

Contemporary quest

An enlivening brace of books from Alan Gould

Paul Hetherington

THE LAKE WOMAN: A ROMANCE

by Alan Gould

Arcadia, \$29.95 pb, 307 pp, 9781921509346

FOLK TUNES

by Alan Gould

Salt Publishing (Inbooks), \$24.95 pb, 80 pp, 9781844714940

Alan Gould's imagination has been steeped in a wide range of reading, from Shakespeare, Milton, Kipling and Auden to less well-known works such as the sophisticated verse of the Cavalier poets. His recent novel, *The Lake Woman*, also reveals the influence of the tough and tender lyricism of Thomas Wyatt.

Gould's literary voice is unusual among contemporary writers, partly as a result of his influences. Although he claimed his own territory as a fiction writer a long time ago (his first novel, *The Man Who Stayed Below*, appeared in 1984), and has always been interested in idiomatic Australian English and Australian culture, he also allied himself to the chief storytellers, such as Conrad, among the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century English-language modernists. As a result, a few of his literary mannerisms – including his diction and some of his cadences – can seem old-fashioned. This should not matter; good writing will always outlast passing fashions, but it may be one reason why Gould's fiction has been less widely noticed than it might have been.

Further, the task that Gould has set himself, and largely achieved – to be equally proficient as a poet, novelist and essayist – is an unusual one among contemporary Australian authors, notwithstanding David Malouf's protean achievements. It has meant that his dedicated readers have had to grapple with a variety of genres, at least one of

them – Gould's poetry – foregrounding a complex and eddying sensibility that has not always been easily approachable, despite his writing's narrative impetus.

A significant part of Gould's imagination is Romantic, preoccupied with individual responses to experience along with a deep interest in history and its intersection with the present. One of his most notable works, the award-winning novel *To the Burning City* (1991), took aspects of World War II as a primary frame of reference, and it seems generally true that his fiction and poetry are most intensely charged when conjuring some kind of imaginative recreation of, and engagement with, the past.

The Lake Woman certainly supports such a thesis. Initially set in 1944, it is framed by the happenings of D-Day (6 June 1944). One of its achievements is the apparently effortless way in which Gould takes readers into his fictional world. Through well-placed detail rather than any overview of the event, he evokes superbly the chaotic nature of the momentous invasion. As a defensive measure, Rommel had ordered the flooding of much of Normandy's lowlands; Gould places his central character, Alec Dearborn, into this marshy, watery world where he is rescued from drowning by the lake woman of the novel's title.

As convincing as the novel is in rendering many details of a world at war in 1944 – and then a world in the uneasy aftermath of war – one cannot look to Gould for a conventional historical

tale. *The Lake Woman* is described as a Romance in its subtitle, but even if that had been missed (the subtitle is not on the book's cover), the title itself evokes every Romance that conjures with the Lady of the Lake, including Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*. In case readers have disregarded the allusion, Gould names his central French female character Vivianne, invoking the medieval French Lancelot–Grail cycle.

The novel works well as an unlikely yet persuasive twentieth-century encounter and love affair, but it is Gould's success in marrying the realistic dimension of the novel to its qualities as a Romance; in creating a modern journey into the magic of a not-well-understood and uncontrollable intimacy and towards a late chivalric quest for self-knowledge – if not for the Grail itself – which is his chief triumph.

Early on, as the novel backtracks from a marshy Normandy to Alec's earlier life, he seems something of a type; an intelligent, somewhat naïve, charming, laconic Australian at Cambridge, who adores the company of women, is good at rugby and athletics, and is studying English and History as an undergraduate. When eventually he is caught up in World War II, fighting for Britain rather than Australia, and volunteers for the Airborne to escape the round of field and garrison ennui, he learns, through parachute training, 'an attitude of complete dispassion about the self'. His continuing battle to reconcile the tendencies of his 'foolish body' with his burgeoning awareness of what he truly values is one of the intriguing elements of the book.

Largely through his interactions with Vivianne Orbuc, Alec's character soon emerges as a convincing individual. He becomes someone who can represent his time, his generation and old-fashioned 'chivalric' morality precisely because he is presented as an idiosyncratic, thoughtful and believable outsider. This Gould needed to do, because for the first hundred or so pages of the novel there is not much action. The novel is dreamy, at times almost fabulist; a kind of essaying-forth into the world of an unlikely, unexpected intimacy between two strangers, who



Alan Gould

come to know each other through the accident of proximity and the collision of character.

Later, the novel adopts a more conventional narrative strategy, but is no less convincing for that, as Alec searches for the lost Vivianne and for a resolution of their complicated love affair. In the traditional manner of Romances, this search presents a variety of testing difficulties, yet its progress and final outcome is persuasive and salutary. Vivianne emerges as a beautifully realised character in her own right and notions of obligation, honour, commitment and self-sacrifice are explored in ways that finally seem entirely contemporary.

Gould's twelfth collection of poetry, *Folk Tunes*, strikes a very different note. It was driven, at least in part, by a residency he undertook with the National Folk Festival in 2003, when he collaborated with folk festival artists. The blurb on the back cover states: '*Folk Tunes* seeks to present poems that combine the immediacy, lightness and clarity of sense

found in much folksong with the formal shapeliness and appeal of such music, while presenting fairly the complexity and delicacy of emotion required by the subjects addressed.'

This is a disarming statement partly because the expressed ambition is much more difficult than Gould's relatively modest formulation, and partly because it flies in the face of poetic fashion. While one must applaud the inventiveness of contemporary Australian poetry, a good deal of current poetic practice tends to favour opacity and obscurity. Yet *Folk Tunes* reminds the reader that writers such as John Suckling remain prized for what one might call their artful directness of utterance, while the more complicated work of many of Suckling's contemporaries no longer has currency. Which is to say that an artful clarity can be as difficult to achieve in poetry as any manifest complexity.

There is considerable artfulness and clarity in *Folk Tunes*. Gould has long been an acknowledged master of traditional poetic forms, and he demonstrates a polished control of poetic technique in this volume. This is poetry that entertains, partly through making deft use of traditional devices such as rhyme, refrains and choruses – much as you will find in the folk songs that prompted the poems.

One may notice, for example, the delicacy of 'An Understudy for Desire', which begins 'Our lazulite planet's not so young, / dozes through its quakes, / the self, likewise, absorbs the small / seismic shifts age makes'. There is also the clarity of the following lines about Charles I and the Cavalier Poets. The reference to Charles I's extra shirt, worn at his execution to prevent any shivering that could be mistaken for fright, will be familiar to students of English history:

Their king was devious and brave,
lived out his right to misbehave,
then wore that extra shirt to fox
both January and the axe.

John Suckling writhed in vomit while
one rich allegiance dropped from style ...

The mirror-walls of history

bounce light from their necessity;
their poems come as x-rays of
their epoch's wild and formal love.

Such an excerpt demonstrates the accomplished way in which Gould is able to move from introducing a subject to a consideration of its import. This poem unfolds the sense of an era while simultaneously being a moving reflection on the vicissitudes of history and a plea for a tolerance in understanding the actions, motivations and beliefs of others, particularly those tied to causes that may seem outdated. Lines such as 'The mirror-walls of history' and 'their epoch's wild and formal love' are apposite and original.

Another poem with shapely verve is 'Democratic Watchdog':

The catchy questions newsmen ask
involve them in no special risk.
A free society is not
quite so plain as Who asks What.
If every now and then the interviewer
who has his subject wriggling on a skewer
dropped his sly triumphal smile
to wriggle there beside him for a while,
then Q.E.D.
we've seen a quiet plus for liberty.

Not all of the poems in *Folk Tunes* are as pithily eloquent, but this is a volume in which many simple-seeming poems, some serious, a good number light-hearted, expand to address and explore wider issues. These range from the qualities and behaviours of various historical and contemporary figures to Gould's own life and his observations, encounters and opinions. New ideas and imaginative vistas are consistently being opened up.

These poems and their measures mostly travel with a sprightly energy, yet they sometimes offer sharp critiques. They celebrate the value of friendship and love, work, culture and history. They entertain and enliven. ■

Paul Hetherington's most recent collection of poetry was *It Feels Like Disbelief* (2007). After a long career at the National Library of Australia, he is now Assistant Professor, School of Writing, at the University of Canberra.