

WHO WE ARE

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drums & bonnets is Miriel Lenore's fourth collection of poetry. Here, and in a later companion volume, **the dog rock**, she turns her gently irreverent gaze to her own family. **drums & bonnets** is the story of Lenore's great-grandmother Lizzie, who emigrated from Northern Ireland in 1853 and spent her married years on the Victorian goldfields around Ballarat.

This collection represents a floating genre, somewhere between verse novel, biography and travel memoir. Lenore uses specific experiences to address ubiquitous human concerns: wars, marriages, cups of tea. The picture of Lizzie's life is built up from small clues, the occasional letter, paintings from the time, public and church records:

... I look at the 17th and 18th century books

the 19th thanks

the parson goes off trustingly to his service

leaving me with three hundred

years of church records

where Lizzie might be found

... and yet she isn't here

(looking for Lizzie)

The work transcends the usual limitations of family history. It addresses the Australian preoccupation with identity, a collective anxiety peculiar to recent decades. We are at a crisis point. The attempt to come to terms with our black history has been scuttled (coincidentally or otherwise) by a propaganda blitz about borders and

security. We need all the help we can get to resist the onslaught. Part of that resistance is to tell and retell our own stories, especially our settler stories. Who are we? Where did we come from? By what right, if any, are we here?

Lenore is aware of the ironies produced by the self-conscious search for the past, for an earlier sense of belonging. The poems provide a meditation on the nature of historical 'truth': deconstruction and reconstruction hand in hand.

do top hats make you rich?

a family story says John poured
a hatful of sovereigns into
his wife's lap on their wedding day

... can one or two pour down?

(myths)

Lenore's own travels in pursuit of Lizzie provide a counterpoint to Lizzie's journey. Lenore experiences Ulster in the marching season and imagines the Protestant Lizzie living there. " ... would she have stood with the haters?/ would I?" **(Corcrain)**.

The two parts of the book, "the land of Macha" and "the land of gold", both turn around wars: firstly the Irish Troubles; secondly the war against Satan, as Lizzie ends her long journey in the bosom of the Salvation Army. Lenore revels in the gutsiness of the early Sallies, but don't be deceived by the lightness of touch. The juxtaposition of the two wars is extraordinarily effective. We are left pondering our militaristic heritage, our urge to strut and threaten.

At seventeen Lizzie left famine-struck Ireland, along with many thousands of others, and sailed for Australia. One fascination with these migration stories is the question of baggage:

It is Lizzie's children who draw her into the new Salvation Army. Here Lenore has used contemporary accounts with great effect. The Army's aims were humanitarian as well as spiritual: "*anyone who hasn't eaten today, come to my home.*" (**Blood & Fire**). Nevertheless the Army in its early days was greeted with suspicion and sometimes violence:

... We sang for Jesus for speaking was impossible.

A dead dog exploded. I stood

with one foot on each side of the dog and sang Beulah Land ...

(Blood & Fire)

One of Lenore's strengths has always been her ability to evoke not only landscape, but also the solitary figure in the landscape (as in **travelling alone together**, her collection about the explorer Edward John Eyre). Her writing is spare but effective:

an old woman in white apron and shawl

carries an armful of twigs round

the lake made from a swamp

and a drowned creek

(a winter's morn at Lake Wendouree 1901)

Lenore's use of free verse achieves an unvarnished quality, a modesty of form and rhythm that appears uncontrived. The voice that emerges is one of compelling honesty. No trickery here, no tinsel. The impact of her subject matter is undiminished. She is an astute political observer and does not gloss over the bleakness, but her eye for the ridiculous never fails.

... three windows stare across to the bowls

of purple petunias outside the Orange Lodge
where Union Jacks fly
we are also British says the sign

down the street a wall of graffiti
faces the school bus stop:
Simpson is fat ...

... Mr Daw is a queer assed faget

(our precarious selves)

Impossible to do justice here to all the beguiling detail. The power of the collection lies in Lenore's ability to move deftly from the individual to the historical, the political, the universal, the whole heartbreaking, funny, human story. She does this with such skill that you rarely notice the shifts. Lizzie's journey halfway across the world, all her work, her ten children, her old age ("*i am not able for milk work now/ i have got an old woman on me*" **Got to pul in my Hornes**), her death ("*One of our oldest warriors, Sister Freeman has been promoted to glory*" **and all the trumpets**): all of this gives us back another piece of our history, helps us understand what a strange hotch potch of a nation we live in.

If we could grasp that, then we might realise the inherent absurdity of borders to protect 'us' from 'them'.

Miriell Lenore *Drums and Bonnets* Wakefield Press 2003

Miriell Lenore *The Dog Rock* Wakefield Press 2004