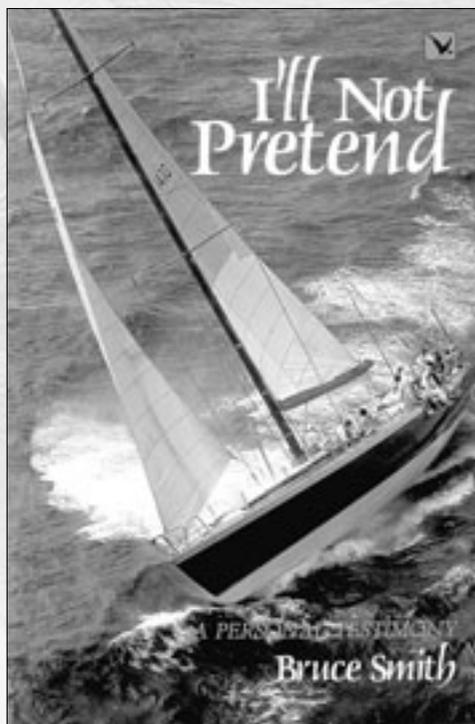


I'll Not Pretend



“A world like this”: Bruce Smith and his poetry¹

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I offer here a brief and inadequate appreciation of one of Bruce Smith’s gifts to God’s people—indeed, to all people—his poetry. Bruce published poetry relatively late in his life; his first volume in 1984. However, in the following 17 years, its recital mid-sermon or mid-lecture became a highly distinctive feature of his teaching and preaching. He was one of but a few Australian preachers, in my experience, to incorporate poetry into his preaching, let alone his own poetry. I was always struck by how much people enjoyed this, and would yearn to hear Bruce preach because they knew that they would hear his verse.

His published volumes of poetry were welcomed in Sydney Anglican circles, perhaps with a little surprise that a clergyman was writing verse. This common and popular occupation in the rest of the Christian world has been considered

rather alien in the Antipodes, especially among evangelical clergy. Launching Bruce’s second volume of poetry, *More Than One World*, at Moore Theological College in 1994, Archbishop Donald Robinson suggested (half-jokingly) that “Not many poets are called!”² However, this awkwardness of reception is merely a cultural ephemera, and tomorrow could be different. It is also notable that those who responded to Bruce’s work sat in church pews across the country—his appeal was wide. And those who favourably reviewed his work number among the most influential Australian Anglican teachers of the past and present generation: Donald Robinson, D. B. Knox, Peter Jensen.

I will outline below some of the features of his poetry, as a means of introducing him to a new and wider audience, expecting that it will resonate beyond the quietening of the voice of its composer.

Style and technique

Bruce Smith's style was largely free verse, in short stanzas: prose elegantly arranged, perhaps. You might call it narrative poetry, but with an inward, psychological turn common to 20th century verse. I've searched for classical models for his verse. (Being a classics teacher, did he follow Homer or Virgil? Did he imitate the non-rhyming stanzas of Pindar's Odes, for instance? Or did he belong with the measured, reflective lyrics of Horace?). It seems to me that he wasn't purposefully modelling his work on any of these, although his concerns—life and death, natural beauty, human misery, music and art—certainly have a classical tenor.

Bruce's primary poetic technique was enjambment, the running over of one line on to the next without using punctuation. This enhances the sense of dialogue between poet and reader, and is one reason his poetry is so personally revealing. Occasionally, he played with simple, largely unforced rhyme. Now and then, various end rhyme patterns are used (ABA, AA, AAB) to 'round-off' an impression. However, he could not be called a formal poet in anything other than subject matter. Although Bruce employs stanzas (usually two to four), these do not appear to follow any recognized pattern or tradition. Rather, they seem to be a means of separating responses to and reflections on an event. Bruce writes occasional poetry, frequently elegaic: one reviewer described Bruce's best poems as those which

"begin with an observation and end in disquiet".³ This tragic structure, undergirded by Christian faith, is a constant feature of his work.

A first-century mind

Although he was not one to reconstruct Scripture laboriously in poetry, Bruce frequently wrote within a first-century context: he recorded the imagined inner experience of Bible figures such as those who listened to Paul preach in the Areopagus, or the Gadarene demoniac who experienced Jesus's healing powers. The following poem is written in the voice of Herod musing over his murderous wife.

Nocturne for Herod Antipas

How comfortably
she lies at my side.
Nothing, absolutely nothing,
disturbs her sleep now.
Those stormy days
and restless nights
when the Baptizer
shook our world
have long since passed.
Oh how she fumed then
and forced her hatred of him
through clenched teeth.
She pursued John
from the Jordan waters
till his outraged head
adorned our bloody feast
at Machaerus.

She is totally a woman of passion
without conscience
and I fear her.
Now she sleeps
while these shadows
from our past
lay siege to my mind.

This week—tomorrow perhaps—
I could meet John’s cousin
—less of a threat to me, I suspect,
but disturbing nevertheless.
Herodias is not interested
and there’ll be no dancing
from Salome!
Maybe Jesus himself
would do a trick or two—
we shall see.

Seasons of mellow fruitfulness

Bruce was a nature observer, writing about wattle trees in the school playground, and magnolias that look like “a mighty flight of prehistoric moths”, and “white enamelled cockatoos”. His season, I think, was autumn, the time when leaves are falling and the parallels with human mortality are obvious. He wasn’t a Robert Frost-like winter writer (even though he writes some poems of winter), because he always saw through to the new blooms.

Gulls

Above
the wind-whipped surf
on wings that sing

in summer skies
they fly—
wheeling, screeching,
blown spray
across blue seas.

Human frailty

Bruce wrote about human frailty and the thoughts of desperate men and women. As one who strolled city streets, sat in parks, and poked about bookshops, he saw broken or lonely people (yes, bookshop browsers are often lonely people!) and found moments to write about them. He wrote ‘from the margins’ about aboriginal suffering, about poverty, about brokenness. He also recognized the distance between people, and marvelled at the times when that distance was traversed, be it through love, shared interests, or the bond of faith in the one God. However, Bruce’s poetry is more frequently about the failure to see the closing of the gap between oneself and another:

Failure

He pitched on
twisted limbs
with body bent
and serious face,
while I with even pace
walked through the park.

As he drew near me
on my way,
I looked at him
and looked ahead

and with determined tread
I passed him by.

I wondered
if he saw me look—
and look away—
and whether or not he would surmise
from the averting of my eyes
the embarrassment I felt within.

Whatever he felt
I'll never know,
but I know well
I failed him there.
Not from kindness did I stare
ahead of me as he passed by.

He pitched on
twisted limbs
with body bent
(and with what face?)
while I deep in disgrace
walked evenly.

The dust of death

Death is perhaps Bruce's major concern in poetry. He frequently wrote on the death of friends and family, the death of those he admired (such as conductor Van Otterloo), and more generally on the presence of death "in the midst of life".

He reeled at the insult of death and destruction, that in it one can imagine the possibility of permanence which is at the core of the human experience. God has placed eternity in our hearts, but without the capacity to see from God's perspective (Ecclesiastes 3:11). Bruce saw death not only as a human, or even

an animal, misery, but as the curse of all creation. In 'Dust to Dust', it was wood-dust that brought him to the poem:

Dust to Dust

A timber frame
two metres tall
and half as wide,
every piece carefully grooved
and fitted,
fastened with bolts,
uprights and crossbars,
designed and executed most artfully
to fulfil a use
I could not fathom.

It lay on its back
behind a house
forgotten,
its days spent,
its purpose finished,
a silent skeletal witness
to previous plans and labours,
conversations and expectations—
rotting,
rusting,
ageing into splintered
fibrous dust.

For all his glory
Solomon did no better.

The future

Bruce dwelt on death, but with the temper of someone who knows that it is not the end. There is nothing 'pie in the sky' about Bruce's heavenly yearnings;

rather, they emerge from suffering endured with faith. And faith always has a future state in mind. Bruce brought his eschatological longing to earth, in the form of appreciating the divine experiences of this world, such as seeing Sydney harbour.

I'll Not Be Disappointed

Often I find myself
choosing to drive
near the sea.
I'm doing it now:
through Gladesville
and Drummoyne
en route to the city.

I know what's ahead of me:
harbour views with water
more blue than the sky,
yachts in full sail
straining for wind,
moored boats in wooded bays,
water-front homes
with rocky foreshores
and bright sandy beaches.

If I have time—
doubtless I will—
I'll park and pause
and look awhile.
I'll try Thornley Street
overlooking a park
with boatshed and beach—
just the place
to take it in.

Even now with traffic
surging all round,
infecting me with its fever

of impatience and frustration,
I can feel the power of this
prospect calming me.
I know what I shall see,
I know that other world
is there, just ahead,
waiting for me.
There's no chance I'll be
disappointed, no chance at all.

Bruce saw the potential of children, that they are one key to the future, and it is no mere off-the-cuff comment of Christ's that those who are as children shall inherit the Kingdom of God. One of my favourite of his poems is not so much about the future, as about the potential of a child to shape the future.

Defiance

'Bamboo', he said defiantly,
'Bamboo'.
He stood in the kitchen
by the door
and fetched this word
from his limited store
to break our wills
with his.

He's barely two years
into life
(and one of these
was spent in Asia)
and now he stood,
bare-legged and nappy-clad,
defying the adult world
with all his verbal strength
while we held back
our laughter.

But if in later years
 he were to stand,
 like Luther, and say 'Bamboo'
 in the cause of
 what he knew was true,
 we would not laugh,
 indeed we would not laugh.

Finally, Bruce saw the experience of life
 as the experience of dissatisfaction, of
 yearning for what lies beyond, and of
 experiencing in the contrasts of life
 something of the contrast that remains
 between earth and heaven.

Being Elsewhere

Today it's wet
 and people complain
 as the rain comes down
 turning the streets
 to a glossy black.
 Car tyres make that
 distinctive hiss—
 a familiar sound
 on a day like this.

It's cold as well,
 not fearfully so,
 but cold enough
 to add to the grief
 of those who seek
 relief from the rain
 by pausing in doorways
 before they cross
 the street once again.

It's the contrast
 that hurts.
 A carpeted room

and a fire brightly burning,
 being at home
 in a cosy world,
 sitting outdoors
 on a sunny day
 reading a book
 while children play.
 It's being elsewhere
 where things are different.
 These things we miss
 on a day like this.

It's heaven itself—
 the absence of fear,
 the reign of love
 and the prospect of bliss,
 that moves our hearts
 in a world like this.

Published work

I'll Not Pretend, Albatross Books,
 Sutherland, Sydney, 1st ed. 1984,
 2nd ed. 1986.
More Than One World, self-published,
 Newtown, Sydney, 1994.

ENDNOTES

- 1 An address given to the Moore College Literary Group, 15 May 2001, at Moore Theological College, Newtown.
- 2 Donald Robinson, 'More Than One World', Moore College, 6 September, 1994. Private papers, Estate of Bruce Leslie Smith.
- 3 G. A. Cole, "I'll Not Pretend", draft of an unpublished review, Private papers, Estate of Bruce Leslie Smith.