

## Poems, Plants and Post-modern Australian Men and Women: or ‘The Boy from the Bush’ in Sydney Town

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The following article is a short reflection on the already very full life and writing career of Edwin Wilson (b.1942), a former science teacher and botanist, and, until recently, long time worker in Community Programs at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Sydney. The life as recorded to date is deemed peculiarly representative of ‘first generation academics/teachers’ and working class country children in the later twentieth century. It was particularly occasioned by the issue of the considerable second volume of his autobiography, *The Melancholy Dane: A Portrait of the Poet as a Young Man* (2006).<sup>1</sup>

It may seem somewhat odd to review at length in a folklore journal a bulky volume which is an apparent literary self-portrait, one entitled by its author ‘book two of poetic memoirs... following on from ... *The Mullumbimby Kid: A Portrait of the Poet as a Child* (2000)’. Yet to write about Edwin Wilson (b. 1942) and his career as poet and botanist is always, and necessarily, to be also writing about the plethora of experiences of this complex person as a sounding board for mindsets and social pressures in Australia across the twentieth century. For, in his own relatively short life span, the writer has been able to tap into so many facets of Australia’s past working class/largely classless culture and of its uneven survival in the later twentieth century. And his first book of verse, *Banyan* (1982) had been deemed to balance precariously between cynicism and sentiment as he began recording his version of the ordinary people’s experiences.

This task that Wilson has taken up, however honest the report, now given, might seem to be one of considerable complexity; and yet the attempt is also one that cannot but give great satisfaction to an Australian folklorist at the beginning of the twenty first century. For there is always so much more offered than the poems themselves, or the relatively

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<sup>1</sup> Wilson, Edwin, *The Melancholy Dane: A Portrait of the Poet as a Young Man* (Lane Cove, NSW: Woodbine Press, 2006). PO Box 32, Lane Cove, NSW, 2066. Pp. 367. Illustrated with many photographs, graphics, etc. ISBN 0 949557 21 8. R.R.P. \$33-00.

common motif, the tortured career of a bush-born (Australian) poet ‘as a young man’ who will seek education, experience, and a life philosophy with Jungian overtones and types, he moving through a world progressively more permissive, more cynical and more filled with opportunities for the bizarre. Of course, he is getting to know himself and so he takes us through a clutch of archetypes and complexes, the persona, the shadow, and the rest.

Much of the book is concerned with what seems to be the Jungian notion of the unknown other, and so is about projection and identification, treating much of the challenge involved with intimacy and tentative sexual relationships. Towards the end of this ongoing saga, we reach the world of mid-life crisis, and the need to relate to the aspects of the personality not yet given expression to that point. Certainly the book will be remembered for its frankness, insights, and perhaps unintended drollness as the writer comes to self-knowledge, listens to his inner voice and tells us of the life progressing, and how his behaviour and philosophy both became authentic, savoured, and so reflective on his [Australian] time and in his several places. He is, too, highly articulate on (societal) ‘truth’, religion, moral and political power and order and chaos, as well as being totally honest on race relations.

Readers of this journal will, doubtless, remember that they have met this unexpectedly complex and developing career and personality before—as in these of his contributed articles:

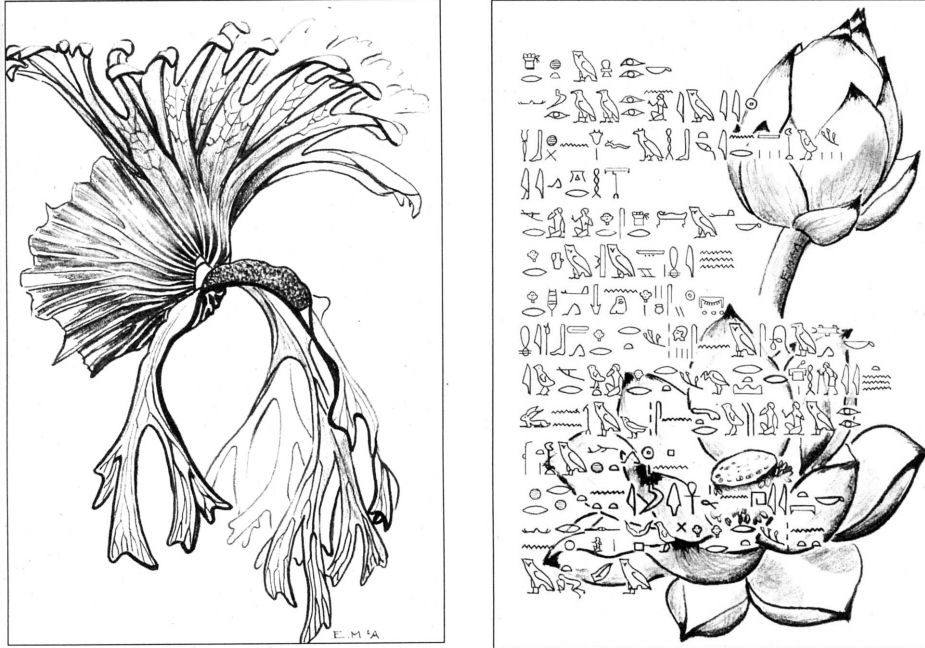
- (i) ‘The Botanic Verses: and Problems of Sexual Tolerance, 1789 to the Present’, *Australian Folklore*, 10 (1995), pp. 189-198;
- (ii) ‘Oliver Bainbridge: An Unacknowledged Casualty of the Death of Empire’,<sup>2</sup> *Australian Folklore*, 13 (1998), pp. 77-93; or
- (iii) ‘The Poetry of Place: Poetic Foci in the Sydney Gardens and Domain’, *Australian Folklore*, 15 (2000), pp. 123-132.

By now the full list of his separate publications—and these issued over some twenty five years—already numbers eighteen, all exquisitely produced in the tradition of his publisher, the earlier named, as the Edwards and Shaw Press, and many with—somehow enlightening—fine delicate botanical drawings by Elizabeth McAlpine. And each of them may variously be said to both amplify—and make more comprehensible—his crowded personal life and the other ingredients in/of the mélange of searingly honest records of personal experiences. And this says nothing of his artistic/cosmic visions and his engagements

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<sup>2</sup> The Bainbridge investigation is discussed farther on in the book (pp. 228, ff.).

with Australia's changing eastern seaboard, its vegetation, its cultural



*Two fine line drawings from The Botanic Verses (1993),  
by Elizabeth McAlpine.*

behaviour patterns and its so often quirkishly eccentric/honest individual people. For Wilson is ever open to experience, a wayfarer, hugely savouring those colourful characters surviving from earlier eras.

He is also, par excellence, the agonisingly sincere recorder of the changing social climates, the vast social and cultural disruptions in our mores at an almost 'renaissance time', over the last forty years. He is especially significant as a recorder of the unmarried, the estranged, and of all those persistently seeking for a more meaningful life. For, as is so often the case, they are deprived of the solaces of religion, or of a totally understanding and supportive emotional relationship, let alone of an extended family. In that last sense, at least, he is also a later interpreter of Depression time's children and parents, the remarkably austere and moralistic generation before the 'baby boomers'. Yet that earlier universal pain, and searingly scarifying suffering, and a style without the later and soon universal mindless affluence and greed, is something that he has occasion to be thankful—and muse on—at many points in what may now be seen to be the steadily growing canon of his works.

For Edwin Wilson—a man rightly proud of both his personally-traced Danish extraction, and Irish convict antecedents—is distinctively Australian by familial domicile. He is, too, ever the sensitive watcher, concerned to establish personal identity, to record (significant) change, and to make remarkable use of the seemingly most slight of available oral history sources. These he uses to document his own private/public and community heritage, they also inspiring his own sculpture pieces and his responses to so many surviving and poignantly decrepit buildings. In fact, he is also to be seen as a doughty—if quirky—contributor to so many aspects of the built and the environmentally desirable New South Wales ‘Heritage and Conservation Register’, according to the Heritage Act (1981) and its amendments.

### *The Classic Botanist*

Above all else, however, his mind is that of a field botanist, a scientist and yet with the perception of the artist, an unsentimental watcher finely tuned to the perception of difference, of beauty, of setting, and of all forms of courageous survival, botanical, faunal, social and architectural. Accordingly, with the eye of wonder and ever the artist, he makes innumerable serendipitous discoveries—these seemingly ever put in his path—as he seeks for continuity in the social and built setting and in the heart and soul of our poorer fellows and their gritty circumstances. And yet he is also a regionalist. In particular, he intuits—and shares with us—the spiritual qualities of particular places, both seaboard and highland, wilderness and nurtured, ‘something that poets and painters have always known’ (*Poetry of Place*,<sup>3</sup> p. 7). Thus he is a peculiarly reliable recorder of both eccentricity and change in his two erstwhile nurturing communities, the Northern Tablelands of New South Wales, and its tertiary education establishments in Armidale, and his earliest nurture in the villages of the far North Coast, a region changing too much and prone to regrettable social ‘development’.

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While the much shorter and deeply nostalgic *The Mullumbimby Kid* (2000)<sup>4</sup> had been subtitled ‘A Portrait of the Poet as a Child’, the sense of it is now given here as a prequel or ‘Prologue’ (pp. 7-26) for the much

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<sup>3</sup> *Poetry of Place: Royal Botanic Gardens Sydney*, (Botanic Gardens Trust, 2004.) This book is a substantially revised and updated edition of his earlier *The Wishing Tree: statues, memorials, memorial trees, etc., in the Royal Botanic Gardens, Domain, and Centennial Park* (Sydney: Kangaroo Press, 1992).

<sup>4</sup> Edwin Wilson, is now—in the Spring of 2008—thinking of a further revision of this first autobiographical text, one that has become something of an illuminating—if not quite explicable—local classic for ‘sea-change folk’ in the region of his earliest nurture.

more mature text. Here he has recorded the slowly gleaned details of: his Danish great-grandfather, who had jumped ship in 1854; his family tree, and that of his mother, one with various convict members; and an unexpected link to Admiral Nelson—so much of which Edwin Wilson only discovered by investigation in his middle years. (This is helpfully summarized on pp. 8-10.)

The rest of the 'Prologue' (pp. 11-26) is a lucid, if reflective and incisive perspective on the earlier volume and other prose, a body of text notable for its acceptance of various teasing hauntings that he experiences, and of conflicting fragments of authentic family gossip. These are mingled with speculations about the migrations of minority groups in Asia, certain ghastly family suicides and their concomitants, his own (self-inflicted) guilt and shame at his seniors' acts (p. 13), and the mass of inevitable tensions for him from the family's raw and debilitating personal history, for

My trouble was I remembered all the details of the slightly conflicting versions of the stories told by different sources. (p. 14)

Yet he would come to many universal truths on the way.

Perhaps the best indication of his more immediate and humble New South Wales North Coast nurture is encapsulated in the following terse paragraph—

We lived in an isolated fibro house at East Wardell,<sup>5</sup> in the middle of a total war, without running water or electricity. The weeds grew wild. There were blackouts every night. I could hear the muffled clubbing from the bombing range at Evans Head. The Japs were advancing still...<sup>6</sup> (p. 14)

Much recalled stressful reaction to his earliest experiences in unfamiliar settings and the like is linked with the family's autistic strand, in Edwin's case this awkward response pattern later to be identified as Asperger's Syndrome. This characteristic, as we are told in some melancholy, produces loners who watch and often are suppressed in their immediate societies, and this is particularly evident in his own early and so different behaviour pattern—

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<sup>5</sup> In the north east corner of New South Wales.

<sup>6</sup> Much of this is similar to the like North Coast recollections of the novelist, Thomas Keneally (b. 1935) in his *The Fear* (1965)—that text being a mix of memory, fearful recollection and imagination, later condensed and reissued as *By the Line* (1989). This account of child terror at the advance of the Japanese—as experienced by Keneally himself—and his fictional alter ego, Danny—discussed in some detail, pp. 187,ff. of my 'The Great Grey Gaol by the Sea', in *Australian Folklore*, 20 (2005).

... all the symptoms of being non-tactful, hyper-truthful, single-minded, and good at systematizing, with recall of precise details of certain events, but weak in socializing skills (*ibid.*)

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The rest of the 'Prologue' contains certain key pivotal details in his progressive understanding of himself, of his settings and so of his linked obsession with recording colours, shapes, and bizarre survivals of the tragic waste surrounding so many wretched lives, for

- 'poets are essentially poor communicators [and try to compensate for this];
- his own proneness was to draw into isolated activities like painting and orchid growing;
- a tendency towards aggressive expression<sup>7</sup>—especially towards other males of all ages—this from a feeling of social inadequacy;
- a heightened sense of when people had lied to him (p. 18); and
- his painful awareness of the lingering Protestant and Catholic 'wars', these all too deeply hypocritical and yet often still raging very close to him.

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#### *Greater Divisions of his/ the Modern/Postmodern Australian Life*

After much reflection, and so many earlier books, Wilson has now arrived at an understood and accepted life pattern, one best understood in the following probably content- approximate titles (not those of the poet writer) that may be given to the nine long chapters, each generously fleshed out with photographs, relevant verses and the situations that begat them, as well as amazing details from the writer's considerable powers of psychic recall, from the period immediately after his late teens' time at the Armidale Teachers College—

1. a bush boy in Sydney Town, first school teaching and finding city girls and then having other startling experiences;
2. school teaching—more confidently now—and, the part-time taking of challenging university Science classes;
3. at Baxter, the University of New South Wales College, still doing interesting Science, but now, for the first time, finding young peer

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<sup>7</sup> There are a surprising number of these identity/ honour-provoked incidents in the both the Armidale teaching and lecturing and Sydney years, particularly when the writer does not feel himself to be in control of the situation, or when he is among too many strangers. This (social) limitation is not obvious in his many encounters with young women, unless they should play class and money games to embarrass him.

eccentrics and discovering a greater ‘truth’ in art and literature; starting a loose-leaf journal, the beginning of his ‘writing bug’<sup>8</sup> (p. 113); living in his head too much and identifying closely with Hamlet, the prince and the play—see the cover of the present work—thus casting himself as ‘the noble-hearted Melancholy Dane, still trying to do right by men’ (p. 117); watching teachers in the bush, with so many of his friends suddenly and inexplicably marrying, and then wondering about a possible return to his origins;

4. the year he would meet the hauntingly attractive Margaret, the girl he would marry, by whom he would have a son later, and whom he would divorce in much pain and guilt;

5. his return to Armidale, to teach at its Teachers College, while his young wife went on with her Bachelor of Arts,<sup>9</sup> his brushes with philosophy, and the disappointment at its semantics; and the couple buying land, and designing and building a house,<sup>10</sup> with too many painful battles in it, he not realizing quickly enough that ‘all marriages are power struggles’ (p. 187); further, the (ever more chaotic) times were against their achieving stability, for

had we bonded in less interesting times we might have been forced to make a go of it. With less mobility, ambition, turbulence and choice, we may have compromised and mellowed into grace, and rubbed the rougher edges off each other.’ (pp. 190-191);

6. his separation, moves towards divorce, poverty in Sydney—‘the garret phase’ of his teaching, his drafting of a novel on travel by car in the bush—and then his involvement with the Botanical Gardens beside Sydney Harbour and

7. the Sydney Museum, or ‘The House of the Muses’;

8. his more mature loves, these preparing him for

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<sup>8</sup> As he describes it in retrospect,

It turned out to be a collection of diary entries and descriptions, notes and ideas from other books, reflections, insights, oaths, profanities, other people’s poems, illustrations, ideas for paintings, embryonic verse, notes dredged from memory and dreams a creative journal of developing and finished poems, descriptions, and lists of things to do—a pretty good autobiography. (p.113)

The realization that he was a poet would only come to him at thirty-two, when he was working at the Museum in Sydney.

<sup>9</sup> This section is a very intriguing and not too sympathetic comment on the mores of an Australian Teachers College, it serving as his example of power, networks and less integrity as he comes to know it better than he first did as a gauche teenager.

<sup>10</sup> Because he knows the small city of Armidale of old, he is able to penetrate more deeply the double standards and the fake conventions of gentility in its so-called gentlemen’s club, where the squattocracy poses in irritatingly distasteful fashion. Pleasingly this is to be contrasted with

the thin, cold, clean Armidale air [where he was] hit in the solar plexus by the number, apparent proximity, and intensity of the stars. (p. 177)

And the time gives him his first experiences in the protection of the region’s ecology, as well as guidance in the field of genealogical research.

9. his lasting second marriage to

an attractive and intelligent working-class woman... aware of what was going on in the world' (p. 311),

thus bringing them, both individually and cumulatively, great calm, an integrated life and, ultimately, a new and true family .

*The Reader Response*

Now, all these blocks of text, both separately and collectively, work to achieve total conviction for the (older) reader, due to Wilson's ability to recreate the articulate nuance, the clashing situation or gauche behaviour of those destabilised decades, the latter being so evocative of the so called 'classless' society and its disorder in the last third of the twentieth century in New South Wales. His last moods of resignation and even despair are well caught in the motto on his book plates—'Life is transitory', a haunting half line from Old English elegy.

The result of all these heroic intellectual efforts—and the dubious behaviour of most of the graduates and academics he meets—cause him to feel that he needs to get out of academic life, a field now become hateful, although it had given him a greater understanding of the world of botany than he had ever had before.

After his time away and teaching in the northern academic hotbed of limned in personalities and fragile egos, he reflects on the changes in Sydney over those ten years:

Sydney had changed one hell of a lot... Dances had virtually disappeared and had been replaced by discos and wine bars. I didn't adapt so well to this new scene... Noise is the great plague of modern life. White noise was used by people to avoid analysis, and contemplation, and non-structured time. Most people were scared of thought, of thought of any kind...

I had a rich internal life, and, because of my calling, I tended ... to live in my head a lot. (p. 232, ff.)

Meanwhile, the new and 'garret phase' of his Sydney life had made him observant, self-reliant, and able to enjoy the city authentically and without the many stresses of his earlier time there. Further, worldly wiser, older, more self-aware, and on this second time around, and in the free and frank camaraderie of the museum, he now found very congenial colleagues 'funny, vital, lusty and alive' (p. 245). And this time he knew that, in this free world of applying science socially, he felt that he was accepted for who he was and what he did, now being in himself much more comfortable in various social networks, free from false pretense.



And now, free enough in himself to paint, he actually meets Brett Whiteley, as well as getting to an orchid conference in Sydney, there to publicly express another vital aspect of himself, his worship of unflawed beauty. This is followed by the incident of the tantalizingly exotic Japanese girl, and experiencing the ambience of the Sydney Opera House. In some ways there is, surely, a touch of Henry Fielding's more mature and less gauche Tom Jones<sup>11</sup> in these sequences.

Interestingly he charts the later twentieth century impact of the thought of Margaret Thatcher and her cloud of shallow 'managerial' acolytes on Australian government and institutions, thereby producing those

who came along with their cost-cutting efficiencies, marketing and market forces, stakeholders, clients outcomes, 'user-pays'. Total Quality Management, 'world's best practice' and all that other trendy crap and jargon. (p. 283)

However, the direct honesty of the more mature Cheryl as his female friend is in marked contrast with so many of his earlier philanderings, and Wilson feels himself to be able to be sincere, and understands now that he has simple if clamouring personal needs, and has come through his divorce with 'a degree of humour and integrity'.

Further he comes to understand that he must write poems when the spirit moves him, that he is in love and then, suddenly, he realized

How much I loved this land, this time and place in Australia, in this vital harbour city surrounded by bush flowers... at almost thirty two, I knew I was a poet now, because of the Museum... (p. 329).

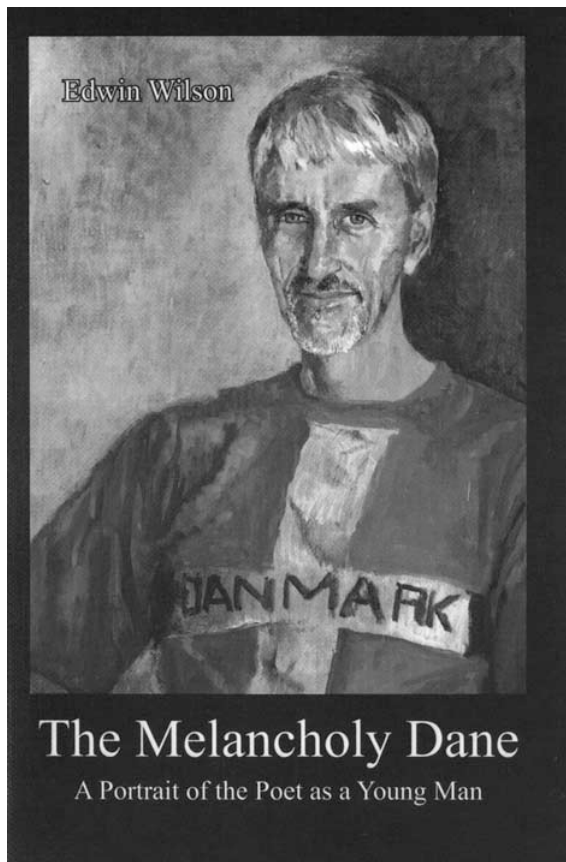
The other strand to his being is the realization of his contemplative stance, perhaps because of his different gene—his slight autism—and the savouring of the fact that his role was

to watch, feel and record, understanding that all generations loved/lusted/hated through the ages. And all those long dead were speaking to me now... And now I was alive and loving at this creeping edge of now, and I would soon be gone, and it was always thus.

The last section of the book tells of personal tragedy, a self-respecting poetic triumph, the jettisoning of guilt and feelings of humiliation and the midlife problems of guilt, and a great calm, and so the attainment of

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<sup>11</sup> Wilson appears to echo incidents of Henry Fielding's novel of the same name at various points, not least in the notions of the life journey, those met along it, and this pre-Jung pattern of quest, encounter, and the gaining of both greater wisdom and self-knowledge.



*Cover of The Melancholy Dane (2006). Image presents the writer/recorder as a Hamlet, but with the freedoms of modern life, and with the lively wisdom of maturity.*

his true creative vocation, the writing of poetry, the publishing of the same, and good karma now substituting for so many years of the opposite (p. 367). For he has emerged from the shadow, developed a deeper relation with his soul and reclaimed the discarded aspects of his humanity, having been guided through the labyrinth of illusions and disillusionments encountered by so many in the modern age, and in its sequential phase.

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#### *The Folklorist–Recorder in the Man*

By now it will be clear that Edwin Wilson is someone who has lived/experienced many more years than his calendar tally, has in various ways spanned—or empathetically felt—perhaps some one hundred and fifty years of the life of New South Wales, indeed, too, so very much of the social and educational history of his nation since the end of the transportation era. Although it did not seem so, he has been saved from

the worst of 'science' and entered into a life of philosophical and literary adventure, of the spirit and of much personal reward.



*Botanical line art logo  
used for all publications  
by Woodbine Press.*

Educationally and socially he has been a simple country outsider, has tried to use Sydney, but, thankfully, has not been consumed by it, and he has found peace, beauty and empathy when he thought these states unattainable for himself. He has emerged from the place of betwixt and between, he has become of the living, abandoning the cold and the destructive and has attained the loving—yet all of this presented in the real world of struggle and failure, and by an outsider everyman.

He has gone through the twentieth century looking glass, has grasped the best and the most painful parts of his entrapping inheritance, of his simple yet crucial educational opportunities for development and unusual work experiences, so that his life is the more transformed by them. He has realized, however slowly, that his avocation was to be a watcher—not on a mining warden's verandah, as with Thomas Browne in the gold rush era—or on a cast iron balcony like Hal Porter, in the urban scene of the earlier twentieth century—but from the most humble rural circumstances. And so he would be the more shyly heroic in the process of carving out a satisfying life pattern for himself.

And then, miraculously, he would achieve an inner reconciliation. For, as the rear flyleaf puts it succinctly, he had courageously, over more than twenty years

embarked on an exploration of poetic genesis,<sup>12</sup> of love, loss, rage, and longing, and the gender wars.

And so it is that this volume tells that Australia-set tale in an uneven, yet searingly honest fashion, one that is well complemented by the many pieces in his *Collected Poems*<sup>13</sup> volume of 2002. Now he is learning to see with his heart, to ever expand his awareness, and, as was said of *Anthology in Australian Poetry Book Reviews* (electronic publishing):

[Wilson is a] refined voice... knowledgeable about botany and history, but, more importantly, he knows about the human heart...[and has] a positive dislike... for New Age rhapsodies, too facile harmony... [and] rages against mediocrity and political oppression.'

For readers of this journal it is also the case that he tells so much of yesterday's and today's class wars, of the quirks of social mobility when not accompanied by vast wealth, the pretentiousness of more recent secondary and tertiary education, both in the rural setting and in the metropolis, and of the decency of so many whose lives have been confused, harrowing, and so far from the stable and spacious nurtures of earlier years. While many critics have focused on the poet's inspiration from Housman, there is a measure of Wordsworth too in his meditations on a troubled period of irreversible change for so many of the ordinary people of Australia. It is this which puts him in the group of folklore interpreters who record the tragic loss of so much in an age of irreversible change.

Yet the poet in him in the end affirms man's ability to dream, to care for one's fellows, to practise folk wisdom and so come to an appreciation of the universal truths to human existence.

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<sup>12</sup> This might very well be an Aristotelean version—in Australian terms—of the exploration of the human condition

<sup>13</sup> This volume, issued by Kardoorair Press in 2002, has this title: *Anthology: Collected Poems of Edwin Wilson, 1967-2002*, and with 'Introduction' and various notes, it comprises some 552 pages.