

Ernest G. Moll. *TransPacific: Collected Poems of Ernest G. Moll*. Edited by Alan L. Contreras. Oregon Review Books, 2024. 468 pages. AUS\$40 pb. ISBN 979-8218392895 AUS\$54 hb. ISBN 979-8218413347

E. G. (“Jerry”) Moll is probably the most substantial Australian poet you think you might have heard of, but aren’t quite sure. He gets brief coverage in the older standard histories like H. M. Green’s, and entries in the modern online encyclopedias like the *Oxford Companion to Modern Poetry*. He is represented in many Australian anthologies across the twentieth century, the most recent inclusion being “On Having Grown Old” (TP 242) in Jamie Grant’s, *One Hundred Australian Poems You Need to Know* (2008). Earlier, he was selected by anthologists including George Mackaness, Kenneth Slessor, Douglas Stewart, Judith Wright, and Les Murray. He is well covered in *AustLit* (of course), and there is extra biographical material on a webpage maintained by Dirk Spennemann at <https://marshall.csu.edu.au/Marshalls/html/Literature/Moll.html>

Ernest George Moll was born to German farming immigrants in Victoria in 1900, the seventh of eight children. When he was thirteen, he followed his elder brother Edwin to a boarding school and seminary in Adelaide whose raison d’être was to produce clerics and teachers for the Lutheran education system. Edwin had found the pathway congenial and eventually became a Lutheran pastor in California; Jerry found the school curriculum and environment unstimulating, restrictive and spiritually threadbare, and so left without entering the seminary. Fifty years later he would publish a scaring denunciation of the school in the autobiographical *The Road to Cactus-Land*. His five years there did, however, prepare for his enrolling in US universities. In 1920 he commenced a BA at Lawrence College in Wisconsin, graduating in 1922. He then completed a master’s degree at Harvard. This qualified him for an academic career in the US, first at Colorado College, and then from 1928 at the University of Oregon, from which he retired in 1966.

This academic career was punctuated by a series of return visits to Australia, first on leave without pay and then on half-pay sabbatical leave, and also by writing and publishing eleven books of poetry. Five of these were collected and reissued by Angus & Robertson as *Poems 1940–1955*, a sort of mid-career Collected Works. In retirement, he continued to write and publish; his last poem, we are told in the Introduction to *TransPacific*, being completed a few hours before his death aged 96. In addition to his poetical output, he wrote a substantial book on reading poetry, *The Appreciation of Poetry* (1933), and an unusual medley, *Below These Hills: The Story of a Riverina Farm* (1957), which is part family memoir and part Riverina agricultural history, interspersed with reprints of a few of his poems. A novel was also completed but remains unpublished.

The second of Moll’s return trips to Australia took place in 1939–40 with a teaching exchange to Sydney Teachers’ College. On this trip he wrote the poems that appear in his first Australian collection, *Cut from Mulga*. The timing was fortuitous, because the Australian government had recently decided to expand its support to writers through the Commonwealth Literary Fund in three new ways. These were to offer short-term fellowships to enable writers to devote themselves full-time to a writing project; to fund the introduction of courses in Australian literature in the universities; and to provide cost-underwriting guarantees to support publication of new and out-of-print Australian literature. Moll’s MS was one of four selected for a publication grant in the first round of this new scheme and was the only collection of poetry. The other books were: Vance Palmer, *National Portraits* (Angus & Robertson, 1940); C. Bede Maxwell, *Wooden Hookers: Epics of the Sea History of Australia* (Angus & Robertson, 1940); and Alfred Hart, *Stolne [sic] and Surreptitious Copies: A Comparative Study of Shakespeare’s Bad Quartos* (Melbourne University Press, 1942). Moll’s publication grant is

sometimes described as his winning an Australian Book of the Year award, but it was the Australian Literature Society that offered an annual prize (a Gold Medal in fact) for a particular work, not the Commonwealth Literary Fund. Nevertheless, the CLF selection of Moll's book for support (announced in early March 1940) did ensure that the book was well produced, and well noticed when it appeared in October that year.

Initial reviews were positive, acknowledging Moll's craftsmanship and his evident closeness to the Australian bush, but the general approval was ruptured by an aggressively negative review in *The Bulletin* (30 October 1940, p. 2). The Red Page reviewer declared that Moll, as an expatriate, was not an Australian writer, and therefore ineligible for CLF support. The review further insinuated that Moll's position as a US university professor had influenced the choice of the Advisory Committee: "Would they have published Professor Moll's verses if he had been plain Mr. Moll?" A third charge was that Moll was simply a pale imitation of Robert Frost, the reviewer supporting this assertion, rather unconvincingly, by juxtaposing passages from the two poets.

The *Bulletin* argument that Moll should have been ineligible for public support was swiftly rebutted by Patrick O'Leary in the *Melbourne Advocate* (7 Nov. 1940, p. 13), and more generous reviews in the *Sydney Morning Herald* (9 Nov. 1940, p. 8) and the *Adelaide Advertiser* (9 Nov. 1940, p. 10) even suggested that Moll had profited from his study of American poets and that his expatriatism gave him a richer perspective on his Australian experience. Moll was thereafter accepted as genuinely Australian, but he still felt it necessary to remind people from time to time that he had never surrendered his Australian citizenship.

Some of Moll's ideas on poetry sound strongly Wordsworthian:

The poet writes, first, because he is greatly conscious—sometimes distressingly so—of the worlds that lie within him and without, and because, by translating into words the objects of that consciousness he can clarify and heighten the feeling itself, and by giving it form and being external to himself soothe away the agitation and bring to his mind quiet and rest. He writes, secondly, to communicate to others the experiences that have excited him. (*The Appreciation of Poetry*, p. 5)

However, there is a significant difference in their attitudes to nature. For Wordsworth, nature is a beautiful but austere force capable of influencing humans for the good, psychologically and morally. For Moll it is more equivocal, and is understood through the lens of practical farming. Thus, the beauty of birdsong coexists with the implacable facts of avian predation ("The Butcher-Bird," *TP* 133; "Beware the Cuckoo," *TP* 157). Lambing provides a salient point from which to see this paradox of nature. In "Foxes among the Lambs" (*TP* 101) and "Ewe with Twin Lambs" (*TP* 139) the speaker intervenes to euthanise lambs rendered unviable by predatory attack or maternal rejection. But a rather different stance is taken in "Eagles over the Lambing Paddock" (*TP* 86) where the frail and tenuous existence of the new-born lambs seems to be "accidents of lust" which evoke pity at best and "sometimes . . . mere disgust." By contrast, the wheeling eagles, threatening predators though they be, seem to stand much closer to a Life Spirit with their "Great wing above the messy commonplaces / Of birth and death and the weak sprawl of feeling"; so that "coolly then would flow through heart and brain / Respect for life again" (*TP* 86–87).

Moreover, the farmer's bond to nature is intensified by his own committed endeavours—he has skin in the game, as it were. Thus, a returned veteran claims a talismanic power in the wheat paddock:

“One good foot left of what was once two feet,
 One lung just fair, and one unclouded eye;
 But all those years I heard them whining by
 And in the mud I chuckled to remember
 How wheat turns copper and gold in late November.” (“Returned Soldier,” *TP* 89)

Although always ready to exult in birdsong and lush paddocks of wheat, Moll also has a decided preference for spare, grudging nature as in “Thistles in Winter” (*TP* 191), “Barren Country” (*TP* 174), or “Desert Country in Summer” (*TP* 98). In the last, the poet describes a static landscape that lacks softness, hope, vision or emotional variety, but still offers a metaphysical centring:

And I who dared to offer this intrusion
 On what concerned me not, feel here alone
 The peace that is when thought sloughs off illusion
 Like withered flesh, and leaves the steady bone.

One of the striking aspects of Moll’s poetry is its range both in subject and verse form. Among the shorter poems are love lyrics, satiric quatrains, character sketches, and nature observations. His satire can be light and whimsical:

Since what he saw in woman’s eyes
 Was his torch for paradise,
 And what he noticed of her legs
 Stirred his being to its dregs,
 The hardest thing he had to do
 Was to be one man, not two. (“Romanticist’s Problem,” *TP* 165)

or more pointed:

He made a harem of his dreams and sat
 Like a rich prince among them, grave and mild;
 And though in time they all grew very fat,
 Not one of them produced a healthy child. (“A Visionary,” *TP* 178)

Moll also wrote more ambitious long poems, some of them book-length. In 1946 he arrived back in Australia to write *The Waterhole*, a nine-part saga of Australia told in 98 Italian sonnets. This is a considerable technical accomplishment. It starts from describing a detached primordial power, the Quiet, which watches over the balance of evolutionary inventiveness (Life) and planetary stability (Law) and the way humankind pushes towards self-destruction. The first episodes deal with the ecology of the billabong, including a quadratic interaction where a large frog is about to seize a butterfly while simultaneously a snake readies to strike at him and a kookaburra in a tree observes the action dispassionately because both frog and snake are too big for him to attack. The frog leaps just in time; the kookaburra chuckles,

Then, moved to hunger by the play he’d seen
 Down there below, he thought him of a hill
 Where a brown wood-mouse foraged round a tree
 And found the thought so wonderfully serene,
 So sure and sweet a morsel in his bill,
 It muffled half his laughter lusciously. (*TP* 203)

Successive episodes cover the seasonal visits to the waterhole by Indigenous people, the arrival of white pastoralists with their new types of animal, the displacement of Aboriginal people and the establishment of permanent buildings, the clearing of the land for agriculture and stock. The penultimate section shows the waterhole filled in to form a racecourse for the city that has expanded to engulf the valley. This section has two scenes: one in church where members of the congregation pray for a range of things that are singularly unspiritual; and the second at the racecourse where people with differing levels of desperation place bets on the last race of the day, and the poet has the supremely challenging task of calling the race in a sonnet. The poem concludes with a repudiation of the progressivist narrative of Australia and a demand for the country to take responsibility for its past.

This is our hope, my country: only we
 Wrought the sad thing we look on with sick eyes.
 Dear Brutus, hear my whisper, the fault lies
 Not in our stars! How is it they should be
 Concerned with us who have so beggarly
 Flattered the very pavement with our sighs
 And called—ah, basest of inequities!—
 What is our will's permission, destiny. (TP 230)

A few of Moll's longer poems imaginatively expand literary stories. He gives us the letter that Mary Shelley might have written to Edward Trelawny when he courted her almost a decade after Shelley's death (TP 146). He also retells the *Book of Job* with intense focus on the prophet's bootless anger against Yahweh (TP 247). But the most effective of his imaginative projections is the 55-sonnet sequence, *Briseis*, published in New York in 1965.

Homer gave Briseis only a single speech in the *Iliad*, even though she is the involuntary cause of what podcaster Natalie Haynes, has delightfully called "Achilles' 18-book sulk" and the consequent death of many Greeks (*Natalie Haynes Stands up for the Classics*, "Homer: *The Iliad*"). In that speech to the dead Patroklos, Briseis reprises the killing of her father and brothers by Achilles, and Patroklos's promise to see her married to Achilles. Ovid in *Heroides* gave Briseis a fuller voice as she writes Achilles a letter reproaching him for not accepting Agamemnon's apology which would have reunited her with Achilles. But Moll's poem makes a much more imaginative enquiry into what sort of love would be possible in a world rendered groundless and chaotic by the rule of arbitrary gods and a warrior culture in which rape chronicles battlefield success.

Literates in war and lust, the heroes write
 On our clean flesh their tale of victories,
 . . .
 Deep in my loins the ravisher's hard thrust
 Throbbled with the triumph of my husband slain,
 My brothers dead, our fields laid waste and bare,
 Lyrnessos the fair city ground to dust:
 Deep in my loins, again and yet again,
 Hairy Achilles wrote his victory there. (TP 320)

Initially, Briseis intends only to choose her moment to kill Achilles, but her survival skills and a sense that Achilles is also constrained—she and Achilles are "sharers in a yoke" (TP 322)—change her tactics. And so

... when the dogs of war were chained and sprawled
 Twitching in night's dark kennel, I sent out
 Such troops as only woman could deploy
 Against his breathing flesh, however walled,
 And then he knew surrender and a rout
 Such as he would not live to see for Troy. (TP 324)

TransPacific reprints the contents of Moll's seventeen books of poetry, supplemented by some early poems published in a student magazine in Moll's university days, a couple of late unpublished poems, and two poems that appeared in Australian newspapers but were never reprinted in a collection. The editor, Alan Contreras, a fellow poet, editor of other Oregon writers, and authority on Oregon birdlife, has produced this volume, apparently with minimal or no institutional resources, to keep Moll's poetry available for another generation. It should be regarded as a reprint rather than an edition, as there is minimal intervention; and even though Contreras does admit to making some silent corrections "when the mistake is clear" (TP 13), he does not systematically engage with, or even draw attention to, textual issues that in a more critical edition would require elucidation and resolution. There was no scope, for example, to raise an eyebrow at the phrase, "That haunty melody" (TP 16), or at "whiskers flexed with beer" (TP 115). Moreover, there is no acknowledgment that the source texts for some of the poems were not the original volumes, but rather the 1957 compendium of five Australian volumes issued by Angus & Robertson as *Poems 1940–1955*. The A&R editors made some changes to capitalisation and punctuation, corrected an error or two and introduced a couple of new ones. Space has been saved by omitting some of Moll's own notes which identify allusions and references the poems make to other literary works. Most readers would have been grateful for those.

By way of apparatus, there is an Introduction containing a brief biography, a discussion of why Moll is not better known today, a summary of recurrent themes and verse forms in the poetry, and a statement of the scope of this reprinting. There is an elegant preface by Patrick Buckridge pointing, *inter alia*, to Moll's literary self-consciousness; a glossary of words, places or persons likely to be unfamiliar to either North American and Australian readers (e.g. Don Bradman, Knight's-Plume); and a list of awardees of a research fellowship set up at the University of Oregon to honour Moll's memory. There is also an alphabetical index to titles to help readers navigate the formidable Contents list of over 500 poems.

Alan Contreras has done a remarkable job in bringing E. G. Moll's poems back into print. Almost the entire oeuvre was rekeyed, the proofing of which took Contreras and an assistant several months. Additional unpublished late poems were secured from Moll's friends. While the student newspaper, *The Lawrentian*, was searched, the editor acknowledges that there may be more poems to be discovered in magazines and newspapers that did not find their way into Moll's collections and so do not appear in this reprinting. That said, *TransPacific* offers a convenient way for a new generation to encounter almost all the work of an Australian poet whose oeuvre is overdue for dissemination and re-evaluation.

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