



***Intercolonial* by Stephen Oliver. Auckland: Puriri Press (2013). Pb, 61pp. RRP: \$28.50 plus \$2.50. postage within New Zealand. ISBN: 9780908943401. Reviewed by Patricia Prime.**

*Intercolonial* by Stephen Oliver is a most remarkable book. Oliver shows extensive learning,

maintaining throughout an admirable objectivity; outstanding enough, given the nature of the material he is dealing with and the fact that the narrative is sustained right the way through sixty-one densely packed pages. The stories, after all, deal with a tremendous amount of New Zealand and Australian history. The complexity of the narrative, its beauty and meaning might intimidate the reader, but it is well worth the effort. Frequently, Oliver relies on the cumulative effect of a series of observations. Sharp writing and graphic imagery are essential to this work. There is a tight control of subject matter and the writing does not disguise the complexity of the theme.

While recognizing that there may be obvious gaps in our knowledge of the particular people, events and history to which Oliver refers, there are advantages in that readers are introduced to myth, history, childhood, geography, cities and much more. The densely packed scholarship which informs Oliver's work is not there to daunt the reader, and one gets to what the poet is reflecting upon very quickly.

In a romanticized quest like that presented in *Intercolonial*, the goal is a spiritual, transcendent experience. The first stage refers to Wellington harbour and the shipping trade between New Zealand and Australia. Here, it is the child who sees the harbour from his house:

Our bay-windows became a ship's bridge, took the  
of southerlies off the Tasman Sea, churned <sup>full force</sup> smoky-  
charcoal on wintry nights, the house held to its <sup>grey as</sup>  
moorings against  
shuddering troughs, deep low-pressure systems;

This first stage, the lure of the ocean, becomes a mystical journey – an immersion of soul and

body, an attempt to experience the limits of human experience – and, hopefully to move beyond those limits. We are now introduced to Kupe (in Māori mythology Kupe was involved in the Polynesian discovery of New Zealand).

A scatter of southerly, battered baches, Cook Strait,  
heaving with bull kelp, beer-bottle brown, sting of  
salty air.  
Here, Kupe cut himself on sea shell, so too his  
daughters  
who gashed their breasts in grief thinking him  
sea-lost.

When we come to the passage about the poet's childhood, we see Oliver at his best; the theme fully developed, the portrait warm and sensitive without sentimentality. A few lines, where the boys play in the street:

Our pram-wheeled trolleys in mediaeval cavalcade  
northerlies head-on, hurtling down Karepa Street –  
two unsure  
boys, with bat and ball, bowling googlies down a  
dusty,  
worn wicket pitch on solitary 'Baldy's Flat'/Tanara  
Park.

Oliver advances the depiction of childhood with sustained subtlety and shows his history with inference and allusion.

Later in the book, this fine, well-controlled poem takes the reader to Australia, where we meet the explorers:

Our lank shadows dogging us, scrambling across the  
raw-red stones', cried the explorers, the oven-plate  
of Central  
Australia; the Gibson and Simpson and Great Sandy  
deserts;  
each shadow elongated into history like a Drysdale  
painting.

Many of the passages about Australia recall the past, the history and geography of two countries: their communication, togetherness and acceptance of each other. But even more significant, is the poet's process of observation, understanding and articulation, in the acts of imagination that result in the poem itself as an expression of connection.

These are narrative poems, though there are beautiful lyric passages contained in the stories Oliver tells about warriors, the gods, the Romans, the Vikings, Maori, settlers and his childhood. These aren't necessarily the stories you'll find in history

