

A FAMILY AFFAIR: DOUGLAS STEWART'S *GARDEN OF FRIENDS*

Susan Ballyn
Universidad de Barcelona

With the death of Douglas Stewart in February 1985 Australian letters lost one of its most notable contemporary figures. Born in New Zealand, Stewart moved to Australia in 1934 where he was to spend the rest of his life and where he was to achieve renown as a poet, playwright and literary editor. Even a brief perusal of Stewart's career in the literary field reveals not only his standing as a creative artist, but also his notable contribution to Australian letters in general. To quote Les A. Murray, himself a distinguished writer, on Stewart's achievements:

He was a poet of the first rank, and a playwright whose achievement in radio drama is unexcelled by any Australian. In collaboration with Nancy Keesing, he produced two anthologies of central importance to our tradition, and he was the sole editor of other fine anthologies. He was one of Australia's great literary editors. He was a short story writer and a prose stylist, a biographer and memorialist, and a literary critic whose analysis of the published and unpublished poems of his friend Kenneth Slessor has always seemed to me one of the very finest and most judicious of our critical essays.

(...) For something like thirty years from 1940 onwards, Douglas Stewart was, as the *Oxford History of Australian Literature* has noted, perhaps the most influential man of letters in Australia.¹

Now, just over two and a half years after Stewart's death, admirers of his work will welcome the publication in October of his diary, *Garden of Friends*, written during the last year of his life, the first entry being the 15 of March 1984 and the last the 18 of July of the same year.² His daughter Meg, in the afterword, enlightens the reader with regard to the sad background of ill-health against which the diary was written and of which there is no direct mention in the text itself:

My father wrote his diary, *Garden of Friends*, in the last year of his life. He was too frail to leave the house much. So frail, in fact, he had to handwrite the diary. Hitting the keys of his typewriter was too

exhausting, he said. His desk in a room at the back of the house was perfectly positioned for keeping an eye on the garden even if he wasn't out in it. The garden had become his outside world.³

Garden of Friends is very much a family affair. The work has been beautifully illustrated by his widow, Margaret Coen, the well-known watercolourist whose work in the book embellishes page after page with black and white drawings of the fauna and flora mentioned in the text. Some of these are small delicate tracings in the margins or at the top or bottom of pages, while others are halfpage drawings of great strength and sensitivity typical of the artist's work. The Afterword is, as has been seen, by Meg Stewart, the author of *Autobiography of My Mother* a revealing and sensitive work which offers a picture of Margaret Coen's childhood in Yass and Sydney, her emergence into the art world, her friendship with Norman Lindsay, later shared with her husband, and, of course, of her friendship with and marriage to Douglas Stewart.⁴

Garden of Friends is a fitting final word on Stewart's part, containing as it does most of the thematic preoccupations and stylistic devices which run through the greater part of his creative output. On the surface the diary reads as an enchanting account of Stewart's relationship with the micro-sized natural world of his front and back garden. Stewart creates for his reader a delightful world full of life, colour and sound. It is peopled not only by a gammut of creatures from the minute insect to a number of half-wild cats, with their eccentric carryings-on, possums and other larger inhabitants whose antics are narrated with humour and affection, but also by friends from past and present such as David Campbell, Norman Lindsay, Nancy Keesing and Mark, the gardener, among others. Stewart's ever keen eye, a quality in his writing which has become famous, zooms in on, for example, the amazing feats of ants as they march about the garden on an unknown errand; on spiders as they weave their different shaped webs among the trees and plants, or on the astounding beauty and delicacy of newly-opened blossoms such as these snowdrops:

They look very pretty, the frail white cups looking downwards amongst the dark green of their own leaves and the surrounding bromeliads. That spot of green, like an embedded seed, at the tip of each snow petal is a master-stroke of design; and why it should be there for any other reason I cannot imagine.⁵

As always, Stewart is not only the keen observer of the natural world, but the highly skilled creative artist able to portray all the subtleties, textures, shades and sounds of that world. So the reader sits with the writer and watches with him, or wanders about among the trees and bushes moving aside obtrusive foliage to admire the amazing hub of life that is Stewart's garden.

Each of the inhabitants of his garden is described in detail so that the reader becomes familiar with the habits of the birds feeding at the birdtable or the idiosyncratic behaviour of the family cats. Each becomes not a mere animal in description, but a being in its own right with its own foibles, its own annoying and endearing behaviour. Each of Stewart's garden friends is described in such a way that it becomes almost human; a mirror in which to watch ourselves. Take for instance the disreputable "bold bad wattle-bird" and his patient, long-suffering wife "One-leg" who Stewart strongly suspects has fallen victim to her husband's tyrannical behaviour:

Once or twice, even in their most affectionate days, I saw her husband grab her by her one sound leg and swing her ominously by it in the air, as if he were minded to knock her on the head or perhaps, to break that leg off too. Having seized her, as no doubt Nature prompted him to, he really seemed —to be fair to him— puzzled as to what was next expected. I suppose that in the end he killed or drove her off the property; or a cat got her.⁶

Or, take also the rigid hierarchies established by the birds at the feeding-table where lorikeets take precedence over the wattle-bird only to be later pursued themselves by the greedy, wasteful currawongs who also peck holes in the writer's socks as they dry on the line, using the wool to make their nests. The hum of activity in the garden is amazing, ranging from the mosquito dancing over the fishpond in its frenzied egg-laying ritual to the stillness of the Retiarus spider, the caster of nets, who lies in wait for days at a time; or from the frantic incursions of the cats indoors and their ensuing escapades to the eerie thumping of possums on the roof at night. All this related in the brilliant, controlled easy-flowing prose so familiar to readers of other works by Stewart such as *Fishing Around The Monaro*⁷ or *Springtime in Taranaki: An Autobiography of Youth*.⁸

Though he confesses to be no naturalist, in the scientific sense of the word, Stewart reveals himself to be a highly qualified connoisseur of the natural world. When confronted by an intriguing question we follow him to the dictionary to find out the exact origin of that euphonious sounding word "jonquil", following him through the etymology to the Latin "juncus" via the French "jonquille" and the Spanish "junquillo" and "junco"; an anecdote which Stewart ends with a characteristically dry-humoured comment:

Another perfectly useless piece of information, but it is a good word. The Spanish certainly improved on juncus.⁹

Nor is Stewart's diary restricted entirely to the garden. We travel with him on trips to Mona Vale Beach, Ku-ring-gai Chase, Springwood —Norman Lindsay's house— among other places, and even to the local shopping centre and playing fields, all equally revealing to the writer with their stock of wild-life.

We may not have such an abundance of plants and wild-life in our gardens as Stewart had in his back yard at St. Ives, and many of the creatures and plants may have unfamiliar names for the European reader, but, nonetheless, we are soon led by Stewart to watch and observe with him. We laugh at the antics of some of the inhabitants; breathe the sharp autumn air; marvel at the deadly perfection of the spider's web and, ultimately, live his garden as a world of our own.

This then would be a surface reading of *Garden of Friends* and very rewarding and enjoyable it is too. However, as has been stated earlier, the work can also be read as a continuation of what have come to be recognised as the main preoccupations which pervade Stewart's poetry, particularly *Sun Orchids* and *The Birdsville Track*, and also much of his other work.¹⁰

Stewart's best known verse drama *The Fire on the Snow* centres on Scott's expedition to the Pole and while it is a gripping, moving story in itself, the play moves around the theme of the search for truth on the part of the five men involved and on their outstanding spiritual endurance in the face of both their own physical limitations and of the harsh natural world through which they have to struggle with indomitable will.¹¹ Nancy Keesing explains why Stewart chose Scott's expedition as the theme for a play and the way in which it links in with the general preoccupations present throughout Stewart's work, including, as will be seen, *Garden of Friends*:

These further "reasons" for Stewart's choice of the Scott expedition bring us close to that central absorption with themes of nature and man which impels and compels his dramatic writing as a whole. (...) Certainly, in all Stewart's poetry nature and man are the most consistent themes and Man as Hero his chief interest.¹²

Stewart's search for truth and his predominant interest in Man and Nature are probably most easily accessible in *Sun Orchids* and *The Birdsville Track*, so a brief perusal of these two works seems called for if connections of thought with *Garden of Friends* are to be established.

In both *Sun Orchids* and *The Birdsville Track* Stewart stands, in the role of observer from which vantage point the eye of the poet becomes a microscope concentrating on the minute details of the natural world. In spite of the brevity of many of the poems, a brevity necessary if the small organisms so often described are to retain their objectivity, they contain a wealth of captured details, from the minute stamens of the orchid to the delicate tracery of the spider gums, or the complex patterns of lichens on rock. Each of the poems becomes a vivid canvas on which reality is faithfully recorded. However, Stewart sets out to do far more than become a mere "reporter" of Nature:

I never like to think about mysticism. I don't think of myself as a mystic; but the poems are, as I say, an exploration into the truths of the universe.¹³

Stewart's main preoccupation then, in both works, is to move behind reality and reach the essence of being, the underlying reality of the universe. The two works in question form a coherent body of thought and Stewart acknowledges in them not only the ambivalent dualities of the universe and natural world, but also that these dualities constitute a unity in which all creation is seen to be bound together in interlocking relationships necessary to maintain the balance of the universe. *The Birdsville Track* places Man in his true perspective in the natural world acknowledging his heroism in his constant struggle with the desert, but also recognising that it is only through a true acceptance of his dimension and role in the universe that Man will be able to establish a peaceful, serene relationship with Nature. Stewart warns Man constantly to remember that he is part of Nature, that he forms part of the underlying harmony and symmetry prevalent throughout the universe. His poems reveal that the same ambivalence of good and evil, strengths and weaknesses detected in the observed external reality also form part of Man's own inner being.

Stewart perceives the inner forces of the universe, the apparently blind creative forces and the contrasting destructive powers to be far from a haphazard and chaotic struggle of strengths. All the ambivalences detected in the natural world respond to a necessary inner harmony which in itself guarantees the balance of the species and the continuance of all life. The poems of *Sun Orchids* and *The Birdsville Track* reveal how even the minutest form of life is in itself a reflection of the greater dualities and ambivalences reigning throughout the universe. Thus each individual part of the universe represents the whole, forming a harmonious unity with it.

In *Garden of Friends* Stewart clearly stands in the same role of observer as in the two works mentioned above, and a closer look at the diary reveals that all three works share the same thematic preoccupations. Beneath the apparently idyllic surface of the garden lie hidden powers of darkness and destruction. The reader learns that fearsome predators are daily at work in Stewart's backyard; the funnel-web spider with its poison capable of killing humans; the lizards and the carnivorous snail which leave a gruesome trail of empty snail shells behind them, the latter indulging in something akin to cannibalism, or the apparently innocuous goldfish which will devour the hundreds of mosquito eggs laid in their pond thus reestablishing the balance which would be sadly upset were all the eggs to hatch, to name only a few of the predators. Nothing happens without reason in Stewart's garden as he himself admits, albeit wryly given the havoc wreaked on his rock-lilies by snails. Nature may appear senseless in the apparently wanton destruction of her offspring, but ultimately it is all to maintain the balance and harmony of her world. In the garden, as in the larger natural world described in *Sun Orchids* and *The Birdsville Track*, there can be no ferocity without generosity, life without death, light without dark, and the oneness or kinship between Man and Nature is manifested on several occasions as Stewart himself stresses:

There is some far kinship between us, Earth and her creatures.¹⁴

The very mention of the word "kinship" above reminds the reader of Stewart's illustrative poem "Kindred" in which the poet perceives the kinship among all things exemplified in that between the snake "Chilly and black as it vanishes" and the snake-headed crimson orchids which:

(...) spill on the green air
 Their dewdrop of dark thought
 Like venom in the blood.¹⁵

So too the garden reveals the same kinship among all creatures, including Man, for they all share the same dualities of good and evil, all springing from that unknown region in which "Earth's darkest impulses brood"; impulses that Stewart observes daily in the micro-world of his garden.¹⁶ Time and again Stewart's garden reveals to him some manifestation of Nature's darker side only to lead him inevitably on to discover the logic of and necessity for such manifestations, speaking to him of the total harmony, the total symmetry that is the natural world.

If the desert of the Birdsville Track country demonstrated to Stewart the amazing adaptability of tiny organisms to the harsh desert world, so does his garden and its surrounding environment, exemplifying the marvellous flexibility of the natural world and its ability to evolve and merge into the world of the Sydney suburbs and into the city itself, as evidenced in the cockatoos accustomed to weird foods at the shopping centre; the galahs on the playing fields or the dove nesting at Pymble station. In contrast to this ability to evolve Stewart dryly remarks on the fact that Man's civilisation does not advance that much: "We only make louder noises" he quips on hearing the clamour of electric saws and lawnmowers being put to work in people's gardens. As always Man raises the discordant note in the harmony of the universe.

Garden of Friends reads then, as has been said, as Douglas Stewart's posthumous word on the essence of being, the underlying reality and truth of the universe; a thematic extension of those preoccupations to be found in his lyrical verse. The book will most certainly be warmly received by all those who knew the man and admired not only his work, but enjoyed the warm friendship and generosity he extended to so many. For others, perhaps discovering Stewart with this work, it will undoubtedly become a firm friend and lead them on to explore other areas of his writing, thus really increasing the number of inhabitants in his "Garden of Friends".

Notes:

1. Murray, Les A.; "Eulogy for Douglas Stewart. (1913-1985). Delivered at All Saints Anglican Church, St Ives, 18 February, 1985". *SOUTHERLY*, June 1985, n.º 2, pp. 123-128.
2. Stewart, D.; *Garden of Friends*, Viking, Penguin Australia, 1987.
3. Stewart, D.; *Ibid.*, p. 133.
4. Stewart, Meg; *Autobiography of My Mother*, Penguin Australia, 1985.
5. Stewart, D.; *Op. cit.*, p. 72.
6. Stewart, D.; *Op. cit.*, p. 16.
7. Stewart, D.; *Fishing Around the Monaro*, Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1978. First Published by Angus and Robertson as part of *The Seven Rivers* in 1966.
8. Stewart, D.; *Springtime in Taranaki: An Autobiography of Youth*, Hale and Iremonger, Sydney, 1983.
9. Stewart, D.; *Op. cit.*, p. 84.
10. Stewart, D.; *Sun Orchids and The Birdsville Track*, from *Collected Poems 1936-1967*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1967,
11. Stewart, D.; *The Fire on the Snow*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1944.
12. Keesing, N.; *Douglas Stewart*, Australian Writers and Their Work Series, OUP, Melbourne, 1969, p. 16.
13. Thompson, J.; "Poetry in Australia: Douglas Stewart" in: Kiernan, B. (Ed.); *Considerations: New Essays on Kenneth Slessor, Judith Wright and Douglas Stewart*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1977, pp. 115-126.
14. Stewart, D.; *Op. cit.*, p. 81.
15. Stewart, D.; "Kindred". *Op. cit.*, p. 166.