

In praise of Bush Poetry

David Campbell has a bee in his bonnet.

He won first prize in the 2005 Victorian Bush Poetry competition, and his poems have been published in magazines and anthologies, so he saw red when Imre Salusinszky, writing in *The Australian*, dismissed the genre as "faux dinkum" verse.

Here is the gist of his reply, also published in *The Australian*, on New Year's Eve:

Pick up any of Australia's literary magazines and you'll find page after page of free verse. You'll discover only a handful of poems that could be described as possible examples of traditional verse: that is,

rhyiming verse with at least a gesture towards regular metre.

It would appear traditional verse, at least in the mainstream literary world, is dead, smothered by a torrent of words that sometimes appear to cascade onto the page in a kind of alphabet soup. In fact, any one can become an instant

free-verse poet using a poetry generator from the internet, for example, try www.jelks.nu/poetry/

Australia's own form of traditional verse, bush poetry, is dismissed by the literary cognoscenti as sentimental doggerel about kangaroos, billabongs and gum trees.

However, any study of the contemporary, original work on offer at the many bush poetry festivals across Australia

quickly reveals an agenda that is much broader than that.

The outback life certainly features strongly, but there are also poems about war, the environment, personal loss, multiculturalism, the family... in other words, exactly the same issues commonly dealt with in free verse.

But there's one big difference: it's readily understandable. Even if, as is inevitably the case, some of it is badly written,

at least the reader or listener won't be saying, "What the hell was that about?"

We have a great history of traditional poetry in Australia, and that creates a challenge to poets and editors alike to preserve it and give it prominence. It's certainly being written and performed by a great many people, especially in NSW and Queensland, but at the moment it's playing to a limited audience.



by Craig Nelson

Small wonders. These turtles on the Bellinger River are not the species *emydura* referred to in the poem, but probably another local species called *elseya georgesi*.

Picture: Ruth Pawley

Some flash city coves swept up the drive one day,
Flustered and uptight, we thought they'd lost their way.
'Can't get through 'ere,' said Pop, 'You'll 'ave t' go around.
Last bullock team to try it, still has not been found.'

Exasperated glances showed we didn't understand,
They were here to buy our place, for 'Eco-wonderland.'
Said they had the backing to purchase all our farms,
The offer they made should have set off all alarms.

Subject to some riders, they thought it in the can,
With all the best advisers for their tourist plan.
There'd be a public meeting, but if we signed now,
There's a bonus offer, they'd even buy the plough!

Pop said, 'We'll think it over, no need for you to wait,
'Watch out for the old bull and shut the bloody gate.'
'What about,' we started, when Grandma waved us down,
And said it would be sorted, when we went to town.

Up and down the valley was talk of all its worth,
With everyone assessing their precious patch of earth.
Toting up the profits, good workers lost the knack,
Instant millionaires for humble little shacks.

Approval of the shire was guaranteed, we thought,
Mayor was on the payroll, others could be bought.
All our cares were over and many plans were made,
Of how we'd spend our fortunes, once we had been paid.

The fateful day arrived, the day that was to see
The start of a new future, followed by a spree.
To dignitaries the mayor kowtowed to say,
'Welcome to our chambers on this auspicious day.

'I know I speak for all, they'll back me to a man,
We are delighted to endorse your master plan.'
We thought it in the bag, our plans were right on track,
When there was a protest and ruckus up the back.

A scrawny little bloke, all hair an' beard an' ribs,
Shouted accusations that all we'd heard were fibs.
Amid cries of, 'Siddown, shuddup, yer scruffy lout',
Big Al stood and said that, 'We'd better hear him out.

'He comes from the Black Scrub and I seen what 'e done,
Clearin' weeds and feral cats from Bill O'Reily's run.
That cagey boar O'Reily winged, never stood a chance,
Goats in Gaspers Gully have gambolled their last dance.

'E out-foxed all the vixens, stopped the rabbits dead,
At night 'e hunts wild dogs while loafers are in bed.
I seen armchair greenies, but this bloke's got the tin,
He deserves hearin' for the work that 'e's put in.'

The little fella spoke, the crowd went strangely quiet,
Hearin' that he saw a pathetic, sorry sight.
'Sittin' in yer comfort zone, countin' up yer purse,
You lot have a dose of the dreaded squatters' curse.

'Just because developers throw some loot around,
You're prepared to give up on any piece of ground.
We need another golf course and hotel for the rich
Like we need a mongrel dog from a dingo bitch.

'We know in the web of life, every thread connects,
Every species lost is a noose around our necks.
There is a long-necked turtle that has done no wrong
Called Emydura, but it won't be round for long.

There's one place on earth, where this turtle's found,
Its habitat's been ruined, since we came around.
Cattle trash its breeding ground, foxes eat its eggs,
Its chance of survival falls with each surveyor's peg.

'A turtle old and wise, has its own distinction,
Is ours a plan that hastens its extinction?
All we've heard is bulldust, I reckon you'll agree,
'Eco-plans' that threaten aren't 'wonderland' to me.'

It got us all to thinking, as his tale unfurled,
Who protects a turtle, unique in all the world.
It seemed that if its future, rested in our hands,
We had to reconsider exactly where we stand.

Grandma gave a nudge, as with Big Al the crowd agreed,
'You're for a hiding, close the meeting, let's proceed.'
There were some scuffles, as we ran them out of town
And chose a new council, next vote that came around.

Now as we hoe the vegies and milk the goats and cows,
And chop wood for winter, until the sun goes down,
We think of all the riches and chances we lost,
An' hope the flamin' turtles are happy with their lot.

Awarded First Prize in the 2005 Nimbin Agricultural and Industrial Society Bush Verse and Poetry Competition, sponsored by The Northern Star.

Silencing Poets or Banishing Bards

by Lyn Lockrey (16th October 2005)

*We live to pen poems,
scribbling down stanzas,
weaving words,
into talking tapestries,
provoking thoughts,
inciting ideas,
evoking emotions
painting our pictures
on linguistic landscapes.*

*Our flights of freedom
open the door,
to flee our cage
and wing beyond
this earthbound ball.
There to hover,
to view in different light
our lives, loves and times,
reflect and renew.*

*We need to speak,
of love,
of laughter,
to dream and write
unfettered,
exposing greed,
pleading for the poor,
appealing for peace.*

*But witness the warnings,
political posturing,
conservative climate change,
careless about carbon,
discrediting critics,
restricting our rights
fanning fear's flames,
bungling like Bush,
and banishing bards.*

*New laws
to tame terrorists,
limit our lines,
melt each metaphor,
sanitise the stanzas,
vet every verse,
tinker with titles,
capture computers
and fingerprint files.*

*Take care
what you write,
don't dare
to dissent.
There's a witch-hunt
on words of "ill-will",
purging the paradigms,
shrinking the similes,
constricting the creative.*

*They want
correct little couplets,
verified verse,
harmonious haiku,
rubber-stamped rhyme,
regulated rhythm,
'democratic' doggerel,
for a politically bankrupt,
secret society.*

Kennism

We can all fly easily.
It's the landing again
that is the problem.
So most people don't want
to even try to fly.

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