'The Mitchells' by Les Murray: Jason Clapham shows how Les Murray's sonnet 'The Mitchells' is interesting for students of post-colonial literature as well as those exploring what the sonnet can do

Jason Clapham


Copyright: COPYRIGHT 2006 Philip Allan Updates
http://www.philipallan.co.uk/englishreview/index.htm

Full Text:

There are certain poems that seem difficult to write about because they are so easy. Les Murray's 'The Mitchells', written in 1973, has just this sort of difficult simplicity. The language of Australia's most prominent poet is more usually dense and outspoken--the ironically titled Subhuman Redneck Poems is more characteristic of his work. 'The Mitchells' is different: on first glance it seems to be no more than an affectionate description of two men taking a lunch break in the outback.

Concealed celebration

One way to approach poems such as these is to start not with language and form but with the key question the reader is left with. In this case, what is it about the Mitchells that the poet thinks is worth writing about? There is an interesting humility about the men, choosing to boil their water in a 'prune tin' and wear an 'oil-stained felt hat' even though one of them 'has been rich'. Then there is the curious delayed response of the second Mitchell, who would look up 'with pain and subtle amusement' before repeating the phrase 'I'm one of the Mitchells'. In fact, these two features are related: the faint, understated humour at work here is reminiscent of a quality Murray associates with deeply Australian traits of restraint coupled with the sardonic.

Seen in the light of Murray's comments, the poem appears to be a study--or even a celebration--of Australian rural culture. Some years before writing this poem Murray
expressed a 'paradoxical' desire to 'celebrate something without giving it away', and this poem appears to do that. There is a festive quality about the 'unthinning mists of white/bursaria blossom', both in their appearance and in bursaria being another name for the Christmas Bush (as it flowers in the Australian midsummer). The bees are described as working a 'shift', creating a connection between their work in the Australian flora—bursaria and wattles—and that of the men working the land, while the second Mitchell holds leaves in his hand as he gives his name, creating a strong association between the men's identity and the land they farm.

The poem as a sonnet

In view of this, it might seem odd to write this poem as a sonnet, a quintessentially European form with resonances of genteel love games and the Elizabethan court. But as Bill Ashcroft says, Murray:

faces two directions, wishing to reconstitute experience through
an act of writing which uses the tools of one culture or society
and yet seeks to remain faithful to the experiences of another.

(Ashcroft 2002, p. 59)

A cursory glance at the poem establishes the traditional division into octave and sestet, with the octave further divided into two quatrains (at least visually). More important, perhaps, is the sense of a volta in the unexpected switch to an urban setting in the final line 'Sometimes the scene is an avenue'. As in a traditional sonnet, this line effectively alters the meaning of the sonnet as a whole: the formal, urban 'avenue' suggests that this pair of men represent something broader than a particular rural culture; they represent Australia itself.

We might read this as an irreverent post-colonial 'subversion' of the genre. Murray has replaced the urbanity and confident virtuosity expected of the sonnet with plain speaking ('I am seeing this') and an awkward hesitation ('raise/I think for wires' ... 'The first man, if asked' ...). Instead of aristocratic amours, this sonnet cheerfully presents workmen eating
'big meat sandwiches out of a styrofoam/box with a handle'. There might be something indecorous about the pronounced caesurae that slice through four lines and the four enjambed lines of the octave. The 13-, 14- and 16-syllable lines seem to struggle against the confinement of the sonnet 'box': Murray appears to be working against the sonnet form, trying to free himself of it.

Beyond this, however, such readings are too limiting to allow us to discover much of interest about the poem. It could be argued that Murray is doing what poets have always done, importing foreign genres and adapting them to local language and experience. (The English sonnet tradition began this way, with Wyatt in the sixteenth century.) Seeing Murray as a sort of Janus, with one eye on the poetic genres of the 'centre' and the other on the marginal 'otherness' of Australian experience, is simply inadequate. As he remarks in his introduction to Hell and After, Murray feels he has struggled throughout his career against 'the narrow national protectionisms which still impede much poetry in English from reaching its natural public across the whole Anglophone world'. Post-colonial readings, many of them emanating from the 'centre', seem to constitute one kind of 'protectionism', as they leave Murray with a secondary status.

The 'vernacular republic'

Language is what 'The Mitchells' is really about. The reader is struck by the lack of literary pretension right from the opening four words, and the language of the whole poem seems to imitate the directness, reticence and humour discernable in the quoted speech it includes. There is little that could be described as non-standard English, grammatically speaking, but the attempts to capture the cadences of Australian speech are unmistakable. This is particularly apparent on hearing Murray read this poem; listen, for example, to the elongation of the /a/ sound of the word 'handle' and the lack of any sort of subordinating pause around the phrase 'I think' in the third line.

The first published version bore the more grandiose title 'Dedication, Written Last, for the Vernacular Republic' (1974). Although this was replaced, Murray used the idea of a 'vernacular republic' for his 1976 edition of selected poems, where the Australian vernacular is a key to understanding Australian identity. It is 'the matrix [of Australian] distinctiveness' he says; '[w]e are a colloquial nation, [a] vernacular republic'.
The poem dignifies Australian speech, presenting it as beautiful in its own way and worthy of being immortalised in the high art of the sonnet. In his review of the first dictionary of Australian English, Murray comments on:

how much larger and richer our dialect is than many had thought ...
gently but firmly shifting our linguistic perception, so that our entire language is henceforth centred for us, not thousands of miles away, but here where we live.

This is an observation that might also be applied to his own poetry.

Nearly everything they say is ritual

The penultimate line of the poem reinforces the importance of identity: 'Nearly everything/they say is ritual'. The purpose of the men's speaking is, like many rituals, to express a sense of identity and belonging, and the 'oil-stained felt hat' serves also as a badge of identity. Indeed, the speaker persistently fails to distinguish one man from the other--what is important is the fact that they are both Mitchells, not their differences or Christian names.

The name Mitchell, like the name Murray, is strongly associated with the Scottish settlers of Australia (Murray's own family arrived in Sydney from Scotland in 1848, fleeing poverty caused by the highland clearances). By declaring that they are Mitchells, the men are honouring their 'lost' Gaelic roots, an important constituent of Australian identity; as Murray has said: 'Many [Australians'] attitudes, even their turns of phrase, are only really comprehensible in terms of that lost inheritance.' The poem as a whole can be seen as a sort of 'clanship' ritual, like a number of other Murray poems such as 'Four Gaelic Poems', 'A Skirl for Outsets' and 'Elegy for Angus Macdonald of Cnoclinn', which concludes:

... Teacher of my heart, you'll not approve
my making this in the conqueror's language ...

but my fathers were Highlanders long ago
then Borderers, before this landfall ...
Waltzing Matilda

The very act of brewing tea and eating together by a campfire is ritualistic, and peculiarly Australian:

Oh! there once was a swagman camped in the billabong,
Under the shade of a Coolabah tree;
And he sang as he looked at the old billy boiling,
'Who'll come a-waltzing Matilda with me.'

Less well known, perhaps, is that this celebration of Australian experience that became the unofficial national anthem was written by another poet of Scottish descent from New South Wales, and that the tune for 'Waltzing Matilda' is actually a Scottish folk tune. Australian ethnicity is a key feature of Murray's contemplation of Australian identity. Some of Murray's recent poems expose what he calls 'the great secret' of the Aboriginal ancestry of white Australians: 'Australians don't quite know what they are made up of', he said in a recent interview; 'they've gone to such efforts to hide it.'

At the opening of 'The Mitchells', its 'speaker' describes what he is observing, apparently from some distance in the wattles: the humming of bees mingled with the men's voices and the bubbling of the water. He seems unsure of the nature of the work they are undertaking and, as if seeking clarification, overhears a comment by one of the men (he is unsure which). So who is the speaker? His observation of the men seems to stand in for the reader's, and his fascination prefigures our own. Like him, we live predominantly urban lives among 'avenues' rather than wattles, and watch the ritual and drama of this scene played out with a sense of nostalgia for the certainty with which they would answer the key question which is left unspoken: who are you?

The Mitchells
by Les Murray

I am seeing this: two men are sitting on a pole
they have dug a hole for and will, after dinner, raise
I think for wires. Water boils in a prune tin.
Bees hum their shift in unthinning mists of white
bursaria blossom, under the noon of wattles.
The men eat big meat sandwiches out of a styrofoam box with a handle. One is overheard saying:
drought that year. Yes. Like trying to farm the road.

The first man, if asked, would say I'm one of the Mitchells. The other would gaze for a while, dried leaves in his palm, and looking up, with pain and subtle amusement, say I'm one of the Mitchells. Of the pair, one has been rich but never stopped wearing his oil-stained felt hat. Nearly everything they say is ritual. Sometimes the scene is an avenue.

'The Mitchells' is reproduced here with the permission of Les Murray.

Les Murray in discussion with the author

On the title of the poem

'I stuck with the longer and mightier title for a little while, quickly coming to the conclusion that it was too large a title for that short poem ... The poem felt more comfortable with its less grandiose name "The Mitchells": that's a surname with some resonance in Oz, partly from the splendid white Major Mitchell cockatoo, partly from the real surname of Dame Nellie Melba [soprano], partly from the venerable Mitchell Library in Sydney etc. though I was mainly thinking of Joe Mitchell, an itinerant working in Henry Lawson's short stories. The poem did stand as a sort of epigraph to Ethnic Radio [a volume of poems published in 1977], in which the ethnicity I meant was an Australian one.'

On the sonnet form

'As to my attitude to the sonnet back then, I dimly recall preferring the Petrarchan to the Shakespearean because the Petrarchan tended to integrate the last six lines into the poem, even after a strong volta, while a Shakespearean one might be no more than a 12-
lines with a pat concluding couplet ... But I was never very steamed up about all that, and I can't recall being very political about subverting the sonnet form, if indeed that's what I did. Maybe I was grinning to myself just a little though--I was still at war with the dimensions of Empire and Posh back then ...'

References and further reading


Listen to Les Murray reading this poem and some of his other sonnets at http://lesmurray.org/mitchells.htm

Jason Clapham teaches English at St Edward's School, Oxford.

Clapham, Jason