REVIEWS

Bonny Cassidy

Review Essay: Imaginative Farming: Michael Farrell's *Cocky's Joy*

Giramondo Publishing, Artamon, 2015, pb
96pp ISBN 1 9221 4676 2 AUS$24.00
www.giramondopublishing.com

The inland town of Horsham, Victoria, sits within the traditional Country of the Jardwadjali people, whose native title was the first to be determined in south-east Australia. In making this determination in 2005, Justice Ron Merkel remarked:

> These are areas in which the Aboriginal peoples suffered severe and extensive dispossession, degradation and devastation as a consequence of the establishment of British sovereignty over their lands and waters during the 19th century … The outcome of the present claim is testimony to the fact that the 'tide of history' has not 'washed away' any real acknowledgement of traditional laws and any real observance of traditional customs by the applicants … Indeed, the evidence in, and the outcome of, the present case is a living example of the principle that is now recognised in native title jurisprudence that traditional laws and customs are not fixed and unchanging. Rather, they evolve over time in response to new or changing social and economic exigencies to which all societies adapt as their social and historical contexts change.

Always on the horizon of this region – at varying proximity and from shifting angles – is a range made of shuffled sandstone stacks. It is known to settlers as the Grampians and as Gariwerd to the Jardwadjali and neighbouring language groups, for whom it is a site of the creator Bunjil. The region, called the Wimmera after the river that creates its terrain, is made from remarkably flat floodplains and dense volcanic soil. Horticulture, pasture and livestock are watered by an irrigation pipeline from the river. Periodically the river floods and rises to the floor of the kitchen in which I am writing this review. Gold was discovered in the river in 1866. A couple of years later, the Australian Aboriginal cricket team competed in England, largely comprised of Jardwadjali men. Shortly after that, in the early 1870s, my maternal ancestors migrated to the region from Prussia. I have driven through the region a few times searching for family records, but names were changed and homesteads abandoned. The kitchen table that I am writing from is Formica, a second-hand sixties model; it stands in the middle of a shack that I am renting from two expatriate Britons.

Australian culture does not exist. By which I mean to say, there is no cultural monolith or taproot to be found. Like the history of this place I am writing in, it is sometimes layered, often complexly nested, and always internally contingent and changing in its signs. This complexity has frequently been ignored or simply replaced by national mythologies that are typically held dear by conservatives: the pioneer settler, commemorated in historical markers all over the country; and the male explorer or 'discoverer' of colonial Australia whose visage appears in bronze and paint amidst suburbs and cities. These myths echo into modernity, via the ANZAC or 'Digger' hero who sacrificed himself to the Gallipoli frontline in World War I; the aspirational, heterosexual 'battlers' (and their progeny); and the cultural 'melting pot' created by assimilated immigrants in the twentieth century.

All such mythologies reinforce whiteness as intrinsically heroic or at least invisibly normal, and rely on a mythic genealogy that includes Britain, the US and Western Europe. Against a multi-layered history of immigration, the Australian government maintains a policy that ocean-going refugees, mostly from Asia, Africa and the Middle East, either be detained or 'turned back'. Early in 2015, the United Nations found Australia's treatment of asylum seekers in offshore detention to be in breach of international human rights law. Also against that history, such myths as those above reinforce a melded or 'melted' Australian identity, in which differences in language, sexuality, creed and skin colour may be overlooked if they are closeted 'at home' (or miscegenated) rather than openly expressed or preserved.

© 2016 Wasafiri
http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02690055.2016.1147733
Routledge Taylor & Francis Group

Ultimately, all such national origin myths have created narratives that ignore or replace historical documentation of colonial and postcolonial treatment of Indigenous peoples. Australians were reminded of this close to the time of the UN findings, when former Prime Minister Tony Abbott remarked that those living in remote Australian Indigenous communities are pursuing a 'lifestyle choice' that should not be supported by the Australian taxpayer. In other words, these myths insist upon monolithic unity instead of multiplicity.

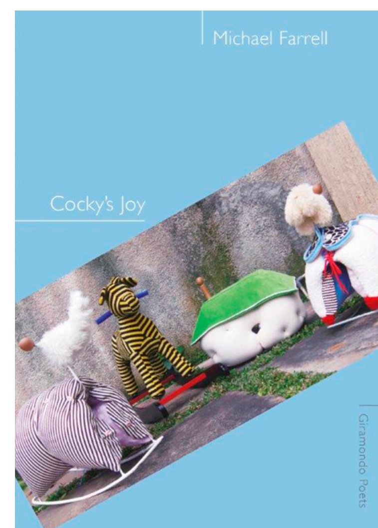
Indigenous and settler art has always offered alternative cultural visions to this persistent paradigm in Australia, not least in a tradition of activist poetry that includes voices as varied as Judith Wright, Oodgeroo Noonuccal and John Kinsella. Michael Farrell's poetry contributes to a recent and vivid period of politicised experimental practice. The work of Indigenous writer Lionel G Fogarty, and several poetry collections by Jennifer Maiden go about creatively pressuring the English language, challenging its normative uses in news media, literary conventions and politics. Additionally, empowered by ecopoetic movements in North America, Australia has in the last couple of decades produced an intensification of poetry that intervenes upon lyric representations of voice and space. Variously surreal, aleatory and poppy, poetry by Martin Harrison, Jill Jones, Peter Minter, Ouyang Yu, Luke Beesley, Stuart Cooke and others constitutes a poetic turn that engages with multiple and more-than-human experiences of body and locality. Farrell's writing can be read within these immediate contexts, which seek to make innovative representations of Australian subjectivity — and not without irritating some critical expectations.

In a poem published in *Island* (Summer 2011), 'Poetry Invaders', Farrell asserts: 'This is my poetry/ So … don't own it don't, rent it' (121). In this poem he expresses sovereignty within his poetic territory, imploring the reader to 'sit down' in his work, in other words, to inhabit it lightly without claiming it as permanent meaning (141). One could see this poem as responding to a minor note of conservatism in Australian poetry criticism, for example, writing in the national broadsheet the critic Geoff Page remarks that:

> There is a stream in our current poetry, small as yet, where any sort of traditional clarity seems to be consciously resisted. It's as if some poets have deliberately misread Wallace Stevens's aphorism, leaving out the 'almost': 'poetry should resist the intelligence, almost successfully' … Those in Farrell's corner regard any poem employing coherent syntax, commonly used diction and detectable rhythms (metred or free) as boringly predictable. ('Poets caught on a sticky wicket', *The Australian* 26 July 2014)

Farrell initiates the poem's analogy to indigeneity by using the word 'Invaders' in its title. This term in English has irrevocable association with European occupation — as does Page's discourse of 'resistance'. It is ambiguous as to whether Farrell is suggesting that his reader 'rent' his poem or 'don't, rent' it – after all, renting presupposes ownership, albeit somebody else's – however, rather than offering a solution he wants to problematise the ownership of 'coherence', drawing a considered link between reading for 'traditional clarity' and neo-colonial treatment of country.

Farrell publishes prolifically, and takes a fairly traditional approach in his choice of different modes. His many chapbooks have been released by experimental small presses in Australia and internationally. They exploit the nature and expectations of the chapbook form as a site for self-contained projects including graphic and typographic content. In parallel, Farrell has made his book-length collections, *ode ode* (2002), *a raider's guide* (2008) and *open sesame* (2012), with established independent presses Salt and Giramondo, and these tend to collect works from across diverse and extensive phases of his work, forming them into a sequence or shape.



The latest, *Cocky's Joy*, is Farrell's fourth book-length collection. It is shaped predominantly by a series of longer narrative poems that relish the conceptual, linguistic and semiotic possibilities of setting, character and loose dramatic scenario. Their effects are like close-up views of chemical reactions – cooking or mixing pigment – with much fizzing, morphing and bleeding of colours. In short, no state remains the same for long. Gertrude Stein hangs over this collection (making spectral cameos here and there) as she does over Farrell's entire oeuvre, informing his shifting, aurally and visually metonymic construction of language. But perhaps his recent poetry relates more closely to the paintings of Juan Davila, whose *Wilderness* featured on the cover of Farrell's 2012 collection, *open sesame*. In that book, poems like 'wide open road', 'epic' and 'eucalypt field' referred to Australian myths of place and, again, its uncomfortable relationship with 'invaders':

> 'it, was dotted with seeds red snow blue:
> with seeds of famous trees. one that hanged a bushranger,
> but memories cant be counted on, to be contained,
> (growth becoming an extension of self), the myth in the fork can
> still break necks, strike at a husband or milker. it was built to
> say keep the silence in or the developers away,
> as if thats a defence. but death is cast

past future; the wreck of
limbs like no romance known. &
when invaders
walk out & start shooting; its only
something to tell your grandkids
if you live to meet anyone or
manage to hold your family
together ('eucalypt field', *open sesame* 8)

In *open sesame* Farrell skulked around the thematic territory that he comes to obsess over in *Cocky's Joy*. The new collection consistently forages from the local ('milking the country upbringing that I had', as Farrell put it in a live interview with Robert Wood in Melbourne) and, moreover, it explicitly pursues the intersection of poetic space and occupied country. In this sense, to 'sit down' in or with the poem is a complicated, three-dimensional experience: one allusion leads to another, and yet it cannot be reduced to a linear logic. It shimmers.

If 'Poetry Invaders' demanded a balancing of authorial and readerly autonomy, the poems in *Cocky's Joy* add a third position to Farrell's poetics: textual independence. In 'The Structuralist Cowboy', he proposes: 'how do lines … know what other lines consist/of? If we deny author control isn't textual autonomy/suggested as much as that of reader? Theme is/extinguished. Lines read each others' minds' (36). In *Cocky's Joy* the importance of this theory is as much political as poetic. Many of the poems borrow normative tropes of Australian settler identity, in order to 'unsettle' the myths to which they are attached, thus making new narratives possible. Together, these poems constitute conceptual yarning: stories of postcolonial and queer Australian identity, in which Farrell segues one local cultural reference to another not so local or familiar; thus forming imaginary, ideologically radical histories and fables.

An example of this mode is found in the poem 'Settlers, Regurgitated', which begins with Farrell repeating pantomime versions of early Australian colonialism: 'Victoria's first settlers were whalers as well/as prostitutes. They were hale, They drank/ale' (13). This is the regurgitation of the school history assignment, or the bad modern bush ballad, or the reactionary historicism conducted on one side of Australia's so-called 'history wars'. Robert Manne outlines how

> From the mid-1980s, a counter-revolution concerning the interpretation of the [Indigenous] dispossession was mounted … The battles were not rooted in arid scholarly disputes and easily avoidable polarities. They were rooted, rather, in the as-yet-unresolved fact that – even after 40 years of scholarship – there is still a deep desire among many Australians to avert their gaze from the history of what happened during the long dispossession and to think of their country as largely innocent of wrongdoing. ('History Wars', *The Monthly* Nov. 2009: 16–17)

More recent discussion of Australian historiography has responded to the current Australian Government's review of the secondary school history curriculum. As professor of education Tony Taylor writes:

> Whig progressivism straitjacketed our understanding of the past by trying to see past events, mainly constitutional changes, as benign precursors of an inevitable and glorious present. Despite, or possibly even because of, its vintage character, this approach has now been revived in Australia as neoconservative progressivism. ('Neoconservative progressivism, knowledgeable ignorance and the origins of the next history war', *History Australia* 10.2 (2013): 229)

By retching up its parody of neoconservative doggerel, Farrell's poem allows this material to be purged onto the page and substituted with re-imaginings that hijack the tactics of settler history: 'They ate a lot of pasta/too, well before the Italians put in an appearance./They didn't call it pasta, they called it boiled/hay. The famous hay-twirlers of that time/have unforch been forgotten, their names deimagined' (*Cocky's Joy* 13). The barbed note in the latter line (particularly in the clash of the academic neologism 'deimagined' against the colloquial 'unforch') echoes through *Cocky's Joy*.

It is a note of disappointment; weariness with cultural stagnation. How did Australians' view of the nation become so 'shit-free'? Farrell reflects this when he corrects himself in schoolmarm tone: 'There's/something about this narrative that doesn't/make sense!'; this flippant treatment of history is 'actionable'! But boiled hay is as creative (and viable) as other semantic and ideological images of the past and the present in Australia. Less speculative, though no more documented, is Farrell's image of a colonial frontier 'Where they/were forced to invite the black milkman and/the black mailman in in order to enjoy company' (14).

Farrell's own scholarship in the field of Australian literature has read colonial texts in terms of their radical aesthetic and poetic qualities rather than traditional historical interpretation. His critical analyses apply a method of imaginative framing that is comparable to the effects of the poems in *Cocky's Joy*. Take, for instance, a poem called 'Bringing the "A"', in which a narrative of colonial invasion is unsettled by the substitution of an unnamed agent for the letter 'A':

The ship came bringing the 'A'

The land was read as a space for
the 'A'

The 'A' damaged the land and fed
the people
Who brought it

In Aboriginal Australia there were
no cattle
No cloven: therefore no 'A'

A familiar historical narrative is troubled by this semiotic presence-absence. We cannot buy the signifier from the artist or poet; Farrell provokes us to examine our own ideas about the way the poem's lines are speaking to each other, creating a context for the 'A'. The letter is innocent and arbitrary, as well as richly allusive and metonymic. For instance, I first saw/heard 'A' as a homonym of the

vernacular 'eh', which is pronounced identically to the letter 'a' in many Australian accents. 'Eh' is an astoundingly flexible non-denotative sound: it can be used like 'oy', to call someone's attention; as a murmur of agreement that ends a statement; as a request for repetition, like 'come again?'; or as a questioning vowel that marks the speaker's urging for agreement or negation. In this sense the 'A' embodies the feral spread of occupying English (roman) language: 'The "A" was in the bush now, it could never/Be caught and sent back.' At its most basic, 'A' is for Alphabet – a literary language that invades an oral culture: Aboriginals found the "A"' meaningless/At first – then a means of defence. To/Every assault they returned a Latin "A"' (72–73). Or it is anything that erodes culture, such as Alcohol. Even more broadly, 'A' begs a connection to 'Australia' as an abstract concept of nation, or even 'Australians' as an imprecise, generalising term.

As with the comparative qualities of Davila's painting, it pays to sit down with the cover of *Cocky's Joy* as a companion to the poetic signification within. In the manner of a classic family portrait, the four objects in the front cover photograph are facing the camera in a semi-circle. The portrait emulates a suburban snap, with the pseudo-family pictured against its home: a grey rendered wall, and concrete pavers with grass growing between them. The image might be a child's arrangement of her weird toy mob. Each object is made from what appear to be domestic items such as pillows and dusters. They are immaculately crafted, but also uncanny: three take the form of four-legged animals with ears and fur/wool, but they are without eyes or facial features and two of them do not even have legs; rather, their sides are stretched over rocking frames. The fourth object is a plush house, studded with dimples that gesture at a face but look more like a pudgy white bum.

Made by Melbourne-based Indonesian artist Ardi Gunawan, these objects speak of resourceful inventiveness: they are fine Arte Povera, reminiscent of the work of Indigenous artist Karla Dickens; or they are knowing bushcraft. As they create something new from what is at hand, so the title of *Cocky's Joy* suggests homely pleasures. I dare say the expression 'cocky's joy' is unknown to many Australians under sixty-five — let alone international readers. 'Cocky' is antique Australian slang for farmer (abbreviated from 'cockatoo farmer' — one whose farm is only good for cockatoos or who moves on frequently like a flock of them). From this came a piece of vernacular to describe the innocent joy of golden syrup. Generally acknowledged as a substitute for honey, either due to conditions of remoteness or austerity, 'cocky's joy' was a treacly pleasure for one stuck out on his dusty, probably rented acres; or for a stockman to take into his swag on a chilly night. Like an old pillow or feather duster (or an innovative poem) it requires a bit of imagination to be enjoyed. Farrell's choice of this title may be an ironic reference to the very Australiana that the book seeks to reinterpret; or a camp reclaiming of his own agency to 'rent' such kitsch. Either way, *Cocky's Joy* makes use of nostalgia or the loss associated with the poet's departure from the bush town of his youth.

The materials that go into the title and cover image of *Cocky's Joy* create a third thing. Farrell suggests that this inventive power has both wonderful and problematic potential. In a number of the poems themselves, golden syrup represents a counterfeit — one that its consumers, having forgotten (or never known) the 'real thing', have come to covet. Syrup is mentioned when blokey larrikins meet for a 'badly translated' date ('An Australian Comedy' 15); treacle describes Boyz II Men playing in a supermarket ('What We Understand Went On'); an unfunny mule eats molasses ('The Comic Image'); and in 'Bush Christie' the syrup is a metaphor for provincial poetic 'camaraderie': 'a Shearer's hut/ Where treacle did for bush honey' (12). Yet from the counterfeit can be made something original and real, the 'bush honey'. It is love: sometimes romance, but also empathy and understanding. Each of the poems in *Cocky's Joy* – the lines reading each other's minds – is structurally and allusively a small community, intricately related by memory, nostalgia, family or country. Even when their subject is not strictly local, the poems frequently take pseudo-families or clans as their subject: 'A Letter' homages the thick affection between two friends; while 'Spoiled for Choice: 80 Ganymedes' compiles a ballad of lovers linked to one another by their shared encounter with the lip-licking 'big cat' (41); 'Beautiful Mother' (winner of the 2012 Peter Porter Poetry Prize) makes a fable of being orphaned; and there are vocal rounds for a family album (untitled) and a house party in 'April Fools'. In these poems, Farrell gives intimacy the mythic dimensions of narrative. And in the collection's more politically charged expression, he also tries to extend the bounds of his own 'prism' to feel something new:

> 'The sacred is order'
> Like pyramids; Akhenaten's cult
>
> Settlement is an order
>
> Oodgeroo's editor made her Bora
> Ring
> (The shape of her Bora Ring story)
> A rectangle
>
> Her Rainbow Snake a rectangle
>
> Make of that (a rectangle snake)
> What you will
>
> [...]
>
> It's not just Cook that makes this
> poem possible
> But the Wurundjeri Council
> Their office at Abbotsford Convent
> A short bike ride away
> From where I write this in my prism
> (Seen as a rectangle from above)
>
> Yet I remember the earthquake when
> This building moved (relatively) like
> a snake ('Order' 76–78)

That third thing can turn sweet or sour, depending on how much feeling holds it together. At its worst, a colony is a counterfeit – a drag – of an imperial culture; but its possibility lives in the collage that it allows us to inhabit and identify. Farrell follows this idea way down the track in 'The Influence Of Lorca In The Outback':

Even in the
cities it's known the Outback is no monoculture;
whispers have been heard of resistance, especially
by men who find Lorca too feminine. It's said that,
here and there, the influence of Rimbaud is beginning
to show. That the Paris Commune is referred to
as a local moment; while many teenagers wear
wrist bandages, and travel the continent on foot.
Still others are living more reclusive lives in the
style of Dickinson: collecting native flowers, wearing
white, and making packets of poetry (28).

Here, urban jokes about the backwardness of regional communities are subverted, as the 'Outback' is not just geographically back (inland) but moves temporally backward to find poetic inspiration, ironically reinventing European modernism as it goes. The reality of the poetic text is neither of here, there; nor of now, then.

If Stein's definition of the poet is that he is either in or out of his time, rather than of it, then Farrell is deeply in his. Writes Peter Keneally in a more recent review:

> Farrell manages to treat the Australian myths of origin with respect and a kind of joyful derision, just as his nonsense poetry makes perfect formal sense and contains many meanings, but is also extremely silly. ('David Brooks and Michael Farrell publish dark verses and light', *The Australian* 13 June 2015)

Keneally rightly highlights the duality of attitude in *Cocky's Joy*, which can possess the sobriety of cultural essays informed by scholarly research, as much as the spontaneity of poetic play. The poems' claim to textual autonomy, however, questions Keneally's reference to nonsense and silliness. The traditions of dadaist nonsense poetics and surrealist chance methods are more obviously apparent in Farrell's earlier collections. In an absurdist manner, the more silly the logic of a poem's narrative or image in *Cocky's Joy*, the more serious or steely its contrast to cultural reality or its insistence upon deep feeling. Most vividly, however, *Cocky's Joy* highlights the influence of John Ashbery. Veronica Forrest-Thomson's memorable description of Ashbery's 'poetic artifice' might as well describe Farrell's mode in this book:

> so detached that he can make two discursive image-complexes … an implied external context … and an ordinary lyrical statement … into a new world of imagination [so that] while preventing us from lapsing into unawareness that he is writing unrealistic artificial fiction, he does not restrict himself to that function; he uses both it and our awareness of it to give us both a new imaginative freedom and internal limitation/expansion. (*Poetic Artifice: A Theory of Twentieth Century Poetry*. Manchester UP (1978). 157–58.)

Cocky's Joy adopts a thematic orderliness in its use of form. In some poems, Farrell avoids end-stopped lines, creating a continuity that reminds us they are 'reading each other'. Instead, he capitalises new beginnings, using this structural fluidity to emphasise his poems' potent generation and proliferation of narrative possibilities. Internal rhyme is another noticeable technique in this collection. It does not impose the same sense of constraint as end rhyme, but it does subtly homage the balladry that the collection is often undermining whilst utilising a looping effect to suggest perverse structural cohesion.

Driving around the Wimmera, I have been listening to the last album by Melbourne indie band Dick Diver, which features a single co-written with Michael Farrell, 'Waste the Alphabet'. It is a cocky phrase — reclaiming the idea of decadence in an era when this big sky and deep earth no longer present the illusion of infinity that they did to the wheat cockies in my family tree. Yet, unlike occupied country, an occupying language may be endlessly exploited in order to create new cultural products; indeed, it must. Farrell is a language cocky, the kind of rogue magnate that the state does not quite know how to define or tax. He handles Australian English with generosity and profligacy, joyfully watching its crystallised meanings dissolve and re-form. *Cocky's Joy* makes an important response from inside the experience of contemporary Australia. Its reader is reminded of a groundless and unfinished place; raw and sweet, made from thousands of settlements.

Finuala Dowling

In the Heat of Shadows: South African Poetry 1996–2013

Denis Hirson, ed

Deep South, Grahamstown, 2014, pb
279pp ISBN 0 9870 2823 5 R210.00
www.ukznpress.co.za

Heart of Africa! poems of love, loss and longing

Patricia Schonstein, ed

African Sun Press, Cape Town, 2014, pb
520pp ISBN 0 6206 0850 3 R350.00
www.afsun.co.za

Carapace 100

David Goldkorn and Johann de Lange, ed

Carapace Poetry, Cape Town, 2014, pb
160pp ISSN 2219 2867

What Julia Wright says of national literatures as a whole holds true for national poetry anthologies — they 'help to create identities in new nations … and to reinterpret and revise national identities in the face of conflict and change' (*Reading the Nation in English Literature: A Critical Reader* 214). In a country that is self-conscious, unsure of its capacity to create truly inclusive citizenship, and dizzied by its rollercoaster ride from repression to euphoria to dismay, South Africans are prolific, even neurotic, anthologisers of poems.