

**Book Review: Victor Daley: a Life, by Frank Molloy**

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**Frank Molloy, *Victor Daley: A Life*. Sydney: Crossing Press, 2004,  
181 pp.  
AU\$24.00  
ISBN: not yet available**

Frank Kermode, always one for a profound truth disguised as plain common sense, suggested in a 2001 lecture that canonical texts remain canonical because they give people pleasure (15). One of the many excellent things about Frank Molloy's "life" of Victor Daley, the Irish-Australian "bohemian" poet of the late nineteenth century, is the force and clarity with which it focuses on this simple fact: that Daley's poetry—and especially his lyric poetry—once gave Australian readers enormous pleasure. This was true for people of his own generation, and it continued to be true for at least one more generation of readers as well. We know it for a fact because many people said so (not just at his funeral), often with enough specificity to convey the *kind* of pleasure his poems gave them, and even which poems. It was only in the 1930s that his reputation as Australia's best lyric poet started to succumb to depreciation by H. M. Green, Douglas Stewart and Vincent Buckley, and to be displaced by the likes of Shaw Neilson and Judith Wright.

Victor Daley (1858–1905) is best known to recent generations of Australian literature students by the handful of poems anthologised in turn by Leon Cantrell, Rodney Hall, Philip Neilsen and Chris Lee, satiric attacks on the arrogance of the rich, the pomposity of Empire, and the absurdity of its colonial hangers-on. Most of these poems—"Correggio Jones" and "A Treat for the London Poor," for example—were first published in newspapers and magazines under Daley's Gaelic pen-name "Creeve Roe" and not collected until the 1940s by Muir Holburn and Marjorie Pizer. They still work magnificently. Comparable with the radical poems of his younger contemporary at the *Bulletin*, Henry Lawson, they are angrier, cleverer and funnier than Lawson's. (For years I paraded the last stanza of "A Treat for the London Poor" before students as the best and funniest piece of anti-imperialist satire around.)

But Daley was celebrated in his own lifetime as a poet of the lyric, and he himself, on Molloy's evidence, valued his topical satires less highly—and tossed them off more easily—than the richly pictorial and "pathetic" poems that he laboured over at length, and which found their way (at least the shorter ones) into the pre-War anthologies of Serle, Murdoch and the Mackanesses. One of the few survivors into the post-War anthologies (significantly, no doubt, a "meta-lyric," but still a very beautiful set of words) was "Dreams," a modified *villanelle*, of which this is the first stanza:

I have been dreaming all a summer day  
 Of rare and dainty poems I would write;  
 Love-lyrics delicate as lilac-scent,  
 Soft idylls woven of wind, and flower, and stream,  
 And songs and sonnets carven in fine gold. (Serle 96)

Sensuous richness of this kind, language drenched in colour and music, reached its high point in Daley's long dreamlike poem "A Sunset Fantasy," first published by the *Bulletin* in January 1888. His other long poem for the year, "The Old Wife and the New," published two months earlier, did for his readers' emotions what "A Sunset Fantasy" did for their senses: it orchestrated and intensified them almost beyond endurance. The poem is a pathetic reminiscence in which an old pioneer remembers and mourns the wife, now long dead, with whom he shared his early struggles, even as he watches, with love, the young wife who is sharing his declining years (and who knows what he's thinking and feeling). J. F. Archibald said of his reaction to the first poem, "I walked on, or rather flew through air, as if I had imbibed ounces of ether." Randolph Bedford "bowed down and worshipped"; Zora Cross was spellbound. Reactions to the second poem were equally rhapsodic: "Is there anything more melodious in the language?" (Ina Wildman); "Daley in his finest mood writing to a million hearts" (Will Ogilvie). Both poems were great favourites with professional reciters in Australia and New Zealand (Molloy 66).

One of the useful things about good literary biographies is that they naturally tend to treat the phases of a writer's life-work as complex moments in their own right, configuring inheritance and aspiration, production and reception, self and society, in a series of changing but connected ways. Molloy's book exploits that capacity of the genre very effectively, and is able to do so partly because his "life" of Daley rests on an unusually solid bibliographic foundation; he has previously published, with Mulini Press, a comprehensive bibliography of Daley's large and scattered *oeuvre*. One welcome effect of this is his generous quotation and citation of Daley's poems—generous but remarkably unobtrusive: ninety poems are referenced in the index, but the text certainly doesn't read like a series of commentaries. When Molloy pauses to comment on specific poems he makes it count; and the narrative is organised, appropriately, not by the poetry alone—for Daley's serious Muse absconded with alarming frequency, staying away on one occasion for nearly ten years—but also by his journalistic writing and by the succession of social and institutional milieux of which that writing was a part.

Born James Daley ("Victor" was added much later) near Armagh in the north of Ireland, he moved to England with his family, then returned to Ireland, then back again to Plymouth for clerical work. From there, at the age of twenty, he took passage to Australia. Here he resumed the peripatetic life, moving from Syd-

ney to Adelaide (where he published his first poem), thence to Melbourne (where he got his first reporting job, on the *Carlton Advertiser*), to Queanbeyan (where he bought and edited a local newspaper), and back to Sydney, where he began to get regular freelance work, first with the Irish Catholic newspaper *The Freeman's Journal*, then with Archibald's newly-established *Bulletin*. A few years later he moved back to Melbourne where he contributed articles, and some poems, to *Table Talk* and the Melbourne *Punch*, then back yet again to Sydney, to the *Bulletin* and the *Lone Hand*.

Daley's wandering existence was only in part a function of itchy feet. More important was a constant need for employment, of a kind he could tolerate—and that meant journalism. By the end of the 1880s he had a wife and two children, with two more to come in the next few years—a substantial financial commitment. He also had a serious drinking problem and was in the early stages of the consumptive illness which would eventually take him off at the age of 47.

All of this sounds familiarly Bohemian. In fact, the classic Bohemian models—modified, as Molloy points out, by the misogyny of the native culture—were deeply formative of Daley's attitudes and lifestyle. He had imbibed Henri Murger's Parisian version of "la vie bohémienne," and was inducted into its Sydney variant in the early 1880s by Harold Grey (Theodore Emile Argles), an older *Bulletin* writer with an authentic French connection, a taste for absinthe, a pink suit, and a suppressed wife at home. The "Bohemians of the *Bulletin*," as Norman Lindsay later called them, were rather more interested in colonial politics than their more "Aesthete" French counterparts, and Grey's facility for clever topical verse satire was the equal of Daley's. The pair of them collaborated brilliantly on the *Bulletin*'s "Pepper and Salt" column in its early years.

Bohemianism is a strangely persistent element in Australia's cultural history, and anyone attempting a biography of a writer or artist, especially male and Sydney-based, between the 1880s and the 1950s, is likely to find that their subject lived in some conscious relation to it, which calls for analysis. But writing about Bohemianism successfully—by which I mean both "responsibly," and also "comfortably" for all concerned—is quite difficult in the current climate, and I think Molloy manages it pretty well. The problem is partly political: one wants to acknowledge the genuinely emancipatory force of Bohemian ideals and refusals within particular historical conjunctures (attacks on "philistinism," for example, look different in the 1880s and the 1950s), while at the same time registering (again, in historically differentiated ways) the deeply reactionary political and ideological elements in many Bohemian cultures, for example in relation to women, marriage and sexuality.

What this often comes down to, for biography, is a problem of stance. How do biographers situate themselves *vis-à-vis* their often boozy, feckless and misogynous subjects? Do they go along for the full Bohemian ride, in the interests of maintaining an unbroken empathy with the subject, but at the cost of an ethically and politically impoverished understanding of the larger phenomenon? Do they withdraw themselves to a safe distance and pronounce pious anathemas in the hope that the reader's interest in the subject will survive, even if empathy is lost? Do they adopt a tone of wry tolerance, placing an ironic space between biographer and subject, and merely attenuating rather than severing completely, the bond of sympathetic identification? Or do they simply remain neutral (a stance which is, for all practical purposes, impossible)?

Molloy's rendering of Daley's Bohemian lifestyle is mainly a mix of the first and third stances, but it sometimes veers closer to the second stance than, say, Peter Kirkpatrick tends to do in his studies of Sydney's café Bohemia in the 1920s. There are moments when Molloy tells us, in no uncertain terms, that he disapproves of Daley's cavalier and thoughtless treatment of his wife and family, of some of his friends, and of his own health. But there is a particular appropriateness about those occasional moments of judgment, because they express not so much the biographer's disapproval as the subject's own. Molloy has taken his cue for analysis and censure from Daley's own explicit dramatisation of his life as an ongoing conflict between "Victor," the free spirit and poet with an assumed name, and "Jim," the former accountant's clerk and family man with a mortgage and the name he was born with. To make the point more generally, Daley wrote enough passages of autobiographical introspection and self-recrimination to provide Molloy with a framework for psychological analysis that carries conviction because, while it may be more elaborated and contextualised than Daley's own reflections, it extends and organises them, rather than constructing or importing a transcendent theoretical framework.

Molloy's decision to examine Victor Daley very much in Victor Daley's own terms offers some real purchase on a puzzle that comes to the fore in Norman Lindsay's *Bohemians of the Bulletin*, where Daley, the epitome of the free spirit, is paradoxically remembered for his prudish respectability (Lindsay 45). It also helps to illuminate the question of Daley's "Irishness." The book opens with a passage of delightfully vague Celtic atmospheric details Daley sent to A. G. Stephens in 1898 in response to a request for some biographical details. It may have been the first time Daley ever really thought about his Irishness. Before that time, as Molloy's excellent chapter on "Daley and the Celtic Movement" shows, he knew very little about Irish cultural traditions. He never took any interest in Irish politics or visiting politicians, being a thoroughgoing assimilationist who "resisted any en-

closure in an Irish or Irish-Australian enclave" (124). But during the last few years of his life he rapidly developed an interest in the Celtic Revival, and contemporaries such as E. J. Brady and Roderic Quinn celebrated his exemplary Irishness, even rereading much of the earlier (mainly "Swinburnian") verse as thoroughly Celtic in spirit—as perhaps, in a sense, it was.

At just over 150 pages of text, this is a short biography, but it is consistently readable, richly illustrated and meticulously documented. Above all, it is a biography that serves a genuine need: Daley was an undeniably major literary figure, widely perceived at the time as the natural successor to Kendall and Brunton Stephens, and—with his *Bulletin* association—something of a "bridge" from them to Lawson and Paterson. Perhaps because, justly or not, most of his poetry has not remained popular, there has been no full biography of him until now, and, as George Mackaness and Walter Stone agreed fifty years ago, one was "long overdue." It is bound to generate further work on a richly talented and interesting figure.

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**Allaine Cerwonka, *Native to the Nation: Disciplining Landscapes and Bodies in Australia*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004, 280 pp.  
 US\$24.95  
 ISBN: 0-8166-4349-0**

The study of spatial practices is an undertaking that draws upon a number of theoretical approaches. In *Native to the Nation*, Allaine Cerwonka certainly surveys her subject area from many directions. She employs the tools of history, geography, sociology, political science, ethnography, post-structuralism and post-colonialism in her analysis of the disciplining of landscapes and bodies in Australia. She shows, through ethnographic accounts of four separate Melbourne "sites," how settler Australians "redefine and legitimate their claim to the land" (5), especially in response