

Dennis Haskell: Bruce Dawe, the Ordinary and Extraordinary Bloke

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Considering literary canons, the English critic Frank Kermode reminds us that “the text is only part of the story; the canon is text plus commentary.”¹ In a way, this statement is a truism, for literary texts and authors find their way into a canon only through commentary. Kermode goes on to claim, “it is by no means the case that canon-formation is invariably the project of a privileged class of priests or academics; the preferences and vogues of lay persons, the force of relatively uninstructed opinion, are often decisive”. It is interesting to speculate on how true this claim is for Australia, where literary history is short, the history of academic study of literature even shorter, where the culture until recently was not known for its attention to literature and the arts, and where so much of the nation's admired literature was written—or in the case of Aboriginal literature, was written down—only recently. Despite the impact (in the academy) of a variety of literary theories over the last twenty years, time remains the great deviser of literary canons; canons are always behind the times, so it is difficult to assure any contemporary author of a place in one. Thoughts of William Hayley, poet-patron of the then unknown William Blake, or of Abraham Cowley, described by Samuel Johnson as “undoubtedly the best”² of the Metaphysical poets, should ensure recognition that no matter how great the impact of any author in her or his own time, their place in the canon can only be provisional.

Bruce Dawe is one Australian poet who holds just such a place, and it is the way in which he is positioned in the canon and the way he sees himself which I want to examine. Poetry is generally considered the most esoteric of the literary genres so that “lay persons” and “relatively uninstructed opinion” rarely get a look in when considering it. I suspect that in Australia the canon—to the extent that one exists—has been formed to a greater extent by academic consensus than in, say, Britain and Europe, which have longer literary traditions. However, Dawe is unique in Australian poetry in that his work has received support from “lay persons”, academics and other practitioners alike. One often suspects that canons are constructed with an eye to balance in the “team”, rather than more purely on judgments of literary quality—there is room for only two opening batsmen, only one wicketkeeper, only one legspinner. Dawe's position on the team is unquestionably that of the “popular” poet: “our foremost living example of the popular poet”³ Chris Wallace-Crabbe wrote in 1979, and the adjective has been applied on many other occasions. Dawe is Australia's third best-selling poet, behind C. J. Dennis and Banjo Paterson; part of the sales are due to Dawe's work frequently being set for school or university study—but only part, and its being chosen for study at these different educational levels says something about the nature of Dawe's work.

The terms in which Dawe has been read are readily discernible in a review of his most recent book, *Mortal Instruments: Poems 1990–1995*, published in the non-literary magazine, *AD 2000*:

*For those readers who switch off at the very thought of “modern poetry”, this collection will come as an eye-opener, since Dawe is not only one of Australia's most distinguished poets—he received the Order of Australia in 1992—but his work is accessible to the average reader. There is a down-to-earth feel and everyday topicality to Dawe's poetry... Mortal Instruments would have particular appeal for upper secondary level students, highlighting as it does poetry's potential for communication, moral statement and even entertainment.*⁴

Dawe is no ineffectual angel flapping his wings before the general reading public in vain. Partly because his poetry is often set on secondary school curriculums, Dawe is the only Australian poet who is frequently

discussed in daily newspapers. In these cases the focus is almost invariably on the poet rather than on his work. Helen Frizell in the *Sydney Morning Herald* of 22 November 1980 described Dawe as “that poet of Middle Australia who does not mind the tag”. This article was prompted by Dawe’s winning the Patrick White Award, as was another in the Brisbane *Courier Mail* three days later in which Dawe was described, because of his clothes and short hair, as looking “more like a salesman than a poet”. Dawe, wrote the journalist Terry O’Connor, “seems the very opposite of artistic”, and quotes Dawe saying: “A poet is a person like any other. He may well be the postman with his whistle, the laborer [sic] leaning on his shovel...the gardener next door”. Thus, the *Newcastle Herald* on 20 November 1991 presented Dawe as “an extraordinary ordinary man” (p.11). The most substantial article of this sort was published by Craig McGregor in the *National Times* on 4 September 1982. McGregor, too, wrote that Dawe “doesn’t look like a poet” and portrayed Dawe as “a very Australian figure, in that traditional A. A. Phillips/Russell [sic] Ward sense of the nobull, egalitarian working man” (p.19). “He once described himself to me”, wrote McGregor, “as ‘an ordinary bloke with a difference’”. McGregor went on, “He is a battler, and he likes battlers”, and favourably comments on Dawe’s use of “Ozspeak”—Australian vernacular.

Newspaper writing can provide a site of commentary where “the privileged class of priests or academics” (so to speak) and “lay persons” meet—a sort of Switzerland of literary criticism. The sharp difference between the discussions of Dawe in newspapers by academics or poets and those by journalists lies in the professionals’ concentration on the work rather than the man. This doesn’t necessarily suggest, though, a sharp barrier between the two groups in the presentation of Dawe. For instance, Kevin Hart noted in 1979 that many of Dawe’s poems “reach a public who, otherwise, would not read a poem from one year’s end to the next.”⁵ In a forceful phrasing of poetry’s “potential for communication” and “moral statement” David Headon declares, “His poems simply and eloquently reinforce what’s right in a world of confused moral distinctions and Post-Modernist torpidity”, and like others Headon notes Dawe’s position as “Australia’s most popular poet”.⁶ Under the heading “A door to normality”, Imre Saluszinsky portrays Dawe as “a decent man, a decent poet”, “admirably bullshit-free”, with “an army of admirers”.⁷

Saluszinsky sees Dawe’s great strength as “competency” and implies that the poetry is worthy but a bit dull. Les Murray, noting that “Dawe’s books sell better than almost any other books of verse in Australia”, found the sources of this popularity in Dawe’s “wonderfully modulated command of vernacular language and concerns”, Dawe’s “strong, distinctive voice” and his poetry’s greater openness “to a participatory compassion and acceptance than most recent Australian writing, with its lumpen-mandarin disdain for the common life of Australian people.”⁸ Murray, probably without knowing it, was echoing the views of Geoff Page, who seven years earlier had pursued the most detailed consideration of why Dawe’s poetry actually was popular. Reviewing Dawe’s selected poems, *Condolences of the Season*, Page found Dawe to be “the only Australian poet of any period ever to have developed a convincing personal voice—a voice which is clearly colloquial Australian yet flexible enough to encompass a quite elaborate vocabulary without strain.”⁹ Page, who saw the book as containing many of the best Australian poems of “the past decade”, went on:

But such a technical accomplishment does not alone explain Dawe’s success. What attracts readers, including those who normally have little time for poetry, is Dawe’s treatment of ordinary people. Instead of a forced identification with the masses he creates characters who flower as convincingly in a one-page poem as do many in a full-length novel.

Page—accurately I believe—detected in such portrayals “an attitude towards suburbia...that is a welcome change from the misanthropy of a Patrick White or the bitter (although accurate enough) satire of a Barry Humphries.” Page also detected Dawe’s interest in contemporary politics and his humour as sources of his popularity, as well as of his value—Page’s review is remarkable for the way in which these two things, popularity and value, are seen as inextricably linked, a view followed also by Murray and Headon. For Kevin Hart, Saluszinsky and others, popularity and quality are quite different issues. Hart found in Dawe’s *Sometimes Gladness: Collected Poems 1954–1978* “a tendency to slightness” and “a versification...which now strikes me as slip-shod and toneless”, plus “a disconcerting sentimentality which spoils some of the more ambitious work.” Saluszinsky sees Dawe’s social analyses as demonstrating “Limits at precisely the same point as his style: the limits of normality”, and finds some of the sentimentality which Hart perceives.

Dawe's voice in his poems is very masculine and his work has mostly attracted male critics. One woman who discussed Dawe's work at the same time as Hart and Murray (1979) was Veronica Brady, in the more intellectual pages of *Australian Book Review*. While quite independent, from her standpoint of social concern Brady views the poetry in terms which concur with those of male reviewers. Dawe's poetry is "widely read and not merely by obligation", makes "an impact that is political as well as poetic" and realises "the possibilities of Australian vernacular"¹⁰ better than any other poet. A "sense of stoic acceptance", which we might see as very much part of the bushman-Anzac-battler tradition, and "the sheer honesty of his language" give "his best poems their simple dignity." However, in the end Brady has an ambivalent view of Dawe:

in the long run Dawe's collected poems shows him as in some respects a limited poet. His range is narrow, his language often awkward and his musical ear dubious despite his feeling for the intonations of the vernacular. Yet in the long run he is also one of our most important poets, rescuing poetry from death by inanition in the ivory towers of academe or grubby rooms of Balmain, Fitzroy or North Adelaide.

The terms of these discussions place Dawe as deeply Australian, and part of a low-key, feet on the ground, vernacular culture, which falters when it tries to reach deeper emotional expression. It seems appropriate that Page likens Dawe to "the cartoonist Bruce Petty", for these are the terms of journalism and cartooning. They are not terms which Dawe, in contrast to most poets, would disdain. Behind Australia's substantial tradition in cartooning lies a set of cultural values that include not getting too big for your boots and not taking high art too seriously. Dawe's perceived Australianness is not just a matter of his ear for the vernacular but his empathy with these values. Although poetry has a reputation for being the highest of the literary arts, our contact with sublimity and the transcendent, Dawe's self-proclaimed aesthetics are of the "lowly" variety. In an interview with Bruce Bennett and Brian Dibble in 1979, Dawe said:

I tend to work in terms of characters...I tend to work at an issue through a particular character who's identified negatively or positively with a particular issue...in one sense this is a lot closer to the cartoonist's approach.¹¹

In a talk titled "Monologarhythms" Dawe saw the link between humour and social point, a link manifest in many of his poems, as enticing:

*to see the over-mighty brought low is a time-honoured source of pleasure... I have always enjoyed immensely the political cartoons in our newspapers, and Australian cartoonists have a great tradition going back to the early days of *The Bulletin* [sic]. Of all art-forms, cartooning is the most immediately enjoyable and our cultural icons have given cartoonists as well as others ample opportunity to get stuck into them.¹²*

Dawe has declared, "Every writer is at heart a journalist", which might come as a shock to many poets, except that Dawe here defines a journalist as "a literary vacuum cleaner ready to scoff up any likely word, phrase, expression, look, action, situation or experience".¹³ The more obvious meaning was apparent when Dawe told me in conversation, "I think I'm a journalist manqué".¹⁴ Dawe went on to say, "I'd rather have six poems over six years in a newspaper than six poems in an issue of *Scripts*", a point also made in notes Dawe prepared:

*I don't have a snob aesthetic about this or that place of publication—I publish my own work in such things as newspapers, local naturalist [?] newsletters, even *Retail News*—and I dream of the day when poems will be printed on paper bags!¹⁵*

Many of Dawe's attitudes are subversive of the "drunk the milk of Paradise" view of poetry and the poet which has prevailed since the Romantics. In notes for a lecture to the Speech and Drama Association at Brisbane Community Arts Centre in September 1984 Dawe wrote:

Poetry shd [sic] have stall in general market-place—not a special boutique/sex shop/clinic with a secret address/password.¹⁶

At the 1995 Canberra Wordfest Dawe described himself as “a simple bloke at heart”,¹⁷ and a few days before was quoted as saying, “I don’t see myself as having a very complex philosophical approach to things... Perhaps that keeps me down to where most people live.”¹⁸

Dawe’s emphasis is on the ordinariness of his thought, his subject matter and of his treatment of it. Where William Blake might have proclaimed that when the sun rose he saw “an Innumerable company of the Heavenly host crying ‘Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty’”, Dawe, good Christian though he is, would see “a round disk of fire somewhat like a Guinea”.¹⁹ In a largely unpoetic culture he is acceptable on the team because he is the most unlikely poet, with roots in the unpoetic. Les Murray has consistently accused the Australian literary intelligentsia of “urgently mandarin”²⁰ snobbery. Dawe is one writer in the Australian canon who provides a counter to Patrick White and Hal Porter, respecting the ordinary and thereby giving voice to a major form of Australianness. Unpoetically, he has also expressed in person that respect for ordinary, often suburban Australians which reviewers have found in his work. In a letter to a student in 1989 Dawe commented that in the poem “Homo Suburbensis”, “all I’m saying...is that suburban people are to be respected for their love of natural things like people anywhere, and *not* categorized like [sic] the song ‘Little Boxes’ attempts to simplistically categorize them.”²¹ One of his poems is titled “To a Suburbia-Baiting Poet” and begins: “People live in those houses. I know. I’ve seen them/walk steadily up the drawbridges of light/in the evening”. In a *Southerly* “Australian Poets in Profile” Dawe declared, “To celebrate the commonplace without merely rephrasing existing stereotypes is I believe, a viable role for the poet”,²² and in a 1984 letter to a teacher and his students Dawe stressed that he had tried “to write in praise of those we call ‘battlers’—who have to live lonely, neglected lives without giving in”.²³ Chris Wallace-Crabbe writes that Dawe’s poems “seek out the little man, the victim, the one whom life throws away.”²⁴ This is not representation of the ordinary for sociological reasons, but for the avoidance of snobbery and for hidden richness. “It never does,” Dawe once declared, “to underestimate the potentialities of human nature.”²⁵

Dawe has even emphasised the unromantic nature of his writing habits: “I write/study/read on the front verandah area or at the dining-room table. I’d find a study too oppressive, too demanding...I’ve never kept any journal or notebook and only recently started to keep rough drafts.”²⁶ Dawe sees himself as a poet of commonsense—and once claimed, “A great part of creativity is commonsense, and Romantics are notoriously non-sensical”.²⁷ Nothing brings out his anger more than the notion of poetic inspiration. In the *Australian* on 22 April 1980 Dawe said, “They say Herman Goering used to reach for his revolver whenever he heard the word culture and I react the same way to the word inspiration”, a point reiterated in 1995: “I want to set an M16 to work when somebody talks inspiration. I don’t have inspirations. I just write out of concerns.”²⁸ Dawe has contempt for the idea that “down comes the divine Muse and taps you on the shoulder or boots you in the bum or something, and the next thing you know you’re scribbling like mad.”²⁹

Dawe has sometimes suffered from having “that special gift sometimes scorned in intellectual circles—the gift of being popular”³⁰, and critical evaluations range from Kevin Hart’s charge of slightness to Les Murray’s assertion that Dawe “is surely one of the best three or four poets we have had in this country”. Nevertheless, there is substantial agreement between Dawe and his critics about how he should be positioned in the Australian literary tradition: Dawe is a social and community poet of great integrity and firm sense of purpose; he can be scathingly critical but is never merely cynical; his combination of humility and self-assuredness makes him a forceful critic but never an ideologue; he is often funny and at base celebrates commonplace elements in the lives or ordinary people; his is a compassionate, masculine voice that marvellously employs Australian vernacular. Do these attributes sound familiar? Dawe has been positioned, and has positioned himself, in the Australian canon—such as it is—as a modern, suburban Henry Lawson, right down to the “feminine” sensitivity in the bloke’s voice.³¹ Dawe has said, “the more I read Lawson... the more I found myself identifying with him, because I can understand a lot of his positions, they seem to me very familiar ones”.³² Lawson is now thought of as a great short story writer and a versifier rather than as a poet of note. Dawe regards “the distinction between ‘verse’ and ‘poetry’” as “inherently false”³³, unhesitatingly puts “living before art”³⁴ and has remarked:

*If someone, with the sort of foreknowledge that people sometimes have, told me that I was never again going to write anything of significance, just minor poems that were enjoyable, I would not be worried. I have no compulsion to produce work that is marked out for the A category, the top basket, or the chief sub-editor.*³⁵

This positions Dawe as receiving what he has called “the poisoned chalice of the Ocker tradition”.³⁶ The terms in which Dawe has been seen have not varied over time so that I have been able to draw on critics' comments without having to follow a chronology of development.

All this presents a truth about Dawe but not the whole truth. It is true inasmuch as Dawe is a political poet, social satirist and humorist, a “public Poet”, as Dawe's friend Philip Martin labelled him in 1966.³⁷ However, it ignores the deeper emotional and imaginative elements in Dawe's work; it does not account for Dawe the elegist and Dawe the lyricist, working with elements beyond his full comprehension; it does not cover those occasions in his poems when imagery acts to embody meaning rather than illustrate it. Critics have paid little attention to this aspect of Dawe's work, although Geoff Page does refer to “his undoubted lyric strength”, while John M. Wright claims a “lyrical utterance” that is “buoyantly, even aggressively assertive...in Bruce Dawe's poetry”,³⁸ and Mark MacLeod contradictorily asserts that “the language underlying Dawe's poems and to which they keep returning is the language of silence: a silence of despair, compassion, the unknown”.³⁹ Dawe himself never speaks in such terms at all. These quoted comments at least point to a dimension in Dawe's poems beyond the readily known. Lines such as the following hardly seem to come from the canonised Dawe:

*The younger ones listen to the darkness
and grow very still as a sound
come softly over the tussocks where the dew
creeps like an insect on the bent stems.
(“Country Lamplight”)*

*The In-between reverberates, a sea
whose echoing immensity's a voice
half-heard, half-answered when, distracted, we
attempt to make necessity a choice
(“Distances”)⁴⁰*

Satire generally involves a conception of language which sees the world as readily nameable, but lines such as these reach out to a sense of the world which cannot be named but only, at best, reverberate in between the words. It is surprising to find how much such writing is to be found in Dawe's poetry; “Easy Does It”, “Country Lamplight” and “Distances” all present this type of poetic language. 116s or not, readers might well feel the impulse to weave a circle thrice around the author of these lines. They suggest that Dawe is a more varied and more mysterious poet than he has been seen to be or than he has seen himself to be. The crucial point in the “ordinary bloke with a difference” may well turn out to be “How big a difference?”

Outside educational institutions canonisation enables a writer to be read: it helps ensure that her or his books will be in the shops and libraries and will be noticed. Within educational institutions canonisation helps determine how the writer's work will be read, and in the case of a poet, which poems will be noticed and which discarded. In Dawe's case, of the type of poem I have been describing, only “Elegy for Drowned Children” has found its place in the canon. Attention has predominantly gone to satires such as “Enter Without So Much as Knocking”, “The Not-so-good Earth” and “Life-cycle”. The majority of Dawe's poems are in the latter vein, but time, the ultimate creator of canons, is a great winnower, with no care for majorities or minorities, and it would not surprise me if Dawe were ultimately remembered for quite different poems to those on which his present reputation has been established.

1. *An Appetite for Poetry: Essays in Literary Interpretation* (London: Collins, 1989), p.17.

2. Samuel Johnson, “The Lives of the Poets—Cowley”, in Bertrand H. Bronson (ed.), *“Rasselas” Poems and Selected Prose* (3rd edn, San Francisco: Rinehart Press, 1971), p.360.

3. "Bruce Dawe's Inventiveness", *Toil & Spin: Two Directions in Modern Poetry* (Melbourne: Hutchinson, 1979), p.62.
4. Michael Gilchrist, *AD 2000*, September 1995, p.17.
5. *Canberra Times*, 6 January 1979, p.15.
6. "The champion of the soldiers of conscience", *Canberra Times*, 9 March 1990; Australian Defence Forces Academy Library, Box 4, Folder 18.
7. *Weekend Australian*, 2-3 March 1991, p.5.
8. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 February 1979, p.19.
9. *Canberra Times*, 25 March 1972, p.12.
10. *Australian Book Review*, 11 (June 1979), p.19.
11. "An Interview with Bruce Dawe", *Westerly*, 24, 4 (December 1979), p.63.
12. Unpublished typescript, Dawe archive, Australian Defence Forces Academy Library, Box 3.
13. "Poet Dawe Explains More", in Ken Goodwin (ed.), *Essays and Opinions* (Melbourne: Longman Cheshire, 1990), p.39.
14. Conversation at University of Southern Queensland, Toowoomba, 24 April 1995.
15. Dawe Archive, Australian Defence Forces Academy Library, Box 1, Folder 7.
16. Fryer Library, University of Queensland, Box 12.
17. Australian National University, 25 March 1995.
18. *Daily Telegraph Mirror*, 21 March 1995, p.35.
19. William Blake, "A Vision of the Last Judgment", pp.92–95, in Geoffrey Keynes (ed.), *Complete Writings* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974).
20. *Persistence in Folly* (Sydney: Sirius, 1984), p.167. Murray has expressed this view in many of his essays and interviews since the 1970s.
21. Letter to Cameron Dowe, Fryer Library, University of Queensland, Box 8.
22. *Southerly*, 39, 3 (1979), p.240.
23. Letter to John and students, 23 February 1984, Fryer Library, University of Queensland, Box 8.
24. *Toil & Spin*, p.67.
25. Ms. of "Other People's Lives", Fryer Library, University of Queensland, Box 12; pub. *The Johnian*, 3, 1, 1984/85, pp.4–7.
26. "Habits of Imperfection", Australian Defence Forces Academy Library, Folder 8; published *OzMuse* 1991.
27. *Essays and Opinions*, p.46.
28. *Daily Telegraph Mirror*, 21 March 1995, p.35.
29. *Ondit* (Adelaide campus newspaper), 11 April 1983.
30. Introduction for Tom Keneally, Toowoomba 9 November 1993, Australian Defence Forces Academy Library, Unvalued Material, consignment 16, received 25 November 1994.
31. For discussion of the "female" aspect of Lawson, see Chris Lee, "Looking for Mr Backbone: The Politics of Gender in the Work of Henry Lawson", in Ken Stewart (ed.), *The 1890s: Australian Literature and Literary Culture* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1996), pp.95–108.
32. "Bruce Dawe: An Interview", *Essays and Opinions*, p.147.

33. *Southerly*, 39, 3, (1979), p.239.
34. *Australian*, 8 August 1964, p.16.
35. Paul Kavanagh and Peter Kuch (eds.), *Conversations: Interviews with Australian Writers*, (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1991), p.40.
36. "Teaching Poetry: The Fearful Art?", Australian Defence Forces Academy Library, Unvalued Material, consignments 15 & 17, received 18 January 1995.
37. "Public Yet Personal: Bruce Dawe's Poetry", *Meanjin*, 25, 3 (Spring 1966), p.290.
38. "Lyricism in Contemporary Australian Poetry", *Westerly*, 19, 4 (December 1974), p.35.
39. "Bruce Dawe and the Americans", *Australian Literary Studies*, 9, 2 (October 1979), p.152.
40. *Westerly*, Spring 1995, p.79. [sic—no final stop.]

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