



The Judas Tree:
Poems by Lorna
Staveley Anker.
Edited by Bernadette
Hall. Christchurch:
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Reviewed by Sue
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Christchurch poet **Lorna Staveley Anker** was born in 1914 and died in 2000. She began to write poetry in her fifties, and

had work published in various journals including *takahē* and *Landfall*. In 1986, at the age of 72, Anker published her first collection, *My Streetlamp Dances*. This was followed by two further collections, *From a Particular Stave* (1993) and *Ellen's Vigil* (1996). Anker was a founding member of Christchurch women's writing group The Airing Cupboard, as well as being active in WEA writing classes, the *Listener Women's Book Festival*, and the Canterbury Poets' Collective. Her writing on the effects of war on New Zealanders at home has resulted in her being called New Zealand's first woman war poet, and her poem "Ellen's Vigil" was interred, in 2004, in the Tomb of the Unknown Warrior in Wellington. *The Judas Tree* contains 53 poems selected by editor (and Anker's friend and poetry colleague) **Bernadette Hall**.¹ 21 of these poems appear in print for the first time.

Hall has written an informative introduction to the poems, and this forms an integral part of a reading of *The Judas Tree*. Hall notes that a writer's style "arises from the reality of who we are", and for Anker, who we are told had a "high regard for truth and plain speaking", the effect is poetry "free of self-consciousness and artifice". This is especially so in Part One of this three part collection, in poems which draw on Anker's experiences as a child and young woman during the first and second world wars. There is little metaphor or simile, and these poems are rarely lyrical. Instead, they utilise the syntax of prose to tell an anecdote or describe a remembered event. They scroll like news reels, line breaks controlling pace and directing our gaze, as in film the camera lingers for a moment on a detail before cutting to the next scene. In "Larry", for example:

His reward – one plastic eyeball
fitted behind a contrived eyelid,
and a second chance to be led
through a park
where feet could froth up
dry leaves,
while he played German songs
on his battle-scarred harmonica,
a genuine Hohner (original factory
established/registered in 1857).

This is straight-forward, communicative writing, direct and factual. Only the word 'froth' bears a possible deeper, darker echo, calling to mind Wilfred Owen's 'froth-corrupted lungs'. "Larry" is typical of Anker's war poems: it is written with a clear eye and a steady hand. It does what it sets out to do: it speaks, and speaks frankly; it shows and shows clearly. Anker offers a wider war testimony than hitherto heard in New Zealand poetry, speaking of and for New Zealand families, including children. Hall suggests that 'over time her work has become stronger and more significant as it bears witness to what has gone before'. This is true of the war poems in *The Judas Tree*.

But war poetry is not all that Anker wrote. The second and third parts of the collection contain more recent work with an extensive range of subject matter and style. It is here that Anker's lyrical self appears, along with metaphor, simile and colour. 'I make believe', she announces in the first poem of Part Two: "A Valley Away". These latter poems are composed with something other than testimony in mind, and there is a palpable sense of release and celebration in their splashes of colour and mentions of music. In "Whispers from wood" a jarrah-bed is fashioned 'with song'; other poems delight in minstrels, ballads and chanson. The moon is a presence too, and an increasing sense of darkness, of mortality: 'soon / I shall dissolve/in/the mysterious/Kingdom/of the quarks'. These poems – perhaps they should be called the peace poems – are explorative in form and subject matter and free-spirited in tone. They display not only Anker's clear eye and a steady hand, but, increasingly, a musical ear and imaginative approach.

The Judas Tree is a fine tribute to a poet of both war and peace.

1. Bernadette Hall is an award-winning poet who lives at Amberley Beach in the Hurunui, North Canterbury. Her most recent collection of poetry is *Life and Customs*, Wellington: VUP, 2013.