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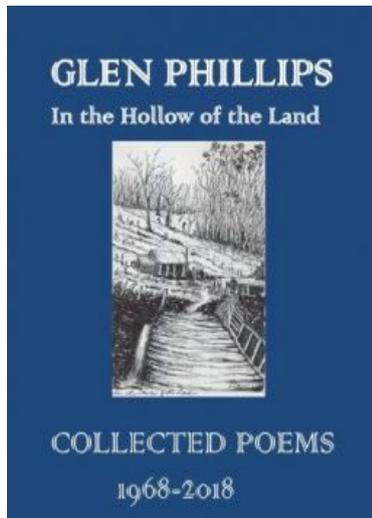
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TEXT review

Akin to musical composition: Fifty years of language and landscape

review by Tony Hughes-d'Aeth



Glen Phillips

In the Hollow of the Land: Collected Poems 1968-2018

Wild Weeds Press, Greenmount WA 2019

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In the Hollow of the Land collects sixty years of poetry by Western Australian writer Glen Phillips in two volumes published by Wild Weeds Press. Glen Phillips was born in 1936 and the poems stretch from the author's early 30s into his 80s. In terms of a career, it is notable that the production of poems by Phillips has tended to accelerate in the latter years, and has been particularly prolific since his retirement from Edith Cowan University in 2001. Taken together, the poems in *In the Hollow of the Land* provide a significant document of record not just of a sensibility that is responsive to his world, but of this world itself.

But what is Glen Phillips' world? In the most general terms, Phillips is a landscape poet. Indeed, in the latter phase of his career he was the Director of the International Centre for Landscape and Language, a research grouping he set up at Edith Cowan University. Landscape, once such a privileged aesthetic domain in Australia, is a term that has fallen into some disrepute, partly because in the postcolonial era the term is considered to encrypt the proprietary gaze of Empire. Be that as it may, the lyric landscape poetry of Phillips is an authentic expression of the particular modalities of belonging that have shaped his inner life. There are three main localities that feature in his poetry: the first and, for this reason perhaps most significant, is the wheatbelt of Western Australia; the second is rural Italy, particularly Tuscany; and the third is China, with a particular focus on Zhejiang province and its stunning ancient capital of Hangzhou. These three regions, while not exhausting the range of Phillips poetry, nevertheless run powerfully through his collected poems and it is not exaggerating to suggest that delineating the genius loci of each constitutes an animating principle in the two volumes.

The organisation principle of the two volumes is avowedly random, according to the insightful preface of Dominique Hecq. As a literary historian, I confess that I would like to have had these collected poems appear in a chronological order, or at least dates of publication or composition included in parentheses with each poem. That said, many of the poems do note dates in their titles or dedications – '1985 New Year Midnight in Tian Anmen Square', 'Regarding the Southern Ocean' (Point d'Entrecasteaux, Windy Harbour, 2001), and so on. But perhaps I am not the ideal imagined reader in this respect, and someone who wishes to read the poems for their own sake will be quite comfortable with the way that the poems unfold according to what Phillips (again in Hecq's Preface) conceives as something akin to musical composition.

Phillips was born in Southern Cross, at the eastern edge of the wheatbelt as you head from Perth towards Kalgoorlie. His father taught in country schools, mainly in the wheatbelt, between 1931 and 1949, so the first years of Phillips' life were spent in towns like Mukinbudin, Lake Grace and Pingelly. His mother's family had started farming in Beverly in 1905, in the very early days of the wheatbelt. Phillips himself was a teacher at Northam Senior High School between 1959 and 1961. So, it is not surprising that Phillips' poems about the wheatbelt are the most layered, transected by generational memory and shot through with the shards of early childhood. I found the poem 'The Blazer', which remembers a father in the eyes of a child, particularly moving:

I was only five and my father's sporting world
 in small country towns was something else
 from his family duties, as our lives unfurled.
 We clustered around mother, held fast
 to our childhood games, completing chores
 that if shirked we'd be brought to judgement
 when he came home pleased with good golf scores,
 cricket win.

...But the gloom spread
 and I well recall seeking his blazer scent
 behind the bedroom door, inhaling comfort

from leather elbow patches as I leant
 against sleeves and folds. (196-97)

Phillips can be located in relation to other wheatbelt writers of the post-war period, most notably Dorothy Hewett, Barbara York Main, and John Kinsella. The title of Phillips collected poems, *In the Hollow of the Land*, recalls the famous opening line of Hewett's memoir *Wild Card*: 'The first house sits in the hollow of the heart, it will never go away'. Phillips is a distinctly gregarious writer and has been a pillar of the Western Australian writing community, particularly through his involvement with the Fellowship of Australian Writers (WA) and his heroic work to save the home of Katharine Susannah Prichard in Greenmount, which now houses KSP Writers' Centre, which Phillips established. He knew Barbara York Main through the FAW(WA) and the last time I saw Glen was in fact at Barbara's funeral in 2019. One of the poems that caught my eye in this collection was 'Scrub Cities: Remembering *Between Wodjil and Tor*'. *Between Wodjil and Tor*, published in 1967, was a pioneering work of nature writing by York Main which traces the intricate natural world in the remnant bushland adjoining her family's farm in the central wheatbelt. Phillips' poem gently riffs off the rhythms and diction of York Main's work, giving them a new yet assonant intonation:

This anti-city
 is dreaming
 in insect hum
 and rustle of feet
 over leaf-litter
 along ant trails;
 in the catacombs
 of termite mounds
 in call of currawong
 and flicker of bronzewing (197)

The poem continues in much this way and the pleasure is simply the pleasure of naming, the act of giving words to the intricacies of life. It finishes on a characteristic note of humility: 'we other travellers haunt / the twilight of our lesser texts' (199).

By comparison with the poems of the wheatbelt and the southwest of Western Australia, the poems that transpire in China and Italy have, by necessity, a more anthropological quality and they fit into that tradition of poetry that makes use its resources to offer up the strangeness of the traveller in the form of an image. Thus, we find in 'The Bird Market Canton II', the kind of vignette that hits the eye of someone who has no choice but to watch and wonder:

Old men carry them like closed lanterns
 where flame of song in each throat
 is quenched for coming night;
 the birds, portraits framed in bamboo mesh,
 the market stacks them one on one
 in leaning towers. (87)

Yet the imagism of Phillips' poem, which he draws in part after all from the translations of Chinese poetry, seems to be generally deferential to the lifeworld that the poems are eavesdropping on. The beauty that he hits upon does not feel overly projected or imposed, and in that sense seems to be a genuine act of translation that while not wholly escaping the charge of exoticism, pays for it with the acuity of the observations and the precision of the metaphors. One can find similar stanzas in his

Italian poems, some of which were written originally in Italian by Phillips, and then translated back into English:

She goes out in the early morning
apron lifting with the chill breeze
across the meadow. Swinging
in her right hand the pail of milk
for the motherless kid; under
her left arm a sheaf of hay
for the other nannies and the old
billy with his comic beard and strut
like a prize fighter in the ring. (242)

In such moments, Phillips 'eye' is that of Hardy, Tolstoy or other provincial realists. It is the eye of regional difference experienced as a displacement in historical time. In that sense, he might also be compared to someone like Heaney, who writes with a double-vision in which a slowly exploding modernity revolves around something other and more ancient, and by turns durable and fragile, that is enacted daily in the rural lives of the characters that people his poems.

Dr Tony Hughes-d'Aeth is a respected historian and author of significant Australian literature. He has lived around the world, from Australia, to Europe and the United States, giving him a sense of how important the land on which we stand is in relation to our sense of identity.