

BRUCE BENNETT and BRIAN DIBBLE: An Interview with Bruce Dawe

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BENNETT: Your work is often referred to when people talk about satire in Australia. Can you comment on the way you go about writing satire? What are the most important targets for a satirist in Australia?

DAWE: Because I tend to work in terms of characters anyway, the most important targets tend to be characters. More often I tend to work at an issue through a particular character who's identified negatively or positively with a particular issue. So, in one sense, this is a lot closer to the cartoonist's approach which is, with some necessary simplification, to identify (say) the Premier of Queensland with certain attitudes, a certain style of politics, and then to tackle him. It's a two-edged sword. I always keep in mind the fact that one of the things that it might well be is simply an image-builder. But I don't think poetry is an image-builder for people in the way that general media exposure is. The thing may publicize aspects of character but I think that what a satirist should be doing is showing, generally speaking, the complexity of an issue but also some particular side that he comes down on, some general abuse that may extend much wider than any particular character.

BENNETT: That would apply then to a "A Victorian Hangman Tells his Love," which was related to the Ryan hanging in 1967 but in which you built up a dramatic monologue of a hangman speaking, which created, in a sense, the general issue. Is that the point you're making?

DAWE: Yes, that's right. And even in the hangman poem, if one takes it slowly, it couldn't be said that I was really attacking the hangman, but was seeing him as a victim of the State policy just as much as the more obvious victim, the person being hanged.

BENNETT: In that case you seem to be particularly interested in the language of deception, of bureaucracy and of State officialdom. You seem to be enjoying, in the process, the language that you're satirizing. Is that right?

DAWE: Yes, I think so. In that one in particular I think I had in mind the way in which even those who are bureaucratic (and the word isn't necessarily a derogatory word, though it's often used that way) themselves may only be the expressions of bureaucracy. The people typified may be themselves caught in something much larger than they can handle. They themselves don't know the answer to the problem but are merely acting out certain roles as in fact a hangman is. One is not really indicting the hangman per se at all. One is indicting a general philosophy. That may be why the bureaucracy is merely the instrument of putting into effect that philosophy.

BENNETT: I'd like to turn now to another well-known poem of yours which has been anthologized often, "Life-Cycle". Students are inclined to talk about the comparison you make between the language of football and the language of religion. It's one of the devices you're using to show up the ironic discrepancy between those two worlds. Being a West Australian, I see some Melbourne league football on T.V. and understand something of the religious fervour associated with it. But people have said to me, he (Bruce Dawe) seems very much to sympathise with, even to enjoy, the target that he's attacking there. How would you respond to that?

DAWE: Well, I'd respond by agreeing whole-heartedly. In fact I can remember a critic - in Westerly, if I'm not wrong - at one time saying that this was a savage attack on Australian Rules football. It's nothing of the kind of course, and most West Australians who have any football know-how at all would understand that. Anyone with sympathy for language would know that there's far too much support going on there for

that to be true. (In fact the original version of certain lines in this poem made it clear. I spoke in some of the latter stanzas about the footballers or the players preferring "the baulk and blind turn/Out of trouble" to "the tricky bounce of involvement", or words to that effect, which is coming far too close to home.) You'll note that in the *Sometimes Gladness* collection I placed it (some people must surely find this rather grotesque) in the section that has social and political issues. But I placed it there because it seems to be connected to those same blindnesses that one sees in the bureaucracies and those who work through them and can get away with it. Those things are facilitated by the sort of bread-and-circus involvement of too many Australians in what is a simpler ritual and a much more meaningful one than the political one. Of course I've no doubt at all which is the more important.

DIBBLE: The hangman poem reminds me to ask about another one of yours, the poem "To Lt. Calley". If I remember correctly, the last lines are: "Others must forget whatever it is they do - / you can't afford to, you poor bastard, you." "Poor bastard you" can be slightly ambiguous in the sense that the bloke can be a right bastard and you can down him for that, or he can be a sad bastard which is another form. Am I right in singling out the two functional ambiguities there?

DAWE: Yes. The poem itself is fairly savage and, it could be argued, at least at the beginning of the poem, that there doesn't seem to be much sympathy at all for Calley himself. But I was aiming at suggesting that in one sense he's the victim, and anybody who has followed through any of the accounts of his precipitation, his own unhappy life (I hesitate to use terms like "low achiever", but it has been used before of him) will understand that his own problems in fact made this a last resort. One could have predicted that out of the many people who may be in that category, who find themselves in an unpopular war, in a war for which they're psychologically unprepared, some would find it too much to take. In fact, many regular soldiers would be ill-prepared for it, let alone people who have joined the services as a way of building up their status after a series of pretty severe setbacks. So he himself, I think, is very much a victim of his background. Of course that particular war was a very pernicious tester of people with poor backgrounds.

DIBBLE: Good. Can I take that further then and relate it to Bruce's previous question? If I remember the poem correctly, we might conclude that Calley was made to be right for that form of activity in that kind of war and subsequently probably would be lionized or forgiven (either one, it doesn't matter) for his activity there. That recalls, it seems to me, the question Bruce asked about the bureaucracy. If you take it as far as that, are not we in fact the bureaucracy? It is only us in the sense of our elected officials?

DAWE: Well, yes. In what we do we certainly are a part of the bureaucracy. The thing is, insofar as we are an un-self-critical bureaucracy, we make the direction of the bureaucracy all the more objectionable. Insofar as we are self-critical about the things that we are involved in we are in a position to control those bureaucratic directions. You know, there's always those who say "nobody should be a knocker" (you know, those who say it now, for example) and various important people in the community say, "this isn't the time to be knocking, it's a time to be all working together". Well, personally I think that's a load of bullshit. There is no time when criticism isn't valuable. In fact I've argued that many times. I hope in one sense the poetry argues that in another form. By being critical one is paying the ultimate compliment. That is, you think there is some chance that the criticism will have some effect, otherwise you wouldn't be uttering it. You believe that you have the right to do this. Since I haven't personally been persecuted, I believe that right is implicit in being able to go on doing it. But even if I was persecuted, I'd still go on doing it. In putting books together. I've never worried about whether, since (to take a nitty gritty question) there is such a thing as textbook sales, that I shouldn't put this or that poem in because it may offend some part of the bureaucracy. That's the chance I have to take. I don't believe I should temper the wind to that particular shorn lamb.

BENNETT: To take another direction Bruce, do you see yourself as a sexist writer?

DAWE: Could you define the term?

BENNETT: I was thinking of a poem like "Condolences of the Season" in which the father and the boy have a kind of winking alliance against the cosmogony of mums'. I was wondering if you see Australians as basically praising male superiority- a masculinity hang-up. Do you see that as something that's worth attacking in Australia? Or do you usually take the male point of view on these issues?

DAWE: That's rather easily answered, Bruce: I usually take the male point of view. You know, it's not really out of any denigration of the importance of the other half (slightly more, I think) of the human race, but rather that, despite my scanty locks and few (cough, cough!)... I still really don't understand them: I wouldn't presume to put myself in their skin as it were (though I suppose that could be taken as a sexist statement itself). You know, I'm a family man; and even before I had my own family, or was part of a family, I always believed in the value of a family. I knew what it was not to have a coherent family. I'm still involved in the process of finding out whether I've got one myself or whether I'm part of one myself. Certainly most of my comments on women are in the family setting and it's women as part of the family (aside from the odd sort of romantic poem which, you know, is a different kettle of fish).

BENNETT: During the Perth Poetry Festival (February 1979), there was a certain amount of what one of my friends calls "acca-bashing" going on: attitudes to university academics have been expressed which suggest that they're very negatively inclined towards the creative writer. You have made a number of statements which support the universities. Would you want to enlarge on those?

DAWE: Well, perhaps it may have something to do with the way in which I first experienced universities. I haven't hidden the fact that it may be a very partisan view still manifesting itself. The people at universities were very helpful to me, very magnanimously so; more so, I would suggest, than the run of their compatriots outside universities would have been. I think that sort of general help has always been there. I'm not denying, from my own experience as a student, that universities have still a long way to go. I realize the chances of getting there are reduced by the tendency to see them as luxury items, items which are only turning out yes-men and not people informed with any critical views. But I don't know that academy-bashing is going to do anything except delight the heart of that breed of bureaucrat who's really very close at the moment breathing down their neck and sharpening his knife. So, you know, I think that's a very wasteful and short-sighted view. I think if one takes the role of the universities (which is one role they still sometimes in an insufficient way perform) of bringing the past into the present, then on that basis alone, if they never taught any modern literature or any Australian literature, I would still defend their role to teach us what literature there was in the past. That would be a very salutary activity in itself to us in the present, since we are part of the past; we carry that around with us, whether we like it or not, in the present.

BENNETT: But you think that the teaching of Australian literature in universities is important?

DAWE: I certainly do! But I can understand why, for example, some academics may find it rather difficult, since they themselves are part of Australian literature, to put forward that view without appearing to be partisan. For example, it's easy enough to point to leading academics who are also leading poets (we'll say) and ask why the hell haven't those universities got more Australian Literature courses than they have? I suspect one of the reasons why they don't lay heavily into Australian Literature courses themselves is because they'd be wide open to charges of setting their own texts.

DIBBLE: There was one poem, Bruce, in which you talk about teaching. You teach students how to do this and you teach students how to do that, and so on. They're non-human things that you're teaching them. It concludes by saying that then you have to teach "Dogs, to bark again; lions to roar..." You teach them in the beginning, I suppose, how to get out of themselves and how to experience other things; and in the end you help them to learn how to be themselves. Can you elaborate on that in the context of what Bruce just asked?

DAWE: Well, taking the poem "Teaching the Syllabus" first, I must point out that the poem was written before I took on tertiary teaching. So it's an expression really of the secondary syllabus as it then was and the constraints built into that. Now those constraints are of course nowhere near as obvious in tertiary teaching. I had to teach what was there - I couldn't, for example, construct courses on my own. You had to teach one of this, one of that, and so on. Now those constraints no longer apply, but for those who do find themselves constrained by very much an imposed syllabus, that's really what the poem is arguing: there is a kind of paradox because any syllabus is meant to be, amongst other things, a source of personal development. Of course one of the paradoxes is that in the very process of so-called self-development those who are being developed may in fact lose all ability to react spontaneously or to be able to go on and develop themselves at some later stage. They may be so stifled by close-shepherding that they never really break out into the open pasture and know what it is to be fully alive in the particular discipline or particular areas of interest in literature or anything else.

DIBBLE: Can we turn the implications of those past few things you were saying back on yourself and ask if you find conflicts among the various selves whom you must be? You're a poet, you're a family man, a teacher of literature, a student of literature, and so on. I'm interested to know where, in the various possible positions or hierarchies of positions, that you finally locate Bruce Dawe.

DAWE: Well, first of all, I do agree that there are conflicts implied. But I suggest that these are only corollaries of conflicts which most people find anyway. For example, the conflict between somebody who has a particular work situation, a particular home situation and a particular study situation are very common ones which in one sense put me in no more or no less a difficult situation than the rest of the human race (or a great number of them). Those who have a work situation, for example, those who have a family situation everybody comes from one (or most people do). The teaching situation: I think it is probably the one that creates the most obvious additional tension and difficulty by the very fact of... I'm not myself one of those people who've ever evolved a philosophy of poetry or any systematic philosophy of life...

BENNETT: Nevertheless, you do appear to have firm convictions on a range of issues, social and political, as well as personal. For example, in regard to the present civil liberties campaign in Queensland, as reflected in such poems as "The Privilege", "News from Judaea", "Open Invitation", and "Over the River". You have been arrested and spent the night in jail for leading an illegal march in Toowoomba, haven't you?

DAWE: Yes, but that is only par for the course. Several thousand have been arrested in Queensland since September, 1977, and spent longer periods in a much nastier jail, in the same cause, and many more no doubt will be before the issue is resolved. There are some things that even conservatives like myself cannot stand by and merely observe: suppression of traditional freedoms is one of those things.

BENNETT: Wouldn't you call what you are doing a form of radical activity?

DAWE: Not in Queensland. It's just that one bunch of conservatives (those dominating Government policy-making) have moved so far to the right on a whole range of issues as to make normal conservatives appear radical by comparison.

DIBBLE: Do you think you will ever feel like leaving Queensland if the present trend continues?

DAWE: Not really. I share the common Australian taste for the ratbag, and Queensland political life is at present extremely rich in this particular animal, at times in dangerous proportions. In an odd sort of way, it is a "privilege" to live in this state now: like sitting ringside at the circus. The disadvantage of ringside seats are of course obvious, too: tigers with toothache, elephants with the "trots"...

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