 1979.² Curnow and Smithyman were not young and had published extensively elsewhere but most would agree that their greatest work was written in their later years; and AUP published it. Soon a further group of established poets was added: three books by Elizabeth Smither, one by Albert Wendt, one by Kevin Ireland. And then a new generation, the exuberant poets of the 1960s and 1970s such as Ian Wedde (four books), Bill Manhire, Bob Orr, Keri Hulme, Graham Lindsay, Michael Harlow. AUP benefited in this period from an informal agreement with Victoria University Press that VUP would publish plays and short stories and AUP poetry and reprints of New Zealand fiction, neither trespassing on the

other's territory. Apart from the very small presses, John McIndoe in Dunedin and Caxton in Christchurch, there was very little competition. By 1986 Dennis had published 35 books of poetry by 20 poets.

Coming to AUP in August of that year I could hardly believe my luck. I had quickly learned, in my first publishing job at Reeds in 1976, the standard publisher reaction to books of poetry, which is simply NO. When as a humble editor I read what seemed to me a very promising first book of poetry by an unknown writer called Lauris Edmond, I could not persuade David Elworthy that we should publish it. (It was called *The Pear Tree* and Pegasus published it.) I had grown up in a household in which reading and writing poetry was considered a perfectly normal activity but now I understood that books of poetry 'do not sell'. AUP's robust defiance of this maxim naturally delighted me and I knew I was inheriting riches.

In developing the list there were balances to be struck. The first was of course between poetry and the scholarly books to which the press was dedicated. Not every university press published new poetry and I was aware criticisms might be made if poetry seemed to dominate. But in general books of poetry were not demanding of time or money and they indicated a press in which writing skill and respect for language were high priorities. They also announced a serious commitment to design which responded sensitively to texts. At various points too they connected with scholarly endeavour. I aimed then to publish around six books of poetry a year within a steadily growing overall list, though someone noticed that if I could squeeze in another small book of poems late in the year I would.

A further balance was necessary between established and new poets. My immediate bequest from Dennis was a remarkable trio of first collections which had been accepted by the Press but not yet published. *Location of the Least Person* by Gregory O'Brien, *All Cretans are Liars* by Anne French and *Cutting Out* by Fiona Farrell (Poole) all appeared in 1987 and were first publications by writers whose future achievements in poetry and other forms are well known. If the heart of Dennis's poetry publishing was established poets, first books by Keri Hulme and Elizabeth Nannestad had already marked a growing confidence and were also successful in the

market. Likewise the three 1987 debuts were exciting, with *All Cretans* winning two major awards and O'Brien revealing himself as artist as well as poet.

Poets already published by AUP were extraordinarily loyal – I subsequently published 14 of the 20 McEldowney poets and watched them change and mature into mighty works like *Atua Wera*. But you also needed freshness and variety and a shifting pattern of voices and sounds. At a quick count I can name 17 first collections while I was at AUP, four of which won the Best First Book award and I am proud that AUP introduced poets like Robert Sullivan, Paula Green, Diana Bridge, Richard Reeve and Chris Price. Some gifted young poets came through our AUP New Poets series and three of these poets, Anna Jackson, Sarah Quigley and Sonja Yelich, later published their own collections.

There was always, but increasingly as time passed, a superfluity of choice even though the arrangement with VUP was rescinded in 1987. There were not many outlets for poetry in a small country, least of all ones that were secure. We thus acquired a number of well-recognised good poets, Michele Leggott, Murray Edmond, Janet Charman, who had appeared previously with publishing houses who had closed their doors to poets. Manuscripts by unknowns poured in. They showed a widespread understanding that you turned to verse in moments of emotional or psychological stress or to celebrate various kinds of love and landscape. They understood about rhyme and rhythm but little of the history of poetry in the twentieth century or of the hard discipline and long practice that it required. Occasionally something stood out and was sent to a reader but few new poets came out of the blue and most were signalled by other poets, or by previous publication. We also rejected with regret many competent and publishable manuscripts sometimes by established poets explaining that we could only justify publishing the best and that meant originality, energy, a distinctive sound, above all a deep and creative sense of the possibilities of language.

Poetry came to us in many forms: a brief sample selection or all the poems composed in the last ten years; as a weighty computer file or on scented paper with floral decorations. (One poet claimed to be channelling Sylvia Plath but the quality of the poems alone reinforced one's natural scepticism.) Ian Wedde always sent a superbly constructed collection in which you

sensed much had been winnowed and refined. Elizabeth Smither's collections hung together beautifully but she said she had no idea how to put the poems in order; I did this for her and she paid me in a bottle of French perfume, quite undeserved as the task was sheer pleasure. A collection from Michele Leggott, who was losing her sight during this period, was always halfway to being a physical object, so precise was her attention to the visual appearance.

The readers played an enormous role. Sending a text to a reader meant it was being taken seriously, as the poets realised, and that at least two opinions had determined the final outcome. Reports by Smithyman and Stead were classics long remembered but other readers over the years included Mac Jackson, Elizabeth Smither, Peter Simpson, Roger Horrocks. They all produced perceptive and elegant comments that assisted both me and the poets. Reflecting now on who made the choices I can see the character of the poetry we published was shaped by a complex interplay between my judgements and those of the readers. I could usually decide with no difficulty whether a manuscript should be rejected outright or given further consideration. In this group were some I really liked and some I didn't. Thus the reader might save me from my own prejudices and expand my horizons or they might reinforce and endorse what I thought. If there seemed to be a complete mismatch between reader and poet I got another opinion but this was rare. If one manuscript was turned down after a negative report I would send the next one from the ever hopeful poet to another reader. I wanted to be fair and I wanted to be open to all possibilities. I was looking not for *my* list but an eclectic and wide-ranging list of the highest quality. People professed to see a distinctive character in the AUP poetry list but I am not at all sure what it was.³

I have been speaking chiefly about new poetry and that was certainly the focus. But new poetry should sit, I thought, in a context of the study and history of New Zealand poetry. Thus the meticulous scholarly rehabilitation of Robin Hyde as a poet undertaken by Michele Leggott over this period in two books published by AUP, and in several essays, was a natural fit; as was the reissue of Mary Stanley's *Starveling Year* and books of literary criticism by Curnow, Stead and edited by Leggott and Mark Williams. I was not much interested in the sort of general anthologies that were published by the commercial houses but very glad to publish the anthologies of Pacific work brought to us by Albert Wendt or the specific act of recovery and

celebration presented by *Big Smoke: New Zealand Poems 1960–1975*. Eighteen of the 56 poets published by AUP from 1968 were university teachers and while much criticism has been made of the stultifying effect of academia on original poetry I found the English Department at the University of Auckland stimulating and supportive. It had long had leading poets among its staff and I saw little sign of the commonly uneasy relations between literary study and practice. Sadly however few poets came to AUP during this period from the Creative Writing classes run by the department.

Producing a book of poems was a close and always enjoyable collaboration with the poet. I edited almost all of the poetry but with a light hand.⁴ I knew a good poet had toiled over every word and that generally if ‘normal’ conventions about grammar or punctuation were infringed this might very well be for a good reason. Elizabeth Smither avoided commas at the end of lines even when the grammar demanded it because she thought the line break constituted a pause anyway, for example. I corrected obvious errors of spelling or fact, queried lines that sounded flat or ugly, suggested rearrangements of poems or stanzas, complained if there were sections I did not understand or if a single poem seemed to let down the whole collection. It was important to me that the poet’s voice was clear and heard at its best and if a suggested change did not meet with approval I usually dropped it. During the editing process I got a much closer sense of the quality or otherwise of the poems as I was paying attention to the finest details; but I usually kept these thoughts to myself.

Sometimes poets rewrote their poems before my eyes. I remember going through the proofs of Kendrick Smithyman’s *Selected Poems* with him at his house in Northcote. He astonished me by ‘improving’ on the proofs many poems he had written years previously. Allen Curnow did the same but more discreetly. Poets often added a further poem or two during the production process so that the book as published was not quite the one we had accepted. I always asked poets to write their blurbs. Some refused and left this delicate task to me; but Ian Wedde, Michele Leggott and Paula Green wrote poems, or near poems, into blurbs, small masterpieces likely to confound your average publicist.

Occasionally I had to take a larger role. Kendrick's *Atua Wera* was published after his death and I spent a whole summer going through the meticulous texts he left to sort out a final text and notes. On another occasion Albert Wendt walked into my room with a whole pile of poetry manuscripts that he, Robert Sullivan and Reina Whaitiri had collected from poets all over Polynesia for an anthology of contemporary poetry. He said they'd done all they could; so I spread the poems out over my living room floor and got down on my hands and knees with a pad and pen deciding which ones should go into the book which became in due course *Whetu Moana: Contemporary Polynesian Poems in English*.

We always asked poets if they had any strong feelings about format, typeface or cover design. They often did: the cover images on all of Janet Charman's collections were her suggestions, so were Anna Jackson's, while Paula Green's often featured an image by her artist husband Michael Hight and C. K. Stead was happily willing to let us choose a design so long as he could react strongly once one was suggested. Michele Leggott supervised every visual detail of her books, all in the same large square format to accommodate her tendency to write long lines and to use lots of white space. I remember the typographic challenge of the concrete poem 'Tigers' in the first collection she published with AUP and of 'Micromelismata' in *Dia*. Indentation, spaces between words, use of italics or small caps were all matters affecting meaning and taken with great seriousness by poet and publisher. Katrina Duncan designed and executed the typography and layout of all of the poetry books from 1995 with a skill, sensitivity and a minimum of fuss that I and the poets greatly respected.

And there was always a further balance to be struck. The readers were usually academics or poets, who were assessing the quality of the work; I had to consider whether the book would appeal to the reviewer in the *New Zealand Herald* or the powerful persons at Unity Books or the directors of literary festivals. I had to think about the market. It was not my first thought: we did reject manuscripts with obvious market appeal if we were not happy about their quality; and I was clear AUP poetry should include some more experimental and adventurous work even if it asked more of the reader. But it came a close second.

I have been thinking about the market for poetry for 21 years. I believe that the disappointing market for books of poetry is in fact a self-fulfilling myth encouraged by booksellers and mediocre schoolteachers. As we know something happened in the first half of the twentieth century to frighten readers and that intimidation has cast a long shadow. I did my best in a small way to fight against it. First I knew that finding pleasure in word play, riddles, puns, aphorism, and patterns of verbal sound, rhythm, rhyme, alliteration, was a universal human trait. In fact we saw this all around us but it was called advertisements or nursery rhymes or pop songs. Secondly I found the oral character of poetry was a great ally because whenever I read it aloud a sudden light of familiarity and comprehension dawned. I always read selected poems from forthcoming books to the sales reps and hope I did something to break down those preconceptions. Recently I read the sales reps at Macmillan a poem from Jessica Le Bas's new (and first) book *Incognito*. It was about the visit of the Prime Minister to open a new school building. It was made up entirely of thoughts and comments the children might have made. It was witty, familiar and not difficult at all – and they loved it.

The market has steadily improved for fiction in the thirty years I have been in publishing. I think it has also, though less spectacularly, improved for poetry too. This growth owes much to the untiring efforts of Bill Manhire and Gregory O'Brien and a number of other enthusiasts appearing on Radio New Zealand. In recent years the establishment and success of Montana Poetry Day has brought poetry squarely into the mainstream and the New Zealand Electronic Poetry Centre (**nzepc**) reaches out to an international audience. We certainly did everything we could – and here I pay special tribute to Christine O'Brien – to put poetry before the public, to demystify it and to celebrate it. Getting it off the page and into the ears was important and we've run regular poetry readings for new books, sent poets to festivals, cooperated with **nzepc** at gala events and readings. For years I nursed the idea of a poetry festival and eventually ran two, in 1997 and 2002. The first in particular was a huge success with excellent sales and much enthusiasm.

I think it was Roger Horrocks who suggested a CD to capture the first festival, *Seeing Voices*. We also published a stand-alone CD of poems by Lauris Edmond, in the production process when she died. The most successful AUP poetry CDs though were the pair deriving from the

massive recording project initiated by Jan Kemp and appearing in 2006 in *Classic New Zealand Poets in Performance* which was reprinted twice and is followed by another volume this year.

As might well be apparent, I am leading up to that difficult question that confronted me many years ago at my desk in Reeds. Is it true, from my experience at AUP, that poetry does not sell and that publishing it is a guarantee of financial disaster? I have looked at all the poetry titles published in 1988, 1993, and 1998–2005, 64 titles in all, and assessed how successful they had been up to the end of 2006. While the results are not precise, I am confident they give a generally accurate picture. It is extremely interesting.

By way of background, publishing is an entrepreneurial activity in which the publisher backs her judgement against the market. Sometimes the judgement will be wrong but on average the successful entrepreneurial publisher will make a profit rather than a loss or, in the case of a university press, a surplus which will contribute to the press's overheads.

The publishing of poetry has not been a drag on AUP's finances. Rather, of those 64 books 51 paid their way or broke even; in fact the figure is really 52 as one book, *Whetu Moana*, had recently been reprinted and later sold out. This puts paid pretty conclusively to the myth. The successes are usually modest and often they would simply not have occurred without the grants provided by the arts council (The Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council, later Creative New Zealand). Forty of these books were awarded grants to assist publication and this number does not include titles in their second printing which invariably did too. A CNZ grant endorsed our opinion of a book's quality and enabled it to appear. The role that Creative NZ plays in supporting poetry has not received much recognition but without their assistance AUP would have had to close up shop as a publisher of poetry. The entrepreneurial publisher would have been taking too big a risk and the higher retail price then required would have ruled out sufficient market sales.

Another factor in the financial health of poetry publishing has been the falling costs of printing as the industry became more computerised. In doing this analysis I was struck at the fall in unit costs from the late 1980s when they were between \$5 and \$6 to \$2 to \$3 today. AUP also

benefited in sales, though not spectacularly, when a book won a major award as 7 of these titles did.

Of those that failed to contribute a surplus only 4 did so on their first printing; all of these were strong collections by respected poets which I am proud to have published and in two cases there were specific reasons for the disappointing outcome. The remaining 8 contributed to overheads by selling out successfully but did not do so to the same extent on reprinting, a step sometimes an unavoidable consequence of a short-listing in the Montana or New Zealand book awards. Of 12 reprints 4 generously paid their way, 3 of them prizewinners.

Fifty-seven of the titles I studied remain in print in modest quantities so perhaps the print runs, usually 500 or 750, have been slightly too large. On the other hand one could argue that keeping classic titles, as many of these are, in print was appropriate for a university press and older books often get new leases of life at festivals and readings.

The poetry list at AUP was never a strictly corralled area – it overflowed into other types of books. So that interesting collection of interviews with writers edited by Elizabeth Alley and Mark Williams, *In the Same Room*, and the later book of essays on contemporary approaches to New Zealand writing, *Opening the Book*, edited by Williams and Leggott, both included much about poetry. Poets like Alan Loney and Chris Price moved brilliantly if almost imperceptibly from poetry into prose; Anne Kennedy made an easy step from poetic fiction into narrative poetry. Poets brought the great non-fiction writer Martin Edmond to AUP and his work too suggests how permeable the boundaries of poetry in fact are. Gregory O'Brien gave us a wonderful book on art for children which perhaps led to Paula Green's *Flamingo Bendalingo*, a poetic collaboration between the poet and 50 schoolchildren. I must also mention here a long commitment to Maori waiata which began in 1979 when Dennis McEldowney acquired from Reeds *Traditional Songs of the Maori* by Mervyn McLean and Margaret Orbell and reached a climax in the four-volume taonga *Nga Moteatea* (2004–2007) as well as an important book by McLean on Maori music.

I think it is the sense of a literature in the making, inheriting a tradition and creating a new one, that so moved me about working on these books. I never ceased to think it was a privilege to open a new typescript from Ian Wedde or Murray Edmond or Anna Jackson; or to find the first viewing of the finished book a moment of excitement. These poems were now about to take their place among those that had gone before. These were not books that shone for a moment then disappeared like so much you saw in a bookshop; they would be quoted and remembered long after I was dead.⁵

They and the poets who wrote them have given me a complete education. I had a degree in English but I really learned about poetry, its creation, its many modes, its effects, its practice and performance in the last two decades. I discovered how to read and how to listen. I watched the rhythms in a poet's life, the rich late flowering of Curnow and Smithyman, the long silences of Wedde and Stead which were followed by two great books, *The Commonplace Odes* and *Straw into Gold*, the changing styles of Anna Jackson and Kapka Kassabova. I saw new poets emerge and farewelled some great ones.⁶

If as a teenager I was asked what I wanted to do with my life I said I'd like to be a poet – but only a good one. As that did not seem a possibility, the next best option, had I only known, was to be able for twenty years to assist in bringing the work of some of this country's best poets into the public world of readers and listeners. I thank them all.

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¹ Dennis McEldowney, *A Press Achieved: The Emergence of Auckland University Press, 1927–1972*, AUP, 2001, pp. 60–61; AUP file, Smithyman, K, *Flying to Palmerston*.

² I have already written about publishing Allen Curnow in *Journal of New Zealand Literature*, 18/19, 2000/1.

³ In a review of *Great Sporting Moments*, a selection of work from the literary journal *Sport*, Mark Williams, rather to my amusement mentions 'AUP postmodernism' (*Journal of New Zealand Literature*, 24:1, 2006). He is presumably referring to poets like Murray Edmond, Leggott, Loney, Green.

⁴ In my last year I began handing poetry manuscripts over to Anna Hodge who was – and is – a perceptive and sensitive poetry editor.

⁵ In an essay which appeared in *Islands* (June 1981) and also introduced Denis Glover's *Selected Poems*, Allen Curnow wrote, 'Time's verdict on much that we are writing now can only be guessed; there is at least sufficient proof that this book contains poems that were built to last, and isn't this nine-tenths of what poetry is all about?'

⁶ In the period I was at AUP we published 118 books of poetry (including 7 anthologies), the work of 50 poets.