DAVID McCOOEY

An Interview with Laurie Duggan

Laurie Duggan was born in Melbourne in 1949. He studied at Monash and Sydney Universities, and Melbourne University where he completed a PhD in Fine Arts in 1999. He has taught creative writing, media and art history, been an art critic, a script writer, and from 1994 to 1997 he was poetry editor of Meanjin. He has published ten books of poetry and won numerous awards, including a Victorian Premier’s Award for The Ash Range (1987), a ‘documentary poem’ detailing the history of the Gippsland region of Victoria. He has also written prize-winning translations of Martial. His New and Selected Poems 1971-1993 was published by the University of Queensland Press in 1996. His latest book, Ghost Nation: Imagined Space and Australian Visual Culture 1901-1939, published by UQP this year, is a cultural history based on early twentieth-century Australian art.

DMcC: Was your childhood pretty much as presented in ‘Adventures in Paradise’?

LD: One of the problems I have with my childhood—and this affects the way the poem gets going and its compositional process—is that I have very few real memories of it. I did, as ‘Adventures’ suggests, have a stroke when I was sixteen, and I think I suffered a good deal of memory loss as a side effect. So what the poem presents is really a disparate group of snapshots (often things I think are memory are memories of photographs viewed later rather than the actual events).

What can you tell us about this stroke? Are your poems attempts at staving off forgetfulness?

I was unconscious for a couple of weeks after collapsing in the locker room at school. Then I spent a month and a half in hospital. Staving off forgetfulness? . . . not really. It’s more a fascination with memory. To me having a memory is impressive—like being able to speak Russian.
The childhood memories in 'Adventures in Paradise' seem from the distant past, even though they occurred in the '50s. Were you making a point about autobiographical memory?

The memory loss thing is important here. Because what I was consciously doing was writing autobiography out of nothing. It's a mock autobiography in that sense and in the sense that all such things are—however much we love to read them—ridiculous constructs, made out of all sorts of odd pieces of information. There's a whole tradition of 'growth of a poet's mind,' things which I don't really feel comfortable with. I was nearly thirty-one when I wrote 'Adventures,' but my life had been one of not much consequence and I wanted to play this off with poetry's sense of its own importance.

In terms of class, the milieu of that poem seems quite mixed. What was your family like?

Mixed. My father was one of ten children and grew up in East Gippsland. He became a truck driver and worked as a mechanic in the RAAF [Royal Australian Air Force]. When he came to Melbourne during the war he stayed at the guest house in South Melbourne owned by my mother's mother. She was widowed with four children, but she had mostly brought them up herself after her husband went to Mont Park asylum in 1930. He died in the asylum in 1938 after an overdose or something from insulin therapy. My grandmother regarded her own family as upper middle class and always resented her social descent. She also resented my father and mother's marriage, though this only became apparent when she went senile.

What all this meant was that I was surrounded by relics of affluence in otherwise poor circumstances. I mention 'cracked lino on the dining room table and floor' and an odd assembly of guest house residents. I've still got some of the grander items of furniture and also a few art books which John Sangster (later to become a well-known jazz musician) left behind.

Even in works like Memorials where 'the poet' seems to be 'Laurie Duggan' recording perceptions and experiences, you don't say much about yourself. Why is this?

It relates to my suspicions about 'the poet's life.' I really don't think I'm very interesting in any broader sense than my friends must
feel. Partly there's just the sheer amazement that a life—my life—
can be written out like this.

You mention in 'Living Poetry' that when you were first becoming a poet
anything less than a 'total embrace' of modernism seemed a 'denial of life
itself.' How did such an embracing of high modernism produce the author
of the 'Blue Hills' sequence, or the satirical 'The New Australian Poetry,
Now'?

This is difficult territory. I think now that I've moved on from that
kind of rhetorical embrace of modernism, but in a sense I was
never really a 'modernist.' I think that my feeling that way reflects
a need to situate myself. Ezra Pound in particular was a kind of
crutch for me, probably in much the same way as F. R. Leavis was
to a lot of people. But I could never be a real 'high modernist'
because right from the beginning popular culture was an impor-
tant part of my makeup. Pop music of the '60s (and onward) has
always been as important to me as Pound or Picasso or whoever.
And I think that despite themselves the poems reflect that.

Yes, one of the main qualities of your work is its interest in opposites, para-
dox maybe, oxymoron. You are attracted to very small and very large poetic
structures; deal with the everyday and something like the metaphysical; you
take poetry seriously and you're forever taking the mickey out of it. Do you
agree? Where does this quality come from?

In a way I can't separate these things. It's a bit like feeling that the
tragic can become bathetic but the comic can often be truly tragic. When I was younger I was interested too in Buddhism—Zen particu-
larly—and although I ended up leaving what was perhaps an
'orientalist' attitude to the 'exotic' behind, I think I always felt an
empathy with the kind of (often vicious) humour involved—like solv-
ing a dispute about a cat by chopping the cat in half. The 'western'
equivalent of all this would perhaps be the idea of carnival, of turn-
ing the world upside down. I've always found Diogenes to be an
attractive figure and he gave the 'Dogs' sequence its title. They're
kind of 'biting the hand that feeds you' poems. The interest in
various forms, gigantic and miniature, partly comes out of a love
of collage and a sense that maybe a life's work can be like this. I
mean by this that a large structure can be made with all sorts of
components. Early on the idea (from Basho) of linking small piv-
otal poems with prose interludes was an attractive one. I like what
Williams did in the sequences ‘Spring and all’ and ‘The descent of Winter.’ But I also love writers who do one thing well consistently—John Forbes’s work is like this—and I don’t think that I’m a ‘better’ poet because of the variety of things I do. It’s just a personality thing.

*Despite your suspicion of the ‘growth of the poet’s mind’ genre, does it strike you as interesting that you became a poet instead of a rock musician, novelist, or painter?*

Perhaps the desire to explore all sorts of forms relates to this. At one time it all seemed possible but . . . life is short. Maybe the crucial thing was that my mother read poems to me before I could respond in any way. I got the feel of the poems without being able to ‘understand’ them. I think my idea of poetry is primarily a musical idea; an idea of rhythms (not of metre). This is what interests me in dealing with structures of variable size and shape: a kind of music which comes before sense.

*You also mention in ‘Living Poetry’ that you felt more Generation of ’71 than Generation of ’68. Do you feel that your association with that amorphous group has been a help or hindrance to your career?*

Yes, well, fifteen minutes of fame and all that. I have to say that I did feel branded by the ‘Generation of ’68’ thing. At the same time I like a lot of the work in John Tranter’s anthology [*The New Australian Poetry, 1979*], though I’d see it now as very much ‘of its time’ in its concern for long poems about poetry and poetics. By ‘Generation of ’71’ I meant that that was the year when I really got started and wrote things I can still bear to look at. I still identify with the writing scene at Monash University in the late ’60s, early ’70s though. I like it that John Scott, Alan Wearne, and myself were so different. Where we came together was in the desire to push the boundaries and move away from the kinds of neat poems which used to appear in *The Age.* That and a love of Ted Berrigan’s *The Sonnets.*

*It does seem that you, John Forbes, Martin Johnston, and others took a real interest in each other’s work. Was that the case?*

Yes. I always used John as a touchstone, once I’d met him. And we continued to exchange work all along. In later years he’d ring me
up and begin reading work without any introduction. Martin was a co-judge of a New Poetry award, which I won when I was still in Melbourne. I met both of them when I moved to Sydney in 1972. Martin’s work really ought to see print again. He came out of a different poetry world than the one John and I lived in and it was often difficult for us, as suburban boys, to come to terms with his very European sense of culture. Both of these writers and a few others who are still with us left me with the feeling that the best poetry readings take place in people’s living rooms.

Australian poets are believed to be notoriously touchy. Have you got much flak for your parodies?

Surprisingly, no. Maybe life is really like the gossip columns: nobody cares as long as they get a mention. In fact there was one serious objection which I didn’t find out about till recently via, of all sources, Peter Alexander’s biography of Les Murray. Apparently Les tried to stop publication of Geoffrey Lehmann’s anthology of comic verse, The Flight of the Emu, because it contained work of mine that offended him. I’d love to have been a fly on that wall.

You once called academics the ‘middle managers’ of poetry. You’ve been associated with academia over the years. Let’s start first with Monash. How important were those Monash readings you helped organize?

I can’t remember the ‘middle managers’ tag. But ‘associated with academia’ is probably a good description of my working history, i.e., I’ve never had a ‘real’ job in an academic institution! But unless you’re a ‘street poet’ (and even then sometimes) it’s hard not to hang around the edges of the academic world. It’s where the gigs are... or were. I wouldn’t want to mythologize the Monash readings, but they were certainly important for John Scott, Alan Wearne, and myself. I think they started about a year before I went to Monash—in 1967—and they were run then by someone in the bookshop. Alan ran them in 1968, then I did it in 1969, after which the scene more or less folded. By then Alan was at La Trobe, John out on teaching rounds. We met for the rest of the time I was at Monash—till the end of 1971—mostly off campus. The readings had a fairly conventional format: a guest reader, usually an academic or ‘established’ poet, then readings from the audience. In a way, we didn’t really need guests and didn’t even like their poetry much (Bruce Dawe was one exception). Reading our own work was the
most important part, and we were quite committed to that. Because there were no print outlets that we could see our work in, the readings were an opportunity to revisit the poems we liked, but there was also pressure to write new material for each (monthly) reading. It was a real hothouse in that sense. And there were people who did performance things, music, elements of dada. Once we got past the guest reader, things got more adventurous. It stimulated our desires to stretch the boundaries, to make poetries which would incorporate a lot of 'non-poetic' material. And hearing some of the poems over and over we would memorize a lot of our fellow participants' work.

To jump ahead from there, you completed your PhD in fine art a few years back. From poet to humanities academic . . . did that feel a bit like going from the frying pan to the fire?

Meaghan Morris said I'd made a brave mid-life move. I told her it was probably like stepping from the lifeboat back onto the Titanic.

What was your doctoral thesis on?

My thesis has just come out as a book with University of Queensland Press. It's called *Ghost Nation: Imagined Space and Australian Visual Culture 1901-1939*. It's an attempt to write a kind of wider critical cultural history which incorporates a range of visual practices, from early modernist painting through children's book illustration, through town planning, and through museology. The creation of imaginary space is really part of the process of colonization. Thinking from this perspective was also a way of approaching early modernism in Australia as something more than the peripheral expression of influences from a 'centre.' I'd stopped writing poems in 1994, the year before I started the thesis, and didn't start again until last year, two years after completing it. But my partner Rosemary says it's really a kind of poem in disguise.

In what way?

I think the way the book is constructed has some similarities with my poetic practice. I don't signal changes of direction or what I'm going to discuss in each chapter, and it tends to be a fairly dense read. I hate explaining things too much in a poem (not a good starting point for a thesis writer, I know!).

Did not writing 'real' poetry for that long spook you?

The break from writing certainly did spook me. It happened for a number of reasons. The last thing I wrote before stopping was the long prose poem 'The Minutes,' which appeared in Otis Rush magazine. At the time I was teaching writing for a year—an unhappy experience because of my own uncertainties. With 'The Minutes' I realized that there were limits to what I could do. I couldn't step away completely from everyday referentiality, for example, even if I ended up using it for a purely musical purpose. I do like the work of some of the Language poets, though I think I have some philosophical differences with them. J. H. Prynne wrote a very good article about them a few years back which encapsulates my feelings: that however interesting their work sometimes is, the Language group are operating under an illusion that they can escape from the cultural condition of language, that is, that they can step outside the structures which the rest of us are imprisoned by.

At the same time my own philosophical supports had more or less crumbled—at least the beliefs I regarded as grounding my poetry (the poems themselves had different ideas, and always had). And on top of all this there was a sense that for all its popularity with creative writing students, poetry itself was ceasing to matter much (the writing students only wanted to write, not to read other people's work). I remember John Forbes saying at the time that a certain intelligent audience which had assembled around poetry in the '70s had now mostly left it for the realms of Cultural Studies, and I guess I ended up doing this myself. The only problem was that I couldn't get away so easily. I felt for a while that my desire to write was just conditioned by the years of experience when writing was the centre of my life. But I came to realize that things weren't so simple. The new writing is tentative. It needs to create its own reasons for existence, so, in that sense, it has a strong philosophical element. I seem to keep going.

Talking of your poetry, critics have noted your use of bricolage, your documentary aesthetic. Carl Harrison-Ford in a review of The Great Divide talks about your inclusiveness. I get the feeling with Memorials that you were seeing how far you could push that, . . . seeing if there is anything that needs to be left out. What do you think?

It's always a delicate balancing act. In principle I like to think anything can make it into poetry. But the processes of editing and
composition are still important. My second book, *Under the Weather* (1978), was my first published example of this ‘open’ kind of writing and it attracted almost uniformly hostile reviews—the result of this was that I swung around and wrote the satires and parodies that came out in *Adventures in Paradise* (1982). But I didn’t stop writing the ‘open’ stuff: there was the ‘New England Ode’ and then the earlier ‘Blue Hills’ poems which appeared in *The Great Divide* (1985). And *Memorials* (1996) takes it up again. I think with *Under the Weather* I was feeling my way. In the first half of the book I was still trying to edit and compose the material in ways I was used to, which, I think, lost the flow a bit. The later pieces got it right more or less. They are still the product of editing, but it’s an editing which is more sensitive to the overall movement of the pieces and to the time structures within them. *Memorials* is, I think, just better at it. It also benefited from the practice I’d had with longer forms.

*Works such as ‘New England Ode’ and ‘Ornithology,’ presumably, are much harder to compose than they look. Is yours the art that conceals art?*

The ‘New England Ode’ came immediately after the *Under the Weather* poems (it was written on the day the book was launched). It’s still a bit clumsy in places I think, but it was trying for structure a bit more from the use of verbs. The earlier poems tended to let things drift by whereas I wanted to get the sense of an argument into the ‘Ode.’ The phrase which always seems to best describe this kind of poetry is from Philip Whalen: ‘the graph of a mind moving.’ The poems are not presenting the kind of omniscient voices that some poetries seem to want to do. The point of this kind of poem is that the voice is fallible, it’s not W. B. Yeats speaking. So although the opinions coming out in the poems may or may not be defensible, they’re certainly not definitive: it’s the wavering, the sudden assertion, the movement of voice which is the important thing. The process of construction is in the end very much a matter of music. Not the tick of a metronome but a balanced set of tonal shifts and registers.

*Does your poetry aspire to the ‘condition of music’? Are the musical references meant to suggest analogy (aurally) or indicate the milieu, the world being constructed, the sensibility of the poet?*

Hard to say. Probably a bit of both. I do mention books, art works, lots of other things, but they are really just part of my everyday
experience, they’re not there as Poundian reading or viewing lists. They’re part of the persona of the writing rather than aesthetic edicts from the author. The poems reserve the right to be ‘cranky,’ even ‘wrong.’ Some of the mentioned music does indirectly structure the work though. I’m not technically up there, but I would be surprised if certain elements of music which I like, such as the drone or kinds of modality, didn’t infuse the work.

You’ve mentioned that your father’s family came from the Gippsland region. Were you aware of that area as a kind of imaginative world for you? I’m trying to get a sense of what led you to write The Ash Range.

As a child I used to go to Ensay, up on the Omeo Highway, every holiday just about. It always seemed a larger-than-life place to me. The earliest poem of mine to appear in a book is ‘East’ (in East: Poems 1970-74, 1976), which is simultaneously a poem ‘about’ Gippsland, and a poem about media and a collage. After a few years I realized that I had a lot more to deal with in relating to Gippsland and in the meantime I had found the kind of structure—collage on a grander scale—with which to approach the subject. So The Ash Range was researched and written. I certainly wouldn’t have written it without the family connection, but at the same time my approach (and attitude) ensured that it would not be a ‘family’ poem. Still, I buried in the text some clues. Some relatives appear without names later in the book, there’s a photograph of station hands which includes my grandfather, unnamed. Then there’s a bit near the middle of the book in which a man called Duggan is arrested on a charge of vagrancy. I don’t know if this character is a relative or not. In fact my grandfather’s name was changed to Duggan from Duncan when he was about four, some years later. But this ‘Duggan’ character stands for me and for the oddness of my own project. The 1884 newspaper report notes that: ‘He... labors under a strange hallucination, viz. that there are but six men on earth who are to go to Heaven, and that he is included in the six. He carries with him a map, a geography, and a grammar in his swag, together with a bucket and five billies.’

One of your other interests is translation. How did you go about translating? (Did you know the languages?)

I started translating early on—there’s a Rimbaud poem in my first book. I think then I was taking on board the Poundian thing, includ-
ing his approach to translation. I’m not a linguist. I have some high school French and a smattering of Italian and Bahasa Indonesian. But it often seemed as though translation and scholarship didn’t always work together well. Some of the most wooden translations come from people who are really adept with the language, but at the same time are not so good as poets. Their concern to get the minutiae right often means that what comes out is translatorese. It would be better for scholars like this to just do prose translations because if something is to become a poem in English it has to work as a poem first of all—if it doesn’t, then what is it a translation of? Translation often means abandoning forms as well. I’m sure Harold Stewart’s haiku translations are accurate, but they just don’t come out as good English poems; the rhymes are wooden and the sensibility thuds.

*Your free translations of Martial allowed a good deal of satire of the Australian literary scene; what interested you in the Italian Futurists?*

The Martial translations were suggested by Michael Heyward, then at *Scripsi*. He was a Latin linguist, but left me to it with a reliable prose crib—the Loeb Classical Library version. I felt that with satire there was no point translating unless the sting of satire were present. And the only way to make that work is to make the poems satires of this moment and sacrifice the local colour of the original, for better or worse. But if I want to find out about Roman life I’ll go and read something else—there’s plenty around. I liked the Futurists because they were kind of naive and enthusiastic modernists; modernists who couldn’t have foreseen the fag end of that philosophy. As far as I know Soffici had hardly been translated. And he had a tone which came through strongly. He was fairly verbose so I cut things down considerably. I worked largely by myself with a dictionary (no cribs available).

*Are you ever bothered that the cultural and literary references in your work will limit its audience? (I’m not just thinking of the parodies, poems like ‘It might as well be spring and all’ come to mind).*

In the end I’ve figured that this is a natural thing for me; I don’t really have a skerrick of populism in my body! Somehow or other some reference will sneak in. But my references are to all varieties of culture, not just the ‘high’ stuff. I’ll never be Charles Bukowski or Sylvia Plath... but then I wouldn’t want to be. I don’t like either
of them very much. And I don't know which is the greater presumption: to expect people to find interest in the things you are interested in or to expect them to find interest in you. I'd opt for the former. Eighteenth-century English poetry is 'literary,' but we can still read it. This used to trouble me a little once, but now I'm more or less resigned to having a smallish audience. I mean, I don't really have expectations. It can be a hard thing to anticipate anyway—after all, what could be more obscure or 'difficult' than a lot of Les Murray's work? The 'difficulties' of my work are, I figure, superficial anyway. It's not as though I base my work on the knowledge of myth or any other kind of esoteric substructure.

Your interest in place and geography is perhaps not so disjunct from your interest in the quotidian, the 'diaristic' part of your work, since it 'announces there's more out there / than we can take in' ('Pastoral Poems'). Would you agree?

I suppose in a lot of my work there's a sense that 'it's all out there'—that there are no 'hidden depths,' which some people think poetry ought to be privy to. At the same time I realize that this kind of 'site specific' poetry is a fairly gendered thing—I mean, for better or worse, the intensely geographical appears to be mainly a guy thing. So there's a sense of limitation there as well.

Your 'Blue Hills' sequence brings together three strands of your work (formalist, diaristic, documentary). They often seem to say that while we live in the 'real world' that world is constructed in countless cultural ways. Is that right?

I think this partly answers your earlier question about literary references—all these things are part of the constructed world of culture and it's very hard to pull them apart. I just don't want to be too hierarchical about the elements of culture. The poems will express preference, but that's partly a product of the way they are voiced. I'm not a complete relativist, however.

Is it just accidental that you and John Forbes (even John Tranter) turn out to have been very interested in Australia after all (just not in the Murray-nationalist model)?

Well we always were. We all read our Kenneth Slessor. John Forbes even read Barcroft Boake! I think, at least in John Forbes's and my
case, we weren't interested in self-conscious kinds of nationalism. In my case the local was always more important than the national, whether it were Gippsland, South Melbourne, or Glebe [in Sydney]. I think we were probably the first literary 'generation' for whom it wasn't vital to go overseas (it was interesting and worthwhile even, but not vital). London did not 'call,' but neither did New York. Though it was always great to see those places.

You seem close in style or interest to Pam Brown and Ken Bolton. Do you feel that there are intersections occurring in the work of the three of you?

Pam and Ken are the two writers I feel closest to in terms of the way we approach things. Reading their work makes me feel part of a wider ongoing project. We have different tonal registers, different concerns even, but what we do feels like community to me. I think we share a sense of open-endedness, which is something different from what you get in John Forbes or Gig Ryan, for example. I've known Pam and Ken for a long time now (thirty and twenty-five years respectively) and I think of all people these two were the ones I felt most that I was 'letting down' when I stopped writing.

How do you feel about your writing poetry again?

I seem to be moving along. But with a sense of the provisional nature of writing which I lacked before. This sounds like a positive spin being placed on a negative! But it really is like having to learn to walk all over again, and this time I'm just more aware of the tentative nature of literary endeavour. I'm more wary about the dangers of careerism with this kind of writing, but then I always did feel ambivalent about stardom—particularly in an area which is so esoteric. John Forbes once said that the Australian poetry scene was like a knife fight in a telephone booth.