DEBORAH JORDAN DISCUSSES THE ROLE OF UQP AS A SIGNIFICANT PUBLISHER OF AUSTRALIAN POETRY IN THE 1960s.

When the young American Frank Thompson was manager in the 1960s, the University of Queensland Press (UQP) became Australia’s most significant poetry publishing house.¹ The Press published volumes of original poetry by individual poets, such as David Malouf, Vicki Viidikas and Martin Johnston; anthologies; two series of Paperback Poets; consolidated anthologies selected from the series, the first edited by Roger McDonald, and the second by Thomas Shapcott (both poets themselves); recordings of poets reading their own work with accompanying text; and cassette recordings of poets. Key Indigenous poet Kevin Gilbert’s People are legends came out in 1978.

Can we put a value on the importance of poetry to a community? Poetry ‘at its highest is more important than can possibly be estimated’ proclaimed the cultural critic, Nettie Palmer.² Most of UQP’s poetry list was contemporary, drawn from the 1968 generation and the New Poetry, and from the earlier poets with roots in the 1950s, but some anthologies included much earlier bards. There was also critical writing about poets; biographies of poets such as Judith Wright; studies of individual authors and general literary histories, and text books all within the frame of Australian literature. A plain series of traditional British poets from Shelley to Browning appeared for secondary school. The interest in poetry extended to some of the titles in the Asian and Pacific series, as Ivor Indyk has found, in fiction and scholarship as well as poetry. UQP’s list formed the basis for the renaissance in Australian writing.³

The extraordinarily wide range and richness of the UQP archives stems in part from the calibre of the literary geniuses and giants—poets included—whose letters and manuscripts are boxed here. The bulk of the UQP records are held in the Fryer Library, with some important editorial correspondence still retained by the Press. Poetry editors employed at the Press were Roger McDonald, Rosie Fitzgibbon (who was also a fiction editor) and Sue Abbey, as well as commissioning editors Tom Shapcott and later Martin Duwell. Not only the correspondence from writers survives, at times anguished even tragic, at times tempestuous, but also letters from key artists of the time whose art was used on book covers.

The ‘immense task of the poet of every age’, believed Palmer, ‘has to be to write lines of such poetic power that our own names and ways can become impregnated with poetry’. With the social revolution of the late 1960s and early 1970s, a new generation of poets was experimenting with poetry as a process in a search to fuse their aesthetics and revolt. There was a generation seeking ways to build co-operative communities, not based in violence and warfare. But just as with earlier generations of poets, there were entrenched obstacles in their way of publication, given the size of the Australian reading public.

‘… to be a poet in Australia/is the ultimate commitment’ sang Michael Dransfield.⁴ When we ask questions about the material culture of poetry, about who reads poetry and what poetry sells, about the history of poetry books, and the cultural politics behind the publication of every book, then the UQP archive comes into its own as a very significant record of creative ferment.

Thompson had an extraordinary capacity to recognise creativity in its different guises and make a commitment to innovation and renewal. He was alive to the idea of the university press with responsibilities to the arts and region. The path ahead was uncharted. Publishing houses are strongly dependent on networks of personal relationships.⁵ Milestones in the history of UQP began in 1968; a ‘memorable year’ Craig Munro called it in his history UQP: the writer’s press, 1948-1998.⁶ In 1968 the first anthology New impulses in Australian poetry and first volume of original verse Roger McDonald’s Citizens of mist were published. In the archives we see something of the complexities of the process, the obstacles overcome and of how Thompson had to juggle poets, manuscripts, referees, the University Publications Committee, cover artists, accountants, production, the Commonwealth Literary Fund (CLF), sales and more to forge new relationships.

New impulses, a selection of over twenty poets, was put together by Rodney Hall and Tom Shapcott. Its publication offers an interesting
case study. Highly credible senior women poets were approached by the Press to referee the volume. Judith Wright, enthusiastic, wanted more explanation for the basis of selection of ‘social tensions’, and Rosemary Dobson, then working in London, challenged the inclusion of some poets. While the book had been accepted by the University Publications committee in 1966, Thompson wanted the funding rules changed. Publication was thus delayed. In his negotiations with the CLF, Thompson brokered a subsidy for the publication costs so the book could be sold at a cheaper price, rather than the later payment for any losses. The CLF also had to review the book, at even greater length, and asked for revisions. The three-page report neatly typed is carefully filed in the archive. The book was reprinted ‘within a remarkably short time’. Thompson’s belief that it was a highly significant book because it heralded the wider renaissance in poetry, is confirmed by later scholars.

‘Please don’t fall into a dark mood of despair’, Thompson wrote to Roger McDonald, UQP’s very first single poetry author, on sending him the referees’ stringent comments. Judith Wright could not read McDonald’s manuscript. Nor could Tom Shapcott, so he instead offered many quotable quotes in his reply. In a revealing memo to Ann [Lahey] UQP’s first editor, Thompson attempts to navigate the perilous hazards to find a suitable referee sufficiently open to poetry not like his or her own. Even this carefully chosen referee wanted deletions and changes, such as the title from ‘The Actor and Child’. A drawing by Hermia Boyd for the cover was commissioned. Somehow rumour had it that McDonald did not like the cover, but in a long letter to Thompson from Tasmania where he was working as a radio producer for the ABC, McDonald insisted that he was very pleased with it. Again Thompson wrote to the CLF for support—urgent support with a decision in time to publish for the Christmas market. The CLF responded by treating the book as a special case. Aware of the possibilities in publishing poetry, but also sure that the Publications Committee would not sanction a poetry editor, Thompson appointed McDonald as Audio Visual editor.

Every book has its own story, which can be reconstructed in the archives. The next two volumes of poetry published by Tom Shapcott and Rodney Hall survive in various stages of preparation, have reader’s reports and were again
channelled through the CLF. In a long important letter to Thompson, Shapcott explains why, rather than send a second poetry manuscript to UQP, he had self-published Fingers at air because he was “anxious to get the work out quickly because it was experimental” and he was seeking a reaction. Such documents provide rich insight into the publishing possibilities of the time, the expectations of poet and publisher and provide the background for David Malouf’s claim that the Press’s next series, the Paperback Poet series, was one “of the most brilliant publishing initiatives of the decade.”

The series was the response to Malouf’s insistence that his volume Bicycle and other poems be published in paperback not hardback. UQP dispensed with CLF funding, and set the text in-house using funds from the sale of text-books. The risks paid off; the Paperback Poets ‘sold like hot cakes’ for one dollar each.

Eighteen paperback books by different poets were published in the series; many of the poets were included in Shapcott’s ground-breaking Contemporary American & Australian poetry (1976). Livio Dobrez provides a useful distinction about the importance of these poets of the New Poetry, or the Generation of ‘68; their poetry “constitutes a quite different approach to the poem as poem, in short a new poetic”. The first anthology edited by McDonald The first Paperback Poets anthology was a selection of the best, and the Press hoped to reach into the schools.

A second vital initiative by UQP was its series of Poets on Record. Associated series were the Poets on Tape, Public Issues on Tape, and Public Figures on Tape. The Poets on Record series each consisted of a 45 rpm record and booklet. Three Poets on Record were published each year initially, then two each year until 1975. The first, Rodney Hall reads Romulus & Remus, had a print run of 1000, but this was increased for the next in the series, Rosemary Dobson reads from her own work, by 500. ‘One of the aims of the series’, explained McDonald, ‘is to provide a readily available stock of recordings for sale to audio-visual libraries and interested individuals.” Poets included James McAuley, Douglas Stewart, RD Fitzgerald, Bruce Dawe, Bruce Beaver, AD Hope, Judith Wright, Chris Wallace-Crabbe, Peter Porter, Randolph Stow, David Campbell and Francis Webb.

Each file, again, tells a different story. A recording session was arranged for AD Hope in Canberra, but at the time he was overseas. The BBC would not do a ‘private’ taping of Rosemary Dobson, who instead found a commercial recorder. Poems were selected by authors themselves (usually) and they read more than was needed so a selection could be made by the Press. Then the poets were asked to write an explanatory note. Not only was the recording being made of the authentic voice of the poets, but they were also being asked to comment on their own poems ‘to make the voice a bit more mind-expanding (as they say in the comics), or as they say in the academy, it will flesh it out’. Again in the archives, we can find the rich variety of responses in drafts of varying lengths and format. Many poets expressed reluctance but were encouraged in dialogue with McDonald. In general, there was an acceptance among these poets that at the centre of every poem there is a “meaning which is supplied by the reader in collaboration with the poet.” Dobson explained to an imaginary school girl how her interpretation of the poet’s poem was right even though it was different from her teacher’s and other members of her class; Rodney Hall wrote of the essential relationship between poetry and
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REFERENCES
7. ‘New impulses’, University of Queensland Press Archives, UQFL198, Box 338, Fryer Library. Documents relating to New impulses are held in this folder.
8. Thompson in Munro, UQP, p. 55.
9. Munro, UQP, p. 54.
10. ‘Roger McDonald’ University of Queensland Press Archives, UQFL198, Box 342.
11. Unsigned, presumably Thompson.
12. David Malouf in Munro, UQP, p. 74.
15. McDonald to A Atterman, 12 January 1976, University of Queensland Press Archives, UQFL198, Box 322.
16. Roger McDonald to Bruce Davie, 26 February 1970, in file ‘Bruce Davie-Poets on Record 5’, University of Queensland Press Archives, UQFL198, Box 95.

Left: Article from University News, 2 June 1976
Top: The covers of two records from the Poets on Record series

Young Australian poets recorded by Uni. Press

magic with the ‘non-rational responses’ in the hearer; but pertinent here are RD Fitzgerald’s comments that ‘a poet reading his own poem, however poorly ... will unveil more of its meaning than the printed page...’. A recording on record could be listened to again, and through repetition, any listener’s ‘bewilderment’ could be unknotted.

The archives of the poets in UQP in the Fryer offer rich possibilities for ongoing exploration into this exciting era, a time when poetic power, through the material conditions of possibility through UQP, was reaching out and our ways were being impregnated with poetry. The second paperback poetry series was initially edited by Roger McDonald, then Rosie Fitzgibbons and Tom Shapcott, all superb critics and editors. In preparing an anthology from the series, Shapcott emphasised ‘the achievements of the second half of the vital decade of the 1970s’ outlining ‘the presence of energy and immediacy’ in making his catholic selection. We can recognise this today, even as the books themselves are now rare, as we can listen again and again to the recordings of many key poets, because Poets On Record are available online, through the Fryer Library catalogue and eSpace.