

## BOOK REVIEW



David McCooey reviews

**Compared to What:  
Selected Poems 1971-2003**223 pp, paperback, Shearsman, np,  
0-907562-61-2**The Ash Range**247 pp, paperback, Shearsman, np,  
0-907562-69-8

by Laurie Duggan

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## Pilot Light

*Compared to What: Selected Poems 1971-2003* clearly shows that Laurie Duggan is the most observant of poets. It also illustrates that Duggan's observations are often very funny. For instance, in the lugubriously comic account of travelling in Northern England, 'Irwell & Medlock or Darkness Visible', Duggan notes:

In the paper, a couple, returning,  
drunk, from Margate,  
fucked in the train.  
No-one objected  
until they began to smoke afterward.

'West', in which the poet is seen spending some time in a Denver hotel featuring a bar called the 'Stuff'd Shirt Bar', contains the following deadpan lines:

The prevalence here of cowboy hats.  
And the stretching of vowels: 'The house shar-blee.'  
Someone asks for a doggy bag for drinks.

I think I like the west a lot.

One for the room.

The barman answers the phone: 'Stuffed Shirt?'

Given the terseness of these examples, it is not surprising that Duggan is also a master of the epigram. His free translations of Martial are brilliant and acerbic:

Those about to die young,  
the insane, the criminal,  
they encourage them all  
to write poetry.

As these examples illustrate, Duggan's observations are often (mock) sociological ('In America they go to bars to be alone. In England they go home') or (mock) autobiographical ('I can tell I'm getting old by the yellowing of books I bought new, two decades back'). They also habitually show a love of cultural allusion ('Pale lipstick, like Dusty Springfield'). These three examples in parenthesis are from Duggan's prose-poetry sequence 'The Minutes' and show how Duggan's poems inhabit the particulars of the world: of place, time, perspective, and the impossibly varied nature of the quotidian.

But such variety is not chaotic. Duggan's particularities are presented in a highly organized way. In short, they are presented as poetry. This is Duggan's genius: to turn diaristic snippets, references to Miles Davis or John Coltrane, found text, or overheard conversation, into highly organized text. 'The Minutes', like Duggan's open form poems, is presented motivically (and the references to music further underscores this motivic arrangement). It is elliptical, allusive and associative, a kind of music, like a long Coltranesque solo on what would otherwise be the most banal of themes. Duggan's apparent sociological, autobiographical or cultural interests, then, are expressed in highly aesthetic ways, with an artist's attention to placement, contrast, colour, and motifs (although they can also be expressed in artfully casual ways, too. Duggan avoids bombast at all times).

As such, Duggan's poems are inhabited by profoundly oxymoronic energies: mimesis and music; documentation and decoration; objectivity and subjectivity; difficulty and accessibility. Such doubleness can be seen operating in other ways throughout Duggan's work. For instance, there is the balance between sociological observation and lyrical imagery in 'Blue Hills 35', in which we are told that 'At Poowong, dairy farms / overlook a flat land of chicken roosts', while 'maps fail to register a prevalence / round here, of trams / balanced on blocks / in the home paddock'. 'Blue Hills 25' begins 'Cape Woolamai from Kileunda: / the sky too subtle for a vulgar type / like John Martin....Turner perhaps.... / Sunlight Through a Bespattered Windscreen'. Duggan's emphasis on the here-and-now demonstrates how the here-and-now is always saturated in associations, history, and meaning.

In his essay 'What Whole Voice?' (published in *Southerly* 57.1 [1997]: 22-27) Duggan argues against facile notions of poetic 'voice' as a way of understanding a poet's work. It

might be more accurate, then, to talk about the poet 'Laurie Duggan' as a way of seeing rather than a voice in the traditional sense. This is apposite given the emphasis in his work on visual art, geography, landscape, weather and visual memory. In some of his later poems the analogy between poetry and visual art becomes explicit. 'Air time' (originally from *Mangroves*, 2003), for instance, begins:

At the mercy  
of what I'm given  
to work with  
radiant windows  
dust hanging  
in the atmosphere  
morning radio  
the city mythologies.

In 'Little History' (also originally from *Mangroves*) the poet asks:

Is sense made simply  
through binding together  
disjunctives — as though  
fragments of pictures  
will always make a picture  
whatever the source,  
weather, texture, opinion.

The emphasis on having to work with what one is given, on the here-and-now, and on effects of light and weather, is not only deeply painterly, but also a source of continuity in Duggan's work, despite his apparently promiscuous attraction to divergent forms. These forms include epigram, epic, pastoral, verse diary, translation, anatomy, elegy, ekphrasis, and verse autobiography. In many, if not all of these modes, irony has a role (often a major one) to play. For instance, the verse autobiography, 'Adventures in Paradise', manages to be both a straight rendition of the poet's life and a parody of the 'growth of a poet's mind' genre:

Then I'm sitting in a fruit box in the yard  
with a dog called Sandy whose bones  
I used to share. The place was a guest house  
owned by my grandmother. I talked before  
I could walk. Crawled up the stairs.  
A man called Len Lovell fell off the roof.

The details here, conspicuously disjunctive, suggest a real childhood, but they are also comically at odds with their genre.

However ironic 'Adventures in Paradise' might be it shows a major feature of Duggan's approach to his materials: an emphasis on detail. In many of his other works detail is provided through the use of bricolage. The attraction to found texts, quotation, and allusion is deeply anti-Romantic and Duggan (like many of his peers, such as John Forbes) is profoundly suspicious of post-Romantic claims concerning 'presence', 'voice' and 'transcendence'. It is a nice irony, then, that Duggan's attraction to quotation and found text engenders his most ambitious project, *The Ash Range* (1987), an 'epic' poem about the Gippsland region in South-East Victoria.

This extraordinary work has been republished by Shearsman as a very welcome companion volume to *Compared to What*. It includes a new introduction by Duggan (replacing Don Watson's foreword of the first edition) in which the poet discusses the status of his work as a 'documentary poem'. As this designation suggests, *The Ash Range* is not obviously poetry. Indeed, as Philip Mead argues in his review-essay of the first edition (in *Scripta* 4.4 [1987]: 23-40), the 'documentary poem', as exemplified in *The Ash Range*, appears to be 'a new and solitary category'.

The singularity of the work in an Australian context is most obvious in its use of bricolage, the assemblage of a text through the quotation of other texts (a technique that Duggan used in 'East', the first poem that appears in *Compared to What*). *The Ash Range* is a history of the Gippsland region made up mostly of quotation (and adaptation) from newspapers, diaries, letters, official reports and histories. As Duggan points out in the introduction, this is unlike anthology in that it presents 'itself as a cohesive argument where the assembled passages would complicate and develop lines of thought through their placement'. Cohesion is seen especially in Duggan's revisionist historiography: the attention to the values inherent in the supposedly objective sources of Duggan's poem. It is also seen in his thematic interest in the oddity of the past and with figures ignored by conventional history.

*The Ash Range* covers prehistoric to recent times (though it emphasizes the years from colonial settlement to the 'Ash Wednesday' fires of 1939). Duggan is attentive to the constructed nature of history, seen, for instance, in his inclusion of four parallel accounts of the same events written by the explorer Angus McMillan. He is also alert to history's provisionality (as seen in the various spellings of Gippsland). A major achievement of Duggan's revisionist historiography is his use of the archive itself to revise nationalist, heroic models of the colonial past. For instance, the fiction of 'White Australia' is exposed in the following lines:

Indian hawkers.

Arabs.

A Polish Jew

sold a lot of 'Brummagem'

a.k.a. 'Carlton' articles

up and down the Snowy;

the first pioneer of this form of civilization,

although I am informed

there is a sewing machine agent

ahead of me.

As well as alerting us to the radical difference (and oddity) of the past, the revisionist nature of the work also presents the past in quite moving ways. The fragility of the Gippslanders' tenure on the land is seen in lines such as these: 'The weather / ending the century / / and the silence / of back blocks'. Many people go mad or die, and Duggan highlights the crimes committed against Aborigines. Women, as Duggan notes in his introduction, are conspicuously silent, which shows a limitation of the kind of sources that Duggan relies upon.

The climax of the work is the account of the Ash Wednesday fires, 'January 1939', which shows how textual arrangement can work cinematically to produce suspense. This section is a masterpiece of arrangement, as this use of newspaper headlines suggests:

ALL HEAT RECORDS BROKEN / Max. Temperature,  
113 / Only Slight Relief Forecast

Wild Birds Overcome Fear of Man

Three Tons of Dead Fish

Snowy River Never Lower

Ultimately, as Mead suggests, *The Ash Range* is a kind of elegy. Everything in the book is lost; everyone presented is dead.

The elegiac nature of Duggan's poetry is not immediately apparent, but it is as important as his interest in bricolage, the quotidian and the visual. It is related to Duggan's sense of poetry's fragility, something observable in Duggan's diaries which are now (marvelously) available at the Australian Literature Resources website. On 18th March, 1979, Duggan writes: 'My poetry — a life watching curtains flutter — & what kind of story is that?' (<http://www.austlit.com/a/duggan/d3poetry-wars.html>). This kind of question appears often in Duggan's writing, conspicuously so, given the astonishing variety of that writing. It may also be behind Duggan's six-year hiatus from poetry from 1994-2000 (during which, amongst other things, Duggan wrote his doctoral thesis, which was published in 2001 as *Ghost Nation: Imagined Space and Australian Visual Culture 1901-1939*).

'A life watching curtains flutter' is a characteristically ironic description of an artist 'At the mercy / of what I'm given / to work with'. But as another entry in Duggan's diary suggests, the fragility of this method is also strangely akin to the ethnographic imagination. Duggan writes in his diary on 14th February 1995:

It occurs to me, reading James Clifford, that quite a bit of my poetry, like the 'New England Ode', is a kind of ethnography: one of a sort which flaunts its subjectivity rather than camouflages it (the 'on location' portions of *The Ash Range* also follow this model). I guess the context of a lot of my work (as it positions itself) is one of 'notes written to kill time', making a virtue out of purposelessness (just as the structure of *The Ash Range* takes 'music' rather than 'history' as an analogy). (<http://www.austlit.com/a/duggan/d7-melb-brisb.html/>)

*Compared to What* is Duggan's second Selected Poems. Given its English provenance it compares interestingly with the Selected Poems published by the University of Queensland Press in 1996. In *Compared to What* there are less of the epigrams of Martial, which is a shame, and fewer translations by other poets, but the three that are there (of Soffici) are stunning. There are also fewer parodies of Australian poets (probably in recognition of the international audience). There are a few minor editorial changes. 'Puppies', for instance, has become 'More Dogs'. Instead of the Australian-specific 'Ornithology', from *Memorials* (1996), there are two other sections from that book set in England and the USA. The collection nicely ends with 'September Song', from the chapbook published by Michael Brennan's Vagabond Press, *Let's Get Lost*, co-authored by Duggan, Pam Brown and Ken Bolton (the two Australian poets most akin to Duggan in style and technique). There is also, of course, material that appeared after the UQP *New and Selected* was published, most of which is from the multi-award winning collection *Mangroves*.

It is hard to fault the Shearsman Selected. One can point to favourite pieces that are missing (such as anything from 'Sites' in *Mangroves*), but, perhaps thanks to Duggan's attraction to bricolage and the documentary aesthetic, his work can be endlessly rearranged in deeply satisfying ways. Perhaps the most satisfying arrangement would be a Collected Poems (though even here the arrangement would more likely be thematic

a Connected Poems (though even here the arrangement would more likely be thematic rather than chronological).

Certainly, Duggan is an endlessly satisfying poet. His refusal of the conventional lyric (and lyric persona) has led to an extraordinary body of work, one in which ideas and intelligence are matched with humour and readability. *Compared to What* and *The Ash Range* are essential works for readers of contemporary poetry. They show an aesthetic that is characteristically oxymoronic: authoritative and fragile at once. Amid the immense artfulness of Duggan's arrangements there are images of the tenuousness of the poetic enterprise. These include the image of the author in 'Louvres' as 'a cursor moving slowly down a page', the image in 'The Minutes' of a 'Ripple in the silence', and most of all the image at the end of 'All Blues': 'the pilot light burns in your kitchen / all night long'.

David McCooley has written widely on Australian poetry (including the 'Contemporary Poetry' chapter in *The Cambridge Companion to Australian Literature*). His first book of poems, *Blister Pack* (Salt), was short-listed for the 2005 Age Book of the Year Awards. He lives in Geelong, Victoria, where he is a senior lecturer at Deakin University.



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