Stephen Oliver's Intercolonial

Puriri Press, 2013
ISBN: 978-0-908943-40-1

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I first met the poet Stephen Oliver when he came with Vicki Viidikas and Robert Adamson to the Sandringham Hotel in what was then the working class south end of King Street Newtown to read their poems. While Robert Adamson seems put off by the rowdy if not hostile audience at the venue, Stephen along with Vicki were intrepid enough to brave reading their poems. I have described this day in a review of a book of Vicki's poems in a previous issue of this journal.

What I didn't talk about then was how Stephen was seemingly oblivious to the audience's negativity and charged into reading his work with a gusto and a fiery voice that soon intimidated the more vociferous "critics" in the audience into a more receptive mood, coming as it seemed to do from the Attic stage of Euripides in the fifth century BC. With his powerful radio-trained voice he demanded attention and received it, he was like a guard for the more vulnerable though no less intrepid Vicki with whom he had a close personal relationship that was clear from the ways they worked together in subsequent Saturday afternoon readings. Stephen would stand on the rickety stage, schooner of beer in one hand, as he chanted and boomed his poetry seemingly without the need of the microphone.

Since those days in the late 1980s I had lost contact with him until I started writing about Vicki's posthumous collected poems. As his image returned to me, I got back in contact with him through our mutual acquaintance, the seemingly ubiquitous Michael Wilding who had first introduced Stephen to me and who, in those times was silently becoming the new doyen of Australian letters after the legendary Jack Lindsay.

That voice of the poet returned to me as I started reading his epic poem *Intercolonial*. I could hear the barrage of images which he would use to confront his audience in the pub as much as his reader in his text as the poem jumps out from the page:

> Tusked cauliflowers and herded carrots, onions in piles,
> tumbled pumpkins, potato scree, boned and stalled in between
> scales that swung and creaked from the cream cabin roof
> of the Indian greengrocer's Bedford truck, his weekly
>
> round by the winding way of Helen and Apuka streets,
> right to the hill top ridge and Brooklyn-*west*, our feudal hearth
> in Karepa Street, perched high over the Wellington basin,
> that bounced off hill quakes about *Te Whanga-Nui-a-Tara.*

The love of physical details matched by the love of the physicality of language and the voice that brings that language to life give the quatrains a power and immediacy fitting for the new epic strain that the rest of this poem will reach for and attain in its grand control of space, time and the things that fill the chronotope. The land and the poet's imagination are on the move as the fault lines of the poem shake into life with the creation of a chaos out of which will emerge the final shapes of the poem. These fault lines mark the two geological plates over which Oliver's poetry moves and from which it gains its power as the poem shifts from the present to the past, from New Zealand to Australia and to Ireland and the northern seas as well as from the distant geological past to the colonial pasts of Australia and New Zealand and the more recent pasts and presents of the two southern lands.

Through this epic dreamscape moves the heroic Thomas McCormack, the poet's ancestor as much as his creation, as he shape shifts in Homeric ways in different parts of the poem as he moves more like Aeneus than Odysseus in the ways he is creating a new world through his adventures, not simply returning to the old world he left behind in an Ithica of the past.

The seeming chaos, more like the Mesopotamian creation myth we know as the *Enuma Elish*, is more in the readers' minds as they are struck by the series of images that can only be formed cogently as the readers immerse

themselves in the poetic experience of reading the poem: life is not a chronologically linear story but a grouping of experiences of things that only make sense when shaped by the poetic vision which Oliver has in abundance.

By the end of the poem, we have a sense of the hereditary links that have been shaping the poem under its surfaces as tectonic plates or sections of the poem are fitted together or collide with each other out of which the narrative is pushed up to the surface…often violently, but always spectacularly and impressively.

Towards the end of the poem, which seems to promise the beginning in a *circuitous vicus* reminiscent of Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* structure, we are given the death of the hero that leads to the birth of the poet-hero. The name and shape changing McCormack is now simply Cormac, not the son of anyone in particular as Oliver echoes in a parodic way the Lord's Prayer:

> Our father *who fell down the porch steps after our father*
> *fell down red concrete steps our father lost his balance liquored*
> *up he was lost his balance and bumped his head our father*
> *did that heaps he did drunken fell and bumped his head now he*
>
> *is dead our father who made our life hell is not in heaven*
> *still maybe falling into the after-nothingness he believed in our*
> *father is still falling for ever and ever our father the bright*
> *young man who who matriculated at fourteen star in the ascendant…*

This nursery rhyme with Sermon the Mount allusions segues into the recounting of Cormac's construction of his world back in the times of the Picts and the Romans. In a Blakean language, the epic ends with the parallel times and places being forged in the poet's mind: "Words sprung from the blade sang in his ears as he stepped".

To read this poem one has to let go of many of one's preconceptions of what modern poetry is and dream of what it may be. The bringing together of the colonies to form a new reality, one that is truly intercolonial, one must sail the stormy seas of the poet's visions and weather the physical and linguistic

earthquakes that shape his world as he brings a new way of seeing the relationships between New Zealand and Australia out of the boring narrative of White Settlements that has sidetracked much critical and creative labor in the past. Only then can a true postcolonial experience emerge that asserts the independence of the still-colonial mind. We need to make our world anew.

By returning to the modernist voices from the Celtic world and the pre-British Maori landscapes and dreamscapes, Oliver has created a new voice in Trans-Tasman literature. It is one that may seem difficult to those of us who want to hear the usual postmodern word games and live in a world bereft of a past that informs the life of our words; but it hopefully is a voice and an achievement that will contribute in major ways to new developments in writing about our world by returning to the values of grand narratives – reconfigured though they will be – that have been held in disrepute in recent times.