

***Christian Mysticism and Australian Poetry*, by Toby Davidson.**

**Amherst, New York: Cambria, 2013, 283 pp.**

**\$109.99**

**ISBN 978-1-60497-844-5 (hbk)**

**<http://www.cambriapress.com/cambriapress.cfm?template=25&bid=545&CFID=60201273&CFTOKEN=21124616>**

Toby Davidson has produced a groundbreaking study which speaks to those engaged in literature, religious and cultural studies and, most directly, to those exploring the interface between poetry and the sacred.

There's been a great need for such a work—and I speak from experience. Some twenty years ago I set out to tell a story about Australian spirituality from fragmentary allusions scattered through the works of several contemporary writers who shared a Christian sensibility, but I took the easy way out, referencing prose works where ideas had been worked through and patterns of thought could be discerned. Poetry, I thought, was too elusive, too impressionistic, too open to opposing interpretations to build a theory upon—good for illustrative quotes but insufficiently stable to form a foundation.

Davidson, however, has bravely chosen to engage with poetry. Instead of rifling through anthologies, he has made the sensible decision to read five poets closely, referencing their work for mystical intimations while taking their life circumstances and critical reception into account. Bookending the individual studies of Ada Cambridge, John Shaw Neilson, Francis Webb, Judith Wright and Kevin Hart are an opening chapter on invocations of the mystical by poets stretching from William Charles Wentworth to Peter Steele and a final chapter on twentieth century Indigenous poets, from Bill Neidjie to Lionel Fogarty. This arrangement works well, as it provides a context for the works of the featured poets and enables Davidson to establish why they are noteworthy. It also justifies his claim that this is the first book-length study of Australian mystical poetry.

But first to define that slippery term, mysticism. For the sake of coherence, Davidson restricts himself to the Western Christian mystical tradition and asks how this has played out in Australian poetry: he is not so much looking for a uniquely Australian mystical tradition as identifying how Australian poets have contributed to the continuing Christian tradition (hence the title, *Christian Mysticism and*—not *in*—*Australian Poetry*). For the purpose of this study, Davidson defines Western Christian mysticism as 'the direct, experimental, or unitive expression of Christ, God, or Godhead transcending regular modes of knowledge and language' (8). He is quick to point out that his subjects 'should not be mistaken for mystics. . . They are Christian mystical poets, in degrees varying from apprehensive to comprehensive' (8).

It might also be observed that Davidson is not writing about religious poetry, that is, poetry that is written to realise Biblical episodes or instil Christian thinking/teaching. Such writing, in my experience, tends to try to make faith concrete, whereas mystical poetry hints at the presence of the ineffable within the reverberations of language.

Even so, Davidson still has a vast territory to cover. He adopts three principles of poetry selection, summarised here as (1) the poet refers explicitly to mystical figures; (2) the poet uses the language and tropes of mysticism; or (3) the poem fulfils the conditions of 'mystical expression' (9). These principles allow Davidson to make a number of claims for his subjects:

Ada Cambridge is this country's first major mystical poet; John Shaw Neilson (along with Christopher Brennan) 'established the popular basis for an Australian Christian mystical-poetic tradition' influenced by Yeats, Hopkins and Mallarmé (116); and Francis Webb's 'The Canticle' is the first time an Australian mystical poet 'dramatises and expands the works of a poetic mystic [Francis of Assisi] in a prodigious expression of cataphatic vision and divine union beyond knowledge and language' (135). Webb himself is 'the first Australian poet to actively and substantially communicate with Western Christian mysticism across his entire career' (151). The non-Christian Judith Wright is included in this study for, despite her interest in Hinduism, Sufism and Taoism, her work 'consistently incorporate[s] the language and themes of Western Christian mystics and mystical poets' (153). Finally, Kevin Hart is recognised as 'the first Australian poet to significantly influence international philosophy and theology' (187) through his mysticism scholarship (particularly in establishing a link between negative theology and deconstruction) and for his own poetry, so much of which is inspired by the writings of mystics such as John of the Cross, Gregory of Nyssa and Simone Weil.

A particularly pleasing feature of *Christian Mysticism and Australian Poetry* is the attention given to women poets. This has not been the norm: references to women writers have been noticeably lacking in attempts to define any form of specifically Australian Christianity, whether theological or mystical. Veronica Brady's seminal work, *A Crucible of Prophets* (1981), which influenced the selection of writers thought relevant to Australian theology and spirituality for decades, brought the metaphysical concerns of nine male Australian fiction writers into dialogue with twentieth century European theologians. It also legitimised the popularity of the desert as the locus of the sacred in this country.

Women poets, too, were virtually unheard. In Les Murray's 1986 *Anthology of Australian Religious Poetry*, some 88% of the poems attributed to individual writers (as distinct from Indigenous communities) were by men, and only 12% by women. The most quoted male poets were James McAuley and Les Murray, each with 23 poems; Judith Wright was the most quoted woman poet, with nine entries. Kevin Hart's 1994 collection, *The Oxford Book of Australian Religious Verse*, showed the effect of a more expansive definition of religion and the sacred but even so, 75% of the poems attributed to individuals were by men and 25% by women, with John Shaw Neilson and Judith Wright the most popular contributors, with nine poems each.

Davidson's broader focus on finding traces of the mystical in poetry, not on religious poetry *per se*, allows him to make the argument for recognising Ada Cambridge as *the* pioneer of Australian mystical poetry. Cambridge, remembered primarily for her novels, had the misfortune of writing at a time when A.G. Stephens's opinions held sway. As Davidson writes (referencing Stephens' introduction to *The Bulletin Story Book*):

Ada Cambridge's placeless, meditative, often erotic poetry simply did not fit A.G. Stephens's ideal of the 'potential knight of Romance ... who grapples with the Australian desert for a livelihood, might sing a Homeric chant of victory, or listen, baffled and beaten, to an Aeschylean dirge of defeat'. (56)

Cambridge's poetry benefits from a more sophisticated analysis: Davidson reads her in relation to St Catherine of Siena, Pascal, Van Ruusbroec, Hadewijch of Brabant, Wordsworth and Rossetti (80). And this is a further refreshing aspect of his study—his recognition that Australian mystical poets drew on a diversity of sources, from early European mystics to later English, American, European and Asian exponents of mysticism.

A work as wide-ranging and detailed as this makes one appreciate the opportunities afforded by a PhD in terms of time to research, think, and structure and verify an argument. Davidson, in touching on some fifty Australian poets and a multitude of mystics, is discerning and generous in his interpretations and avoids the temptation of forcing his subjects to serve his own theories. His bibliography should prove invaluable to future researchers, particularly if the small hitch, presumably introduced in the production stage, is remedied and titles by Veronica Brady, Bernadette Brennan, Christopher Brennan and Vincent Buckley are unscrambled. As a poet himself, Davidson writes gracefully, eschewing jargon, and convinces the reader that 'an understanding of mystical poetics is essential to the study of Australian poetry' (251). His book will encourage Australian and global recognition of mystical poetries and scholarship.

*Elaine Lindsay, Australian Catholic University*

#### **WORKS CITED**

- Anthology of Australian Religious Poetry*. Ed. Les Murray. Blackburn, Vic.: Collins Dove, 1986.
- Brady, Veronica. *A Crucible of Prophets: Australians and the question of God*. Sydney: Theological Explorations, 1981.
- Lindsay, Elaine. *Rewriting God: Spirituality in contemporary Australian women's fiction*. Amsterdam, Atlanta GA: Editions Rodopi B.V., 2000.
- The Oxford Book of Australian Religious Verse*. Ed. Kevin Hart. Melbourne: Oxford UP, 1994.