

Farewell for Ron Pretty. Australia Poetry Centre 2007

Robyn Rowland

I met Ron in about 1999. We had in common a love of poetry, but also, the University of Wollongong, which many years I had done my first and second degrees and where, while a student rep on the university council, with three others I established the first poetry magazine there - *Poets in Pub(lic) Places* (very basic, very student). I studied there in the years when Australian poetry was refused admittance and only after a long campaign by students a one particular tutor, was any a Australian Lit taught at all. It was a hard place to bring Australian poetry to.

Often when a lifetime's work in an area covers many decades, it is easy to forget the many contributions of that life. I wanted to try and briefly touch on the extent of Ron's contribution to Australian poetry, that has spoken ultimately through his founding and maintaining of Five Islands Press for over 20 years.

This contribution it must be said, has been out of love, not for monetary gain! In poetry, how could it be otherwise!

1. First and foremost, Ron is a poet.

He has published 4 books of poetry:

The Habit of Balance, Bald Hill with Gliders, Halfway to Eden and, his most recent *Of the Stone: New and Selected Poems* published in 2000.

Most recently, through his energetic connection with India, he has edited for Bengal Creations, *The road south : an anthology of contemporary Australian poetry*, primarily for the Indian market to generate a wider interest in Australian poetry there.

He has also written *Creating Poetry* (1987), acclaimed by teachers of creative writing as an essential book in the arts, first published by Edward Arnold and reissued in 2002 in a revised edition.

Ron first started writing poetry in year 7! (about 12 or 13?) At university he 'fell in love with W.B. Yeats' - not a bad place to start some of us would say. Living in Greece for a year in 1969, he began to write poetry seriously. Living under a dictator, Ron found made him 'very aware that writing is also a political act'. While in Europe at that time, he read broadly in European and South American poetry rather than poetry from the United States, which led him to be more interested 'in the emotional and political content in poetry, and how to handle them. I haven't always avoided sentimentality in my own poetry,' he told John Kinsella in *Thylazine* in 2001, 'on the other hand, though I admire the experiments of the language poets, I've seldom tried to emulate them. Poetry without an emotional content is a desiccated thing, experiment, practice, language play for its own sake, what Patrick White referred to as "the practice of mere skill, those weightless wet dreams of art"'.

Yet in his publishing programme, Ron has been experimental, publishing accessible to more oblique work, traditional form to performance on the page that sings. On variety he says:

‘Among the things, though, that I would like people to recognise is that there isn’t one monolithic Poetry, but many poetries, each with their own internal logic, each with their own readership. ...by the same token, there are many, and growing, ways of presenting poetry: books and magazines certainly, but also performances, postcards and posters, the web...we lose some of the richness and some of the potential if we turn our back on any of these, though we will, of course, have our own preferences among them. The real disservice is done, I think, when we proclaim our preferences as the only legitimate form.’

2 A life’s work:

From 1983 until he took early retirement in 1998, Ron Pretty was Head of Writing in the Faculty of Creative Arts at the University of Wollongong. At that time, this was an innovative programme that incorporated the practice of poetry rather than the poetic cultural studies approach that later developed elsewhere. Before that his work had been in sociolinguistics and multicultural education.

From 1982 until 1999 he edited the magazine *Scarp: New Arts & Writings* which enabled him to bring Australian poets to the page in interviews as well as mentor new poets. As a mentor and editor he set, and continues to set, new standards for constructive and consistent support.

Ron has served on the Literature and History Committee of the NSW Ministry of Arts. And after holding a senior position for many years in the NSW Poets Union, he is now their Patron.

3. Ron has many laudable qualities:

Take for granted his sense of humour, his patience, his understanding of neurosis in poets, his enthusiasm and drive, his sense of sacrifice, his determination in the face of obstacles, his fearlessness, his pride and his warmth.

In particular let’s note here, that where many people find things, Ron finds them.

I - he was integral in the establishment of the South Coast Writers' Centre

II - he established the Poetry Australia Foundation, through which he established with John Millett and sponsored *Blue Dog: Australian Poetry* in 2001.

He told John Kinsella ... ‘I believe that the potential readership of poetry, the community, if you like, is much larger than the current one. It is that belief that has led to the formation of the Poetry Australia Foundation, to foster the reading, writing, reviewing and enjoyment of poetry.

III. His desire to bring back a generations of lost readers by reaching into schools has led him to establish with Trevor Bradley Grieve, the Taronga Foundation Poetry Prize.

IV. His desire to increase the standard of poetry reviewing in this country has led him to found with TBG again, *Blue Dog* Poetry Reviewing Prize - both with considerable prize moneys.

V. And now, through his vision and work, and through funding from CAL, THE AUSTRALIAN POETRY CENTRE is alive and thriving here in Glenfern.

VI. Ron also founded The New Poets' Program, which receives 110- 140 applications a year. Born in the early nineties as the result of a conversation on a trip he took with John Scott to Canberra to lobby (unsuccessfully) for a federally funded writers' centre in Wollongong. Many fine poets have emerged out of this series.

VII. He also evolved the annual Wollongong Poetry Workshop as well as on-line workshops.

Where many of us have great ideas, Ron actually makes them grow into reality.

VI. Finally, lets get to **Five Islands Press**. Named after the five islands off Port Kembla, the press is now iconic and enduring.

It was set up in 1986 as a co-operative by a group of Illawarra writers and begun in response to the perennial problem of finding publishers for their own work. In the beginning, it published prose as well as poetry. The group agreed that they would publish one book by each of the eight members of the co-operative, which they did over a period of three years. But manuscripts started pouring in.

Members began to leave the co-op, and by about 1995 Deb Westbury, Chris Mansell and Rob Hood had left. FIP has continued as a one person operation since then, becoming a Proprietary Limited company in 2000.

Ron said in 2001 of FIP: 'I have tried, in the Five Islands Press publishing program, to remain open to a wide variety of kinds of poetry. If I haven't yet published a book of surrealist poetry or bush ballads or visual poetry or...it's because I haven't yet been sent a manuscript in these areas that I've been sufficiently convinced by....

My attitude to all these things, I am afraid, is rather pragmatic. When a manuscript comes in, I don't ask what label to put on it, or where it fits theoretically. The first question I ask is what it has to offer its readers that's new, or interesting, or compelling, what insights it offers to its readers about their world. Does it engage their imagination and their sympathies as well as their intellect? Different books, of course, have different readers, so part of my task is to try to identify who might be the readers for this book to decide whether there's a potential audience large enough to make it viable.'

To date Ron has published 230 books with FIP, an invaluable contribution to Australian poetry. The books cover a broad range of poetic styles. Indigenous poets as well as dual texts in Polish, Croatian, Serbian, Japanese, Spanish and Chilean have been published. Many books over these years have won the poets and the press a swag of awards.

'My idea' he said, 'is that the Press should aim to be as representative of contemporary Australian poetry as possible, that it should be eclectic in its tastes, and that, without sacrificing quality, it should aim to appeal to a broad spectrum of potential readers'. And it has.

4. Ron's contribution has not gone unnoticed or unappreciated.

He won the NSW Premier's Special Prize for services to literature in 2001 and received an AM for services to Australian literature in 2002.

Ron, all gathered here wish you well in this new change in your life. We know we will still see you regularly, a freer man, engaged with your own work more fully and still coming up with a million new ideas! We'll miss you in Melbourne though.

I know that for Kevin Brophy, Lyn Hatherly, Dan Disney and myself, taking over the press is a hard act to follow. We really hope that when it comes our time to hand over the press, it is still a thriving enterprise that continues to contribute to the poetic life of this country.

Ron - it simply remains to say - thank you.

