

**LINES OF CONTINUITY IN DOUGLAS STEWART'S  
POETRY AND VERSE PLAYS**

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## ABSTRACT

Douglas Stewart (1913-1985), a New Zealander by birth and an Australian by choice, was a poet, verse dramatist, balladist and short story writer. As editor of the Red Page of the *Bulletin* (1940 to 1961), his role extended to critical essays collected in *The Flesh and the Spirit* and *The Broad Stream*, though his contribution to Australian literature was in his recognition and promotion of new poets and authors whose work became a significant part of the Australian literary canon.

Stewart's poetic preoccupations were diverse; this is evident in the *Green Lions* and *The White Cry*, both published while he lived in New Zealand, and while they evoked the notions of a young poet, the potential indicated was for continuing recognition as the poet matured. His poetry employs vernacular language (even colloquial, at times), yet it is language capable of dwelling on profound philosophical concerns. This is particularly so in his later verse and plays.

Preoccupations evident in Stewart's New Zealand verse continued to surface in his Australian productions. Themes associated with solitude, heroism and nature are present in his earliest lyrics and in the diverse range of his Australian lyrics, ballads and verse plays.

Stewart's dramas, such as *Ned Kelly* and *The Fire on the Snow* made his reputation, but critical focus on these and on his extended verse sequences does not always recognise the continuity of his work considered as a whole. This thesis is concerned to show some of the continuities.

i)

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This thesis is for my son, Paul James McKay

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I certify that the substance of this thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not currently being submitted for any other degree or qualification.

I certify that any help received in preparing this thesis and all sources used have been acknowledged in this thesis.

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(Signature)

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## INTRODUCTION

Douglas Stewart's career as a poet extended across his lifetime's experience from 1926 to 1930 when he was a high school student in New Zealand, to his final work, *Douglas Stewart's Garden of Friends*.<sup>1</sup> During two decades as literary editor of the *Bulletin's* Red Page (1940-1961), his role as editor, poet, playwright, prose writer, biographer, critical journalist and essayist covered an extensive range of diverse genres, the lines of continuity which were cumulative and which contributed to his total philosophy. Stewart resigned from the *Bulletin* when ownership changed hands, but he experimented with modernism in his own poetry and verse plays, although changing emphases in new philosophies such as modernism and post-modernism practised by the 'Class of '68' and younger poets did not appeal to him or his perspectives about literature.

Stewart was awarded an OBE in 1961, and in 1968 he was awarded the Britannica Australia Award in the Humanities. He became Literary Editor at Angus and Robertson until 1970 when he retired. Vincent Buckley was appointed as the new literary editor of the *Bulletin*, but the Red Page remained, as in the time of Douglas Stewart, 'the real centre of new impulses.'<sup>2</sup>

A list of publications from 1970 to his death in 1985 illustrates the continuing energy Stewart drew on during his retirement. Susan Ballyn and Jeff Doyle comment:

The importance of Douglas Stewart for any discussion of Australian letters cannot be underestimated. Prolific, talented and successful in his personal, creative life as a poet, playwright, essayist, autobiographer and writer of short stories, he was of equal significance in the public sphere as editor, publisher's reader, reviewer, arts patron and office bearer.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Stewart, D., *Douglas Stewart's Garden of Friends*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1987. This book was published posthumously by Stewart's daughter, Meg.

<sup>2</sup> Hall R. and Shapcott, T., *New Impulses in Australian Poetry*, University of Queensland Press, St. Lucia, 1968, p. 7.

<sup>3</sup> Ballyn S., and Doyle J., *Douglas Stewart: A Bibliography*, Australian Scholarly Editions Centre, University College, University of New South Wales, Australian Defence Force Academy, and National Library of Australia, Canberra, 1996, p. 1.

It would be a massive task to write about all Stewart's major preoccupations and interests. Consequently, even though Stewart was 'one of the most influential arbiters of Australian literary taste, aiding the emergence of many voices in Australian writing and helping to educate an Australian audience to attend to its own cultural products',<sup>4</sup> it has been necessary to restrict this thesis to focus on Stewart's poetry, ballads and verse plays. Close reading of his poetry and verse plays reveals the critical underpinnings of his later work in the earliest volumes of his poetry written in and about New Zealand. No such critical reading has so far been attempted, and this reading is intended to address a critical lack in the literature relating to Stewart's poetical output. Sometimes it is imperative that readers should consider the implications and connotations which challenge the readers' analytic skills; it is, therefore, my intention to recognise and comprehend what is unspoken in Stewart's work through silences in the poetry, images and symbolism, metaphysical references, and in connotations. Research reveals that there is a paucity of critical analysis of Stewart's work since 1985, despite the fact that he was literary editor of the Red Page, as well as a respected mentor and promoter of new poets' poems and other genres such as short stories.

In this thesis I aim to persuade readers that a re-evaluation of Stewart's poetry and verse plays is both timely and important. The thesis is concerned to examine Stewart's creative impulse, diversity of motifs and poetic preoccupations, and to explore lines of continuity which contribute to the poet's total philosophical statement in his poetry and verse plays from the 1920s to the 1980s. My task is concerned to show lines of continuity, including Stewart's experiments with modernism, that critical focus has not fully recognised. Preoccupations with language, and the way Stewart employed the vernacular (even colloquial) register to dwell on profound philosophical concerns, also form the subject of, and contribute

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<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, p. 1.

to this dissertation. Clement Semmler suggests that Stewart was ‘A continuing and stimulating influence on younger writers;<sup>5</sup> he also states that he attempts to relate ‘in a proper perspective Stewart’s achievement as one who so remarkably brought poetry back into fashion’.<sup>6</sup> As one reader who nurtured an intense dislike of poetry in my more mature years, I, too, discovered Stewart’s poetry and verse plays to be a stimulating influence which renewed my earlier poetic appreciation and energy, and it is my intention to persuade readers to re-evaluate Stewart’s poetic achievement and his relationship to the literary culture of his time.

Stewart formed his argument for poetry over a long period of time. As a young poet his poetry was descriptive as it reflected New Zealand’s natural environment, but even at this early time in his career as a poet and playwright, there were underlying themes such as human responses to challenging experiences; more profound issues developed in later poetry and verse plays such as *The Fire on the Snow*, *The Golden Lover*, *Glencoe*, *Rutherford* and ‘Worsley Enchanted’. During an interview with John Thompson, Stewart states his original preoccupation that ‘one should keep in touch with the earth ... you should not lose contact with nature’.<sup>7</sup> His sense of ‘belonging’ to nature and identification with it forms a line of continuity in his poetic work that contributed to his central philosophy. Mutual identification with the earth and its creatures developed as Stewart’s poetry developed, and later, in Australia, poems such as ‘Lyrebird’ (CP., p. 54) demonstrate a more modernist aspect of the essence of his argument that the closer one moves towards nature, the closer one moves towards the spirit of the earth. In writing poems such as ‘Lyrebird’, he brings his own sense of joy and curiosity to the poem while he was also experimenting with modernism, thus

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<sup>5</sup> Semmler, C., Preface, *Douglas Stewart: Australia*, ed. J. Jones, Twayne, New York, 1974 (no page numbers).

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Thompson, J. Interview, ‘Poetry in Australia: Douglas Stewart’, *Southerly*, No. 3, 1967, p. 193.



contributing to his total philosophy.<sup>8</sup> Stewart was adamant that poetry should be enjoyable, and this line of continuity as well as that of spiritual influence contributes to Stewart's aim to achieve higher aesthetic ideals in his poetry.

R.D. FitzGerald comments on Stewart's versatility, concluding that there will be 'considerable diversity of motifs running through them whereby is built up the poet's total statement, his contribution to our understanding of the universe we live in'.<sup>9</sup> Other thematic concerns that constitute lines of continuity emerge throughout this thesis and demonstrate a 'progressive expansion of his themes';<sup>10</sup> these include themes such as: defiance in the face of insuperable odds and the joy one can attain from poetry. The poet's increasing interest in and experiments with the modernism of his time continued as his poetry developed to include spiritual awareness and more profound and sometimes underlying human themes and responses to their experiences.

Stewart was still experimenting with technical devices such as form, rhythm and language, so when Thompson asked him in an interview in 1965 whether there was any philosophy behind these contemplations of the natural world in 'The Green Centipede', Stewart replied: 'Yes, there is. They're all a method of exploring the universe ... It's an exploration of the duality of God, of good and evil, in the universe ... the poems are, as I say, an exploration into the truths of the universe'.<sup>11</sup> This exploration into the 'duality of God' is developed throughout a great deal of Stewart's poetry and verse plays, and spiritual influence continues to be conducive to both his total philosophy and the way his argument emerges from the poetry in *Sun Orchids* and *The Birdsville Track* in which various motifs and images add strength to more profound issues, and a change in mood and tone occurs in these poems.

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<sup>8</sup> Sharkey, M., *Salt*, No. 9, 1996, p. 5.

<sup>9</sup> FitzGerald, R.D., *Elements of Poetry*, University of Queensland Press, St. Lucia, 1963, p. 27.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>11</sup> Thompson, *op. cit.*, p. 193.

Stewart's attitude to language and the manner in which it is used is of vital importance in this thesis. He argues in the introduction to *Modern Australian Verse*, Part 2, that 'the language of even the most traditional kind of poetry must change as the language of the nation changes, or it will no longer be in touch with life'.<sup>12</sup> His research into the poetry of Wordsworth and Coleridge, who revolted against 'the artifices of the eighteenth century', as well as Chaucer's practice of using colloquial idiom in *The Canterbury Tales*, led to acceptance of Yeats' idea that poets should use 'the natural words in their natural order'.<sup>13</sup> In other words, he argues that 'when we read the verse of poets who practised this direct, natural speech, we are impressed, not so much by the difference between the speech of past times and our own, as by the similarity' (p. xxvii). Stewart is certainly not suggesting that modern poets should use antiquated language in modern times, but that they should use accessible language — not refined, archaic or stylistically contrived — but language which will provoke readers' curiosity and awareness of the poet's philosophical and aesthetic concerns in order to enjoy poems and verse plays in the manner he intended.

In his discussion of literary modernism and his use of it in the 1940s, Stewart is critical of Freud's Oedipus-complex in Auden. He deplored the absurd Freudian psychology, which meant 'burrowing and drowning in the bogs of personality'<sup>14</sup> and he disapproved of the 'vulgar displays of private erudition' preferred by some critics and which could also be found in Ezra Pound's *Cantos* and in T.S. Eliot's 'The Wasteland'. In Stewart's opinion, 'to be a disciple of Freud is to write 'the most difficult, the most "sophisticated", the most unintelligible art of our time'.<sup>15</sup> Stewart confirms his continuing notion that poetry should give enjoyment to 'ordinary

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<sup>12</sup> Stewart, D., *Modern Australian Verse 2.*, op. cit., p. xxvii.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*, p. xxvii.

<sup>14</sup> Stewart, D., 'Escapes from Art' in 'Blaming the Age' op. cit., 1948, p. 89.

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*, p. 91.

cultivated readers’,<sup>16</sup> and in his introduction to *Modern Australian Verse 2*, he reiterates his opinion that Matthew Arnold’s ‘The Reaper’ is an example of the joy of poetry, a thematic preoccupation which contributes to his philosophical *oeuvre* throughout this thesis. Despite Stewart’s disapproval of many poets’ use of modernism in their work, Michael Sharkey’s suggestion that Stewart was accommodating himself to modernity throughout his career<sup>17</sup> is significant, and hence it is a line of continuity contributing to Stewart’s central philosophy and to a considerable discussion, particularly in the latter half of this thesis.

Reviews of *Green Lions*,<sup>18</sup> Stewart’s first book-length volume of poetry, were enthusiastic,<sup>19</sup> and these included a review in the *Bulletin* to which he had contributed many early poems.<sup>20</sup> There were also two letters of praise and encouragement from Edmund Blunden<sup>21</sup> and a letter from John Cowper Powys<sup>22</sup>, but New Zealand reviews of *Green Lions* were more cautious. However, in ‘Fired from the Canon’, Rosemary Sorenson wrote that Dorothy Hewett ‘dismisses him [Stewart] with a laugh’.<sup>23</sup> In the same article, Chris Wallace-Crabbe states that Stewart, ‘perhaps best known for his ’40s ABC radio dramas, *The Fire on the Snow* and *The Golden Lover*,<sup>24</sup> has “already been dropped from anthologies”.’ In contrast, book editor, Joy Hooton, is of the opinion that Stewart ‘doesn’t get the attention he’s worth’ and thinks that may be because he is ‘too prolific’. Benjamin Taaffe points out that Stewart suffered a fate that ‘would have astonished his *Bulletin* readers and appalled many of his

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<sup>16</sup> op. cit., p. 95.

<sup>17</sup> Sharkey, M., *Salt*, p. 5.

<sup>18</sup> Stewart, D., *Green Lions*, privately printed by Holcombe and Tombs, Auckland, 1936.

<sup>19</sup> Taaffe, B.T., unpublished PhD thesis ‘Douglas Stewart: Poet, Editor, Man of Letters’, University of Sydney, February, 1995, p. 34.

<sup>20</sup> Anon, ‘A Young Maoriland Poet’, *Bulletin*, Red Page, 4 August, 1937, p. 34.

<sup>21</sup> Blunden, E., Letter to D. Stewart, 4 October, 1937, NLA MSS 4829.

<sup>22</sup> Powys, John Cowper, Letter to D. Stewart, 1937, ML MSS 5147/19.

<sup>23</sup> Sorenson, R., ‘Fired from the Canon’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 July, 1994, ‘Spectrum’, p. 8, A.

<sup>24</sup> Stewart, D., *The Golden Lover* (1943), *Four Plays*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1958.

contemporaries of the post-War literary world'.<sup>25</sup> These opinions are relevant to my argument — that a re-evaluation of Stewart's work is overdue and timely. A great deal of close reading is required to arrive at a feasible critical opinion in order to give Stewart 'the attention he's worth' as suggested by Hooton.

My re-evaluation of Stewart's work commences with his New Zealand poetry. From the 1920s to the 1970s he developed many and varied impulses that emerged in response to changing conditions of his time when, as an expatriate, he lived and worked in Australia; World War II was most significant in regard to world-wide changing perceptions in 1939-1945 and thereafter. In his essay 'Making the Crossing: Douglas Stewart the Expatriate Patriot',<sup>26</sup> Laurence Bourke investigates Stewart's dissatisfaction with New Zealand modernists and their decisions not to publish his chosen poems. At that time Stewart decided to live in Sydney as an expatriate poet and to work at the *Bulletin* as editor of the Red Page where he became part of the Sydney literary milieu; his role was conducive to new ideas, even though the *Bulletin* remained mainly traditional, but an enormous gulf existed between the Australian and the New Zealand literary scenes.

Bourke argues that, in Stewart's opinion, 'the *Bulletin* was then the bright and burning centre of antipodian literature' was misleading<sup>27</sup>. He asserts that 'Antipodean' refers to both Australia and New Zealand, but the *Bulletin* was not central to New Zealand or to New Zealand critics, who did not take it seriously. Stewart was always careful with choice of language, so Bourke's reason that Stewart makes the statement as an 'aside' cannot be supported; however, Bourke then proposes that in pretending there was no difference between

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<sup>25</sup> Taafe, B., Douglas Stewart: Poet, Editor, Man of Letters, unpublished thesis, University of Sydney, 1995, p. 1.

<sup>26</sup> Bourke, L., 'Making the Crossing: Douglas Stewart the Expatriate Patriot', *Southerly*, Vol. 53, No. 2, June, 1993, pp. 40-53.

<sup>27</sup> Bourke, *ibid.*, p. 41. Bourke quotes from Stewart's biography of Kenneth Slessor, *Man of Sydney*, Nelson, West Melbourne, p. 5.

the Australian and New Zealand perspectives, Stewart's 'elision amounts to little more than a redefinition of the self by redefining the past'.<sup>28</sup> This introduces a new debate on Stewart's nationalism, taken up by Brigid Magner who states that, as an expatriate, Stewart was 'disguising his identity along the way'.<sup>29</sup> There is insufficient evidence to support this claim, especially when Magner adds, 'For most of his adult life, Stewart passed as an Australian while still retaining nostalgic notions of New Zealand'.<sup>30</sup> She then begins a discussion of nationalism: 'Stewart's disavowal of his origins was provoked by the very real pressures which determined the conditions of his existence as a poet and literary editor'.<sup>31</sup> Throughout this thesis I have mentioned the manner in which Stewart continually refers, through imagery, symbolism and language in his poetry, ballads and verse plays, to New Zealand, especially landscapes during the four seasons. I agree that, although *The Golden Lover* 'might be read as an attempt to celebrate a distinctive aspect of his native culture — the spiritual life of the Maori', I cannot accept the next half of Magner's opinion that 'it may be viewed more pragmatically in a way of ridding New Zealand from his mind before making himself over as a Sydneysider'.<sup>32</sup> Such arguments are contradictory and, in my opinion, exaggerated, especially when research into Stewart's works includes his entire published poems and verse plays in which constant references to New Zealand and its landscapes, as well as human responses to New Zealanders' experiences, become lines of continuity culminating in 'Rutherford', and finally, 'Bell Rock'. Nancy Keesing, Stewart's colleague and co-author of *Australian Bush Ballads*, states unequivocally that it is important 'to make it plain that in becoming a major interpreter of Australian landscape he has not rejected New Zealand ... his continuing

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<sup>28</sup> *ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>29</sup> Magner, B., 'Trans-Tasman Literary Expatriates', *A Companion to Australian Literature Since 1900*, N. Burns and R. McNeer, Rochester, New York (State), 2007, p. 369.

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.*, p. 364.

<sup>31</sup> *ibid.*, p. 364.

<sup>32</sup> *ibid.*, p. 365.

preoccupation with two physical landscapes enhances the interpretation of both'.<sup>33</sup>

Phillip Meade perceives the literary search for *terra australis incognita*, that is, the Voyager concept, as the antithesis of emigration — and argues: 'in reality they are all *fragments* of stories and often displaced or off-centred ones'.<sup>34</sup> Stewart claims that voyager poems 'tell, with varying degrees of completeness, a story'.<sup>35</sup> This idea reflects Vivian Smith's concept of 'evasive scepticism', that is, Stewart's 'ability to see both sides of the question and not commit himself.'<sup>36</sup> FitzGerald's supporting argument — 'But probably the only really relevant biography is found in the poems themselves',<sup>37</sup> — continues this argument by comparing 'other poets' whose 'best work is done, as a rule, a little off centre';<sup>38</sup> that is, 'when some thought in the mind, though affected by their central philosophy, is not directly concerned with it',<sup>39</sup> and FitzGerald's suggestion is best demonstrated in *The Birdsville Track* collection, but it is in 'Lyrebird' that Stewart's philosophy is evoked. 'Terra Australis', a voyager poem included in Meade's essay, also maintains its strength by way of Stewart's off-centred approach, and by understanding this approach is the key to any serious re-evaluation of his work.

FitzGerald perceives 'an underlying symbolism of mankind's identity with the life of the earth itself' in Stewart's poetry.<sup>40</sup> He further emphasises the inevitability of progress in science, just as it was inevitable that Stewart's sense of 'belonging' to nature and his identification with it is the centrepiece of his central philosophy. FitzGerald is of the opinion that Stewart is

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<sup>33</sup> Keesing, N., *Douglas Stewart*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1969, p. 5.

<sup>34</sup> Meade, P., 'Constitutional Poetics', *Networked Language: Culture and History in Australian Poetry*, Australian Scholarly Publishing, North Melbourne, 2008, pp. 186-267.

<sup>35</sup> Stewart, D., *Voyager Poems*, Jacaranda, Brisbane, 1960, p. 8.

<sup>36</sup> Smith, V., 'Experiment and Renewal: The Missing Link in Modern Australian Poetry', *Southerly*, Vol. 47, No. 1, 1987, p. 8.

<sup>37</sup> FitzGerald, R.D., *Elements of Poetry*, op. cit., p. 154.

<sup>38</sup> *ibid.*, p. 156.

<sup>39</sup> *ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>40</sup> *ibid.*, p. 37.

‘a master of technique, who understands rhyme today [1963] probably better than anyone else living!’.<sup>41</sup> This notion is repeated by Keesing,<sup>42</sup> who continues with the claim that ‘the true hallmark of Stewart’s poetry is lyricism, and his highly personal music is the music of human speech’.<sup>43</sup> FitzGerald’s comments about Rutherford, the New Zealand scientist, are perceptive and significant. He sees in the poem ‘Rutherford’ motives expressing idealism that also relate to Stewart’s central philosophy.

Vivian Smith continues to develop the idea of versatility in ‘Douglas Stewart: Lyric Poet’.<sup>44</sup> He considers that critical comment on Stewart’s work should take into account ‘the many aspects of his varied talent, that his work has tended to receive less attention than it deserves’.<sup>45</sup> This concern is illustrated in a number of essays, including those by Semmler, and Robinson. Smith suggests that before Stewart’s work can be seen in perspective, the nature of his lyric talent must be defined. This idea provides the impulse for close reading and analysis of the many poems and verse plays discussed in this thesis, my aim being to provide new understanding and insight into Stewart’s work in lyrics, ballads and verse plays. However, there are areas outside the scope of this thesis that remain to be studied at a future date: short stories; stories (mainly autobiographical) about fishing; and articles that appear in the *Bulletin*, all of which could all be viewed from a closer perspective such as Taaffe’s concluding remarks in which he comments on Stewart’s unpublished poem ‘A Treat for St. Joseph’.

Phillips’ ‘The Poetry of Douglas Stewart’ focuses firstly on the manner in which Stewart’s first three volumes ‘largely conformed to the standards of modernism of their time’.<sup>46</sup> This insight by Phillips, together with Sharkey’s statement that Stewart ‘was accommodating

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<sup>41</sup> *ibid.*, p.

<sup>42</sup> Keesing, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

<sup>43</sup> *ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>44</sup> Smith, V., ‘Douglas Stewart: Lyric Poet’, *Meanjin*, p. xxvi, 1967.

<sup>45</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> Phillips, A.A., ‘The Poetry of Douglas Stewart’, *Meanjin*, Vol. 1, 1969, pp. 97-104.

himself to modernity throughout his career'<sup>47</sup> is a line of continuity which contributes to the poet's central poetic philosophy which I focus on throughout this thesis. An awareness of this focal point is essential to an understanding of Stewart's poetry and verse plays. Phillips recognised Stewart's increasing technical mastery, with rhyming, off-rhyming, and his vocabulary (sometimes colloquial) whereby his poetic diction matured as his voice emerged from the poem itself. It was Phillips' view that Stewart was referring to his own poetry when he wrote of Darwin who 'Could well have whirled his thought from star to star / Chasing the far Creator and his plan, / But knew that or the origin of species / Or all of truth one yard of earth suffices'.<sup>48</sup> Reference to symbolism in this and other philosophical poems provided me with the impulse to follow the line of discussion I have followed in this thesis.

Kramer's 'Two Perspectives in the Poetry of Douglas Stewart' presents the notion that Stewart's philosophical preoccupations 'disclose a link between the microscopic and heroic dimensions of [Stewart's] poetry',<sup>49</sup> and that they express ways that mankind and the natural environment interact. This is a line of continuity that unifies many of Stewart's poetical works. Kramer's statement that Stewart's poetry and his observations are 'like pieces of a mosaic' — she perceives 'a design which gives the impression of being empirically discovered, not predetermined';<sup>50</sup> this is significant, for it clarifies the problem of versatility which some critics, including David McCooey, have found 'problematic'<sup>51</sup>.

James McAuley, a contemporary, wrote of Stewart's work in 'Douglas Stewart'.<sup>52</sup> In retrospect, he recalls Stewart's poetry as being concerned with 'life-enhancement, with

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<sup>47</sup> Sharkey, M., op. cit., p. 5.

<sup>48</sup> Phillips, *ibid.*, *Meanjin*, pp. 97-104.

<sup>49</sup> Kramer, L., 'Two Perspectives in the Poetry of Douglas Stewart', *Southerly*, Vol. 33, No. 3, p. 293.

<sup>50</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 138-9.

<sup>51</sup> McCooey, D., 'Douglas Stewart', *Australian Writers, 1915-1950*, Gale Group, Detroit, c2002, p. 365.

<sup>52</sup> McAuley, J., 'Douglas Stewart', *Literature of Australia*, ed. G. Dutton, Penguin, Ringwood, 1976.



colloquial idiom, with the concretely particular, with the popular tradition, with nostalgia for an earlier and more “organic” community’.<sup>53</sup> McAuley expands the observation that Stewart’s diction is concerned with the clarification of his images which include more sophisticated and developing ideas as the poet himself matured — notions of heroic action, panache, and qualities of leadership. It is McAuley’s opinion that ‘Stewart’s work is a large part of what is interesting and likely to be durable in contemporary Australian literature’<sup>54</sup> and is closer to the truth than some minor critics would have readers believe.<sup>55</sup>

Such comments confirm the need to re-evaluate Stewart’s work with research and during the development of this thesis. More recent interest in his work from critics such as McCooey provides comments which relate to the great variety of Stewart’s interests and preoccupations in so many different (sometimes opposing) genres, elicit responses from critics such as McCooey who gives insight into the poet’s versatility; that is, ‘a term that attempts to cover up neither the uneven quality of his work nor the lack of critical agreement over what constitutes his most important accomplishments’.<sup>56</sup> There is no doubt that Stewart’s material, and its variety of critical interests, was, and still is, problematic for literary critics. Ballyn’s and McCooey’s essays provide insight into Stewart’s achievements while Lawrence Bourke indicates links between Stewart’s New Zealand and Australian work; these views put Stewart’s preoccupations in poetry, ballads and verse plays into perspective while at the same time they suggest reasons for his determination to live and work in Australia.

Chris Wallace-Crabbe concludes his article dealing with Stewart’s rediscovery in *Australian Bush Ballads* of the early history of Australian nationalism and the genealogy of

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<sup>53</sup> *ibid.*, p. 441.

<sup>54</sup> *loc. cit.*, p. 441.

<sup>55</sup> Hooton, ‘Fired from the Canon’, *op. cit.*, p. 8A.

<sup>56</sup> McCooey, *op. cit.*, p. 357.

un-English voices. Most interestingly, his opinion is that Stewart's 'disappearance from recent anthologies of Australian verse is a teasing phenomenon; but the turn of such poems as "The Silkworms" and "Brindabella" will come round again.'<sup>57</sup>

Structuring the thesis becomes problematic in view of Stewart's prolific and diverse work; a chronological approach to his development as a poet in New Zealand and Australia to illustrate his place in the contested emergent cultures of each nation has therefore been chosen as an appropriate choice of presentation. In re-evaluating Stewart's work, I commence with his New Zealand poetry. Unavoidably, the choice was selective: the selection, therefore, evoked value judgements which relate to Stewart's argument or were important to an overall re-evaluation of his total poetical works and their development as Stewart consistently 'accommodated himself to the idea of modernity all through his writing career'.<sup>58</sup> From the 1920s to the 1970s he developed many varied themes, which were responses to historical circumstances that emerged from changing conditions of his time; World War II was most significant in regard to world-wide changing perceptions in 1939-1945 and thereafter.

The long Chapter 2, 'Douglas Stewart as New Zealander and Expatriate', targets the poetical milieu in New Zealand as well as the cause of much of Stewart's dissatisfaction with New Zealand literary critics, in particular, Alan Curnow and other poets such as Denis Glover and A.R.D. Fairburn<sup>59</sup> who rejected Stewart's poetry in the 1930s, mainly because it was too 'traditional' in language and form. My approach is to challenge such a view and to provide a background of other poets such as Bethell, Mackay, Curnow, Hart-Smith and Wall to name just a few. This chapter is intended to supply a critical lack in the literature relating to

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<sup>57</sup> Wallace-Crabbe, D., 'Poetry and Modernism', *The Oxford Literary History of Australia*, OUP, Melbourne, 1998, p. 226.

<sup>58</sup> Sharkey, op. cit., p. 5.

<sup>59</sup> Fairburn, A.R.D. *The Letters of A.R.D. Fairburn*, ed. L. Edmond, Oxford University Press, Auckland, 1985, pp. 130-131.

Stewart's poetical output.

The organisation of my argument is chronological; discussion of major texts begins with *Green Lions* (1936) followed by *The White Cry* (1939)<sup>60</sup>; 'Douglas Stewart's Early New Zealand Poetry' (Chapter 3) concentrates on New Zealand landscapes and other New Zealand images. These poems are undoubtedly those of a young poet (an ephebe) interested in subjects that delight a young man. Some poems such as 'A Song to Cross the Sea'<sup>61</sup> (C.P., p. 298), are clearly experimental, sometimes balladic, even though he kept close to ballad and lyric conventions. In later years Stewart was to develop a more individual style in *The Dosser in Springtime*, *Glencoe* and *Worsley Enchanted*. It is, however, in 'The Scarlet Dancers' that a hint of profound themes which will appear in later poetry and verse plays is observed: belonging, loneliness, solitude, and shared delight in nature, 'His ringing flame, cool bush of ash, / still dances with her, heart to heart, / In the dear rhyme of shared delight' (C.P., p. 299). These themes in Stewart's early poetry contributed to his creative thought through which he developed imagery and metaphysical ideas as a way of searching for truth in human consciousness. The refinement of these ideas continues throughout his poetic oeuvre and verse plays as lines of continuity which include his experimentation with modernism.

'The Early Australian Years: the *Bulletin*' (Chapter 4), focuses on changes in Stewart's poetry, some Sydney poets and Norman Lindsay. Stewart experienced many changes in Australia, and at Springwood, where he spent some of the happiest days of his early years in Australia, and where he gathered 'armsful of poems' from the surrounding bush.<sup>62</sup> Lindsay's influence on Stewart's work is clarified when he acknowledges the older man's enthusiasm for creative impulse and creative effort that inspired him, 'my own energy ... was

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<sup>60</sup> Stewart, D., *The White Cry*, J.M. Dent, London, 1939.

<sup>61</sup> Stewart, D., 'A Song to Cross the Sea', *Collected Poems: 1936-1967*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1937, p. 298.

<sup>62</sup> Stewart, D., *Norman Lindsay: a personal memoir*, Nelson, Melbourne, 1975, p. 74.

fed and stimulated by Lindsay's'.<sup>63</sup> Stewart, however, was his own person; he took useful ideas from Lindsay's philosophy, writing his own verse in his own way, and in his own words: 'I am eternally grateful to him for those days [at Springwood] ... and many more before and after'.<sup>64</sup> In his review of Mann's 'Poems from the Mask', and Stewart's *Sonnets to the Unknown Soldier*, Brian Elliott's comment is particularly relevant: 'Both men are poets of sufficient quality to make a discussion of "influences" look foolish'.<sup>65</sup> Writers such as Keesing, Smith and David Robinson<sup>66</sup> refer to Stewart's energy and versatility during the period of change from his early life in New Zealand to one in which he was involved with the literary milieu in Sydney.

During his early years, Stewart had been practising with lyrics and ballads that anticipated in tone, imagery and technique, poems in the later collection *Sun Orchids* and *The Birdsville Track*. This was a way of establishing his own 'voice', which continues throughout his writing career to a conclusion in which the poem 'Bell Rock' is an extended metaphor representing Stewart's career and his total work.

The focus of Chapter 5, 'War Poetry', provides different thoughts, images and voices to those discussed in 'The Early Years'. World War II (1939-1945) was a period of changing impulses and changing perceptions in the literary world. When Desmond Carter, a boyhood friend and RAF pilot was killed during the (1940) Battle for Britain, Stewart's poem 'Elegy for an Airman' (C.P., pp. 275-278), expressed emotions rarely seen in his other works; the poem is memorable, mainly because of its nostalgic imagery, 'This was my friend who died with me out of boyhood, / Was young with me, and hungered for strife (but) nothing can

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<sup>63</sup> *ibid.*, p. 74.

<sup>64</sup> *ibid.*, p. 74.

<sup>65</sup> Elliott, B., Untitled review of *Sonnets to the Unknown Soldier*, *Australian Quarterly*, Vol. 13, No. 4, 1941, p. 114.

<sup>66</sup> Robinson, D., 'Douglas Stewart's Nature Lyrics', *Southerly*, No. 1, 1987, pp. 52-69.

warm the heart'<sup>67</sup> (C.P., p. 277).

In *Sonnets to the Unknown Soldier*, Stewart's imagination was challenged by his lack of experience on the war front, in contrast to the work of soldier poets who wrote responses to their own experiences in World War 2: Leon Gellert's 'These Men', David Campbell's 'Men in Green' and journalist / poet Kenneth Slessor's 'Beach Burial'. Fire imagery appears and reappears as one of Stewart's symbolic images expressed in the poet's personal vocabulary which represents themes of passion, bravery, heroism, courage and endurance. It also reflects danger and destruction as it does in *Sonnets to the Unknown Soldier* (1941) (C.P., pp. 275-278). These sonnets protest against barbarity, cruelty, violence, human against human;<sup>68</sup> wherever soldiers live, throughout millennia, soldiers of all countries are the same, fighting for the old men who make wrong decisions, as, for example, at Gallipoli.

Stewart's protest against violence is not constrained by references to war; it is a theme that continues throughout his mature poetry and verse plays and in the voice that is Stewart's. The way in which he begins with an idea, then uses it in different ways through specific language, imagery, rhyme and rhythm continues through lyrics, sonnets and ballads and verse plays such as *Glencoe*.

Stewart's contribution to the *Bulletin* during World War 2 in the role of reader, editor and adviser for the soldier poets, has been ignored by critics who failed to recognise his work over a period of five years. In collections of war poetry his name does not appear. The critical lack of interest for *Sonnets to the Unknown Soldier* was possibly related to Stewart's use of Romantic style and language whereas Wilfred Owen's war poetry, for example, written during World War I about human pain and suffering on the Western Front, presented what was then

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<sup>67</sup> Taaffe, op. cit., p. 360.

<sup>68</sup> Stewart, D., Introduction, *Douglas Stewart*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1963, p. vii.

modernist poetic awareness of soldiers' experiences and their responses to these experiences. Stewart did not write war poetry after *Sonnets to the Unknown Soldier*; his *Sonnets* were far removed from these poems in both language and style. He also recognised the gap between his own poetry and that of the Australian soldier-poets' work he edited for the Red Page during World War II.

Various voices are taken to an aesthetic level in *The Fire on the Snow* (1939) in which violence of Antarctic weather defeats Scott's expedition that ends in tragedy. 'Verse Plays for Radio: *The Fire on the Snow* and *The Golden Lover*' (Chapter 6), demonstrates how the challenge of new technology such as radio was taken up by Stewart. Radio provided him with an incentive to write drama for a medium other than stage production and allowed him an opportunity to use a variety of voices, including his own as Announcer, with which to comment on more profound themes than his earlier poems offered. Although 'Ned Kelly'<sup>69</sup> was Stewart's most popular play (written for stage, it was also broadcast on radio), it is *The Fire on the Snow* that established his reputation as a playwright in Australia and overseas. This verse play about Captain Robert Scott's expedition to the South Pole contributed to a sharper understanding of Australia of the time and changed the way audiences perceived themselves and their society. Radio also allowed listeners to visualize and respond to romance in *The Golden Lover* as well as to *The Fire on the Snow* which is about 'romantic heroism'<sup>70</sup> that transcends the ordinary, a theme challenged by late modernists.

Fire and dream are central images which appear in *The Fire on the Snow*; the unity of dream and fire symbolizes courage, fortitude and endurance; Stewart develops these themes to an abstract level, surpassing literal and nationalistic descriptions of the landscape. *The Fire on*

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<sup>69</sup> Stewart, D., *Ned Kelly*, 1943, *Three Australian Plays*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1975. Although *Ned Kelly* is Stewart's best known verse play, it has been analysed and discussed by many critics over many years; it has, therefore, been omitted from this discussion.

<sup>70</sup> Green, H.M., *History of Australian Literature*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1961, p. 1180.

*the Snow* and *The Golden Lover* are the antithesis of each other — imagery of flame, ice and snow of Antarctica in *The Fire on the Snow* contrasts with the bright colours of bush growth in New Zealand and the brightness of fire and dream imagery in *The Golden Lover*, based on the Maori legend of the red-headed ‘patu paiarehe’ in which Whana, the golden lover, and Tawhai, Ruarangi’s beautiful wife, who have an extra-marital affair. Tawhai eventually returns to the world of reality when she rejects the dream of a life with Whana to return to her Maori culture. Although this play is a comedy in verse, the language is not comic — it is formal throughout and maintains the dignity of the Maori. For all the differences, fire and dream imagery and underlying symbolism of mankind’s identity with the life of the earth itself connect *The Fire on the Snow* and *The Golden Lover*.

Stewart’s practice of close observation of subjects continues in ‘*Sun Orchids* (1952) and *The Birdsville Track* (1955)’ (Chapter 7). ‘Flying Ants’ demonstrates the way Stewart uses metaphor and imagery to construct a ‘crystal tower not there at all’ (C.P., p. 161); at the same time, the tower is a symbol of uplifted thought — the flying ants are the stimulus for the poet’s impulse which then transmutes the natural to human consideration. This concept, as well as the idea of ‘flittering thought’ in ‘Firetail Finches’ (C.P., p. 53) and ‘The Finches’ (C.P., p. 110),<sup>71</sup> are symbols of the processes of thought as the poet is preoccupied with the activity of consciousness; the difficulty the poet faces is how to express these thoughts within the limits of the language at his disposal. This is clarified by Stewart’s use of personal idiom as he creates his own vocabulary, a grammar of symbols; for example, McCooey suggests that ‘Rutherford’ is ‘organized in terms of binary oppositions: the cosmic / the atomic; early / late; movement / stasis; savage / civilized; human / superhuman’.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Stewart changed the title of ‘Firetail Finches’ to ‘The Finches’ for *Collected Poems* and *Selected Poetry*.

<sup>72</sup> McCooey, op. cit., p. 364.

Contrasting themes of music and silence form part of the mysticism in ‘Mahoney’s Mountain’ (C.P., p. 168) and in orchid lyrics such as ‘Nodding Greenhood’ (C.P., p. 145). In ‘Helmet Orchid’ (C.P., p. 158), the concept of silence is considered as nature ‘listens’ to eternal music that is the rhythm of life — Stewart imagines the helmet orchid is listening to the sounds of silence while the fragile colony and the giant bloodwoods are part of the same unified whole and all ‘listen’ to the same ‘voice’. In contrast to the silence found in many of Stewart’s nature lyrics, the music in ‘Cicada Song’ (C.P., p. 121) is noisy; it is also a song of defiance in the face of dangers that summer brings to Christmas in Australia. He strives for precision with the poetic expression of these human connotations — the language he uses suggests that he is focused on the effects of nature on mankind and the role of humans in the general scheme of things.

In the introduction to *Douglas Stewart*, Stewart writes that, ‘it takes a long while to realize that the proper thing to strive for in poetry, usually, is absolute clarity’ (p. vi). Although he was referring specifically to his early New Zealand poetry, for example ‘Moment’ (C.P., p. 327) and ‘The Growing Strangeness’ (C.P., p. 318), the idea of clarity of expression continues throughout his collections, and it is in *The Birdsville Track* that this preoccupation is most obvious. Survival is the major theme in both short lyrics and longer poems in *The Birdsville Track*; the continuity of the theme appears to be the way Stewart sees into the hearts and minds of the men and women in this environment; without water the creative spirit is lost and consumed by aridity, heat and madness. There are two landscapes in this collection: one is the physical landscape and the other is symbolic, the landscape of the mind.

The new perspective of the universe gained by Stewart during his journey on the Birdsville Track is pursued in later poetry which contains mature and profound themes that implicate world-wide humanity — themes which began with his interest in heroic struggle and emerged from *The Fire on the Snow* is continued in Chapter 8, *Glencoe* (1947), ‘Worsley



Enchanted' (1952) and 'Terra Australis' (1952). These themes are contemplative and narrative; they are focuses of Stewart's interest which illustrate his philosophy that life is an ongoing struggle which achieves extraordinary qualities of courage and bravery, particularly in *Worsley Enchanted* about which he writes: 'by implication it is a comment on the strangeness of all human experience, the mystery of our existence'; it is the will to survive that remains one of the mysteries of life.<sup>73</sup>

Stewart experimented with the ballad form earlier in *Dosser in Springtime*, *The Fire on the Snow* and *Ned Kelly*, but it is in *Glencoe* that his admiration of Scottish ballads emerges dramatically — these ballads are the response of a mature and imaginative poet. Like the literary ballads of some of his contemporaries (such as Denis Glover in New Zealand, or William Hart-Smith in Australia), his ballads do not follow the folk or traditional ballads, in that they are not songs transmitted orally, otherwise they are mostly conventional in form. In *Glencoe* Stewart achieved a sense of poetic voice through imaginative motifs, supplemented by voices of his characters and expressed in varied ballad forms as Stewart tells the story of the 1691 massacre of Glencoe, the result of clan rivalry between the Campbells and the Stewarts. These motifs and the interplay of voices continue in 'Worsley Enchanted'.

Stewart creates dream imagery in 'Worsley Enchanted' (C.P., pp. 175-194), as he did earlier in *The Fire on the Snow* and *The Golden Lover*; this interfusion of reality and dream provides a unity characteristic of his dramatic and narrative work. 'Worsley Enchanted' is a poetic account of Sir Ernest Shackleton's expedition to the Antarctic in 1914-1916. Frank Worsley (Captain of the *Endurance*) wrote a recount of the journey in 1920.<sup>74</sup> Stewart wrote,

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<sup>73</sup> Stewart, D., *Douglas Stewart*, Australian Poets series, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1963, p. ix.

<sup>74</sup> Worsley, F.A., *The Great Antarctic Rescue: Shackleton's Boat Journey*, introduced by Sir Edmund Hilary and photographed by Australian Frank Hurley, Times Books, London, 1977.

‘Worsley ... said that he joined the expedition as the result of a dream’.<sup>75</sup> The poem begins with the dream motif, ‘Commander Worsley, fired with a purpose, / Plunged in his dream like a stocky porpoise’ (C.P., p. 175); the dream motif continues in Stewart’s themes in verse plays about adventurers such as Scott, Worsley, Quiros and Lane, and Rutherford. Many of his ‘heroes’ have New Zealand connections: Stewart is drawing on what he knows, and is publicly advancing New Zealand’s place among voyagers and discoverers.

Inclusion of the fourth man in Section 15, unseen but always present, during Worsley, Shackleton and Crean’s journey to the Norwegian whaling station at South Georgia, introduces a spiritual theme to Stewart’s poetic preoccupation. This is the strongest spiritual image in any of his poetry or verse plays; he avoids an outright statement about his personal beliefs in this regard, although the mystery of life and death and the spirit of the earth are pursued as underlying philosophical ideas in many lyrics and in ballads such as *Glencoe*. At the end of their struggle with the Antarctic environment, the conflict between humans and nature becomes another dream, but the conflict between dream and reality is one of defiance. All men on Elephant Island survived, thus prevailing against the odds; a contributing factor to Stewart’s imaginative recreation of ‘an attempt to create a ‘tragic mythology’ in these terms for Australia, drawing on history and legend for its subject matter in a revealing shift away from contemporary subjects and settings of Australian realism.<sup>76</sup>

A spiritual theme is also present in ‘Terra Australis’, a long satire in which two voyagers, Captain Quiros and William Lane, meet in search of their own utopias, but unlike the image of the fourth man in ‘Worsley Enchanted’, Stewart satirises their quests. Keesing’s

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<sup>75</sup> Stewart, D., *Voyager Poems*, Jacaranda, Brisbane, 1960, p. 118.

<sup>76</sup> Sturm, T., ‘Drama’, *Oxford History of Australian Literature*, ed. L. Kramer, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, p. 227.

comment that the poem is ‘a mocking but profound satire upon immoderate idealism’, is apt.<sup>77</sup>

It is Quiros’s voice that tells Lane about his failure to establish a successful religious settlement at Espiritu Santo; Lane tells Quiros about his failure to maintain a co-operative settlement in Paraguay. Unlike Shackleton in ‘Worsley Enchanted’, both Quiros and Lane are ineffective leaders of men who both finally suffer failure and disillusionment; at the same time, they refuse to accept death and defeat. Stewart does not call these characters ‘heroic’, a term disparaged by the modernists — instead his satire suggests that Quiros and Lane are figures of ridicule, that is, of egomaniacal delusion. Quiros’s vision of a Utopia on a metaphysical level, and like Lane’s vision of a new Utopia in Paraguay, it is a voyage of the mind, a voyage of self-discovery referred to in Chapter 8 as ‘the landscape of the mind’. The disjointed narrative emphasises confusion in the minds of Quiros and Lane, and like the Flying Dutchman, their ghosts continue to follow their dreams. Stewart invites readers to read the poem as an analogy as he reflects indirectly on Australia, its political and social structure and the distance from its European (British) background.

Despite the failure inherent in ‘Terra Australis’, a sense of humour emerges from Stewart’s penchant for metaphoric imagery. The theme of lunacy is constant as the poem refers to moonlight on the ocean, ‘in the world’s skull like a moonlit brain’ (C.P., p. 168), in which the two vessels ‘zigzag in confusion’. Humour is also present in the language and the ludicrous situation in which the ghosts find themselves as they ask, ‘How do we know we are truly dead?’ (C.P., p. 171). Stewart describes the *San Pedro* with a simile, ‘rolled, / High-pooped and round in the belly like a barrel’, illustrating a comic mood as the two men proceed to continue their quests into the unknown. Humour in ‘Terra Australis’ contributes to the thread of continuity throughout most of Stewart’s poetry; it is an important characteristic

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<sup>77</sup> Keesing, *Douglas Stewart: Australian Writers and Their Work*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1969, p. 29.

which, as McCooey suggests, is not recognised fully by literary critics.

Collective voices of characters inform readers of implications behind the action, often through symbolism and motifs, and it is this that provides continuity through *Glencoe*, 'Worsley Enchanted' and 'Terra Australia' rather than a continuous theme linking the three works. Struggle and heroic endurance are readily identifiable in much of Stewart's 'most ambitious and most significant work.'<sup>78</sup> Quiros and Lane, Worsley and Shackleton, and the intellectual voyager, Rutherford, are examples of the protagonists whose courage lifted them above the ordinary.

Clement Semmler refers to Stewart's 'scrupulous observation of minutiae of creatures and things, rendered in a tone tenderly elegiac or matter-of -fact, are mixed with glimpses of the past'.<sup>79</sup> His suggestion that Stewart had become concerned with a 'clear new turn in history' in poems such as 'Reflections at a Parking Meter' and 'Leopard Skin', Semmler's opinion is apt; 'he (Stewart) has always had a penchant for philosophizing in verse; the difference is that he has, in his later poetry, become more passionate and ironic', and this is supported by his remark that Stewart had a 'remarkable facility ... with metaphysical imagery, as a probe for something buried deeper in men's consciousness'.<sup>80</sup> Semmler's remarks encapsulate Stewart's poetic development and preoccupations which changed to focus more on human experiences and the effects of those experiences following his personal investigation into, and experiments with the modernism of his time.

When A.D. Hope's essay 'The Discursive Mode: Reflections on the Ecology of Poetry'<sup>81</sup> appeared in *Quadrant* in 1956, Stewart and other poets such as FitzGerald, Hart-

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<sup>78</sup> Smith, R., 'Douglas Stewart: Terra Australis', *LiNQ*, Vol. 2, 1973, p. 1.

<sup>79</sup> Semmler, C., 'Australian Poetry of the 1960s: Some Personal Impressions', *The Art of Brian James and Other Essays on Australian Literature*, University of Queensland Press, St. Lucia, 1972, p. 64.

<sup>80</sup> *ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>81</sup> Hope, A.D., 'The Discursive Mode: Reflections on the Ecology of Poetry', *Quadrant*, Vol. 1, 1956, pp. 27-33.

Smith, Francis Webb, Rex Ingamells, McAuley and Rosemary Dobson, had already written in the discursive mode; it had been an established style since the early 1940s when Stewart wrote *The Fire on the Snow*. Hope focuses on a more unified single-style, single voice poem than the 'sequence' style of modernist poem favoured by Stewart and other Australian poets at that time. He also moves away from the particular to the general statement or argument, unlike Stewart's fine detail in *Sun Orchids* and later nature lyrics in *Rutherford* such as 'The Silkworms'. Hope earlier wanted to improve the quality of Australian poetry when he criticised the Jindyworobaks and the Angry Penguins, and suggested that Australian poets should make use of a discursive mode or a more relaxed middle style of poetry, and encourage the practice of satire; this advice was noted by Stewart, particularly in 'Terra Australia'. Stewart concludes that Hope is at his best when loathing is transmitted into love, such as 'An Epistle: Edward Sackville, to Venetia Digby', in which the poem illustrates Stewart's own practice of control of technique, finesse of language and music of rhythm and rhyme that he admires.

Changes in sensibility from traditional verse of the 'Establishment' poets (Stewart, FitzGerald, McAuley and other poets of the 1940s and 1950s), were supported by little magazines such as *Poetry* (1941-1947), the Red Page (which gained strength under Stewart's editorship), and *Australian Letters* (1957-1968): all supported the tone and styles of older poets, as was the practice of *Meanjin*, *Overland* and *Southerly*. Innovation and change in poetry was slow to be taken up by these magazines until the 'generation of '68', who, as younger poets, were experimenting with new forms, structure, language and themes, and adopting self-conscious *avant-garde*, modernist ways of thinking and presenting their works. Vincent Buckley, R.A. Simpson and Wallace-Crabbe were 'members' of the *avant-garde*.

Bruce Dawe and Evan Jones also joined;<sup>82</sup> Craig concludes that Dawe helped to release poetry from its Georgian restraints and staidness.

These changes in poetic sensibility cannot be attributed to a move away from traditional poetry alone; the Vietnam conflict and conscription contributed to major world-wide changes in literature. John Tranter recalled in 1982 that younger poets called for:

new freedoms in their lives and poems ... freedom from bureaucracy and capitalist exploitation, freedom to experiment with drugs, [and freedom] to develop a sexual ethic free of hypocrisy and authoritarian restraints.<sup>83</sup>

Stewart was ambivalent in his opinions, particularly in his attitude towards modernism, but as mentioned earlier, Sharkey's suggestion that Stewart was accommodating himself to modernity throughout his career explains some preliminary signs of his awareness of change in literary practice which can be seen in some of his satirical poetry such as 'Reflections at a Parking Meter' and 'Four Letter Words' (1962-1967), and the mock-serious 'Leopard Skin' (1962). Geoff Page sees 'Leopard Skin' through modern eyes<sup>84</sup> when he reminds readers that: 'Poetry is not all a matter of nobly described heroic events and sublime enjoyment of nature — or of love at a distance. It's also about rotary clothes-lines and somewhat pathetic wearers of leopard-skin underpants'.<sup>85</sup>

The voice in 'Leopard Skin', that is, Stewart's persona, is amused by an image of 'Seven pairs of leopard-skin underpants / Flying on the rotary clothes-line!'; his philosophical sense of joy, common to many of his poems, is explicit, firstly in the title itself, then in its mode of satire. 'Leopard Skin' is 'different': it is written as a sonnet, but it emphasises the poet's modernist approach in tone and attitude towards his subject. This poem is discussed in more detail in Chapter 9 of this thesis to reveal the poem's modernist character and as an

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<sup>82</sup> Craig, A., ed., *12 Poets 1950 to 1970*, Jacaranda Press, Sydney, 1971, p. 8.

<sup>83</sup> Tranter, J., 'Four Notes on the Practice of Revolution', *Australian Literary Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 2, October 1977, p. 128.

<sup>84</sup> Page, G., 'Leopard Skin', *60 Classic Australian Poems*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 2009, pp. 95-98.

<sup>85</sup> *ibid.*, p. 98.

example of Stewart's philosophy about poetic language such as full rhyme and 'a number of half-rhymes', together with 'the final couplet ... it brings the poem to a snappy end by somehow summarising all that has gone before'.<sup>86</sup>

Stewart's concentration on whirling atoms in 'Rutherford' (C.P., pp. 96-105) becomes a major image in this work — that of the wheel as 'the racing electrons whirled / Circling the radiant centre, the white-hot nucleus, / Held in your hands, almost, huge as you were, / Pierced by your thought like a neutron' (C.P., p. 96), and as Rutherford contemplates the miracle, 'A wheel moved somewhere far away in the dark' (C.P., p. 97). These themes and images once again provide threads of continuity while, at the same time, more significantly is the theme of 'the irresistible advance of knowledge itself and its possible effects on the destiny of the human race' appears as a concept that challenges Stewart's thought in more than this particular poem.<sup>87</sup>

There are two voices in 'Rutherford': Rutherford speaks for the scientist and his concerns for the future of humanity (but the underlying voice is Stewart's) while Stewart comments on his awareness of Rutherford's quest to split the atom; while expressing his personal comment on his developing concern for humankind, he writes from historical fact which entails the atomic destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki which brought the war in the Pacific to an end in 1945.

Many poems in *The Flowering Place* collection are about explorers and scientists and their quests for knowledge and the unknown; there is often a satiric tone and an underlying symbolism of human identification with the life of the earth itself throughout Stewart's total works. His choice of poems in these collections is significant — they draw modernist themes together that eventually present continuing motifs, as in 'The Peahen' (C.P., pp. 10-13) that

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<sup>86</sup> *ibid.*, p. 97.

<sup>87</sup> FitzGerald, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

illustrates Stewart's variety of themes and preoccupations. Semmler's 'penchant for philosophising in verse' (see above) when humorous verbal imagery probes feminist ideas current in the 1960s; Stewart gives serious yet unobtrusive thought to the topic as he contemplates the mystery of the female mind as well as the politics of gender at that time. His idea of female equality with the male of the species is sympathetic to the female as it was later in *The Golden Lover*.

'Bell Rock' is impressive in the way Stewart's images 'coalesce and cancel / In mystery at last' ('The Waterlily', C.P., p. 59). The lighthouse, a symbolic tower which reaches for the sky, is his own fortress of art and poetry. Based on historical fact, the imaginary lighthouse is Stewart's metaphysical tower of poems which represents his poetic output and the opposition it engendered in both New Zealand and Australia, and there in the storm's white shower, 'I have built my tower' (S.P., p. 246). As well as imaginative imagery in 'Bell Rock', Stewart's persona's voice emerges strong and clear as it overpowers that of Stevenson, the real-life builder of the lighthouse on Bell Rock in Scotland. A diverse voice, it speaks of the poet's perceptions and preoccupations that contribute to his versatility. This poem is reflexive and symbolic in that the reader is left in no doubt that the light that shines from the tower is the intellectual and creative force which provided Stewart's quest for understanding with answers to some of the mysteries of life. Motifs become stronger and more profound with the poet's maturity until, finally, the stones used in the building of 'Bell Rock' are the poems which are symbolically his philosophical perceptions of his poetic oeuvre.

One can imagine that Stewart would applaud comments about the poetry debate in the *Australian Literary Review* in reply to some contemporary poetry criticism. Poetry editor, Jaya Savige, concludes that Philip Mead's *Networked Language: Culture and History in Australian History* (2008) is 'a much needed adrenaline shot in the heart of Australian



poetry'.<sup>88</sup> Savige argues with Ian McFarlane, who remarked in an earlier edition of the *Australian Literary Review* that poetry is not given the recognition it deserves. According to McFarlane: 'Poetry today is unread because much of it is unreadable ... the deliberately awkward structures and discordant rhythms that casually jar the eye as well as the ear'.<sup>89</sup> Inclusion of Stewart's poetry in the 2010 NSW Higher School Certificate syllabus, together with Savige's more tolerant remarks, could be an indication that there may be a balanced reappraisal of modernist poetry such as Stewart's in the future formal study of Australian poetry.

This thesis is concerned with Stewart's creative impulse, diversity of motifs, as well as the symbolism of his poetic language and its connotations, philosophical poetic preoccupations and poetic language, whereby he established many lines of continuity such as modernism in his poetry and verse plays which contributed to his total philosophy throughout his career. Discussion in the following chapters focuses on often metaphysical and pantheistic lines of continuity which contribute to Stewart's central philosophy in his poetry and verse plays from the 1920s to the 1980s. The poet's sense of 'belonging' to nature and his identification with it is the centrepiece of his philosophy — the closer one moves towards nature, the closer one moves towards the spirit of the earth itself — is an important line of continuity throughout Stewart's literary development. As he matured and became more at ease with the modernism of his time, underlying symbolism and deeper issues such as human responses to challenging experiences developed in Stewart's later poetic oeuvre and verse plays. Modernist lines of continuity in his later works cannot be appreciated from one poem — the effect is cumulative and forms a pattern or 'mosaic'<sup>90</sup> which McCooley suggests that

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<sup>88</sup> Savige, J, 'Australian Literary Review: Poetry Lives, OK?', *The Australian*, 2 June, 2010, pp. 16-17.

<sup>89</sup> *ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>90</sup> Kramer, *op. cit.*, p. 296.

some critics have found ‘problematic’<sup>91</sup> and which some critical focus has not fully recognised.

As stated early in this introduction, my intention is to persuade readers to re-evaluate Stewart’s poetic achievement and his contribution to the literary culture of his time. His literary output, its diversity and variation of critical interests, will still prove to be thought-provoking for literary critics, and will continue to provide insight and perspective for interested readers of his poetry and verse plays. He suggests that ‘the strangeness of the Antarctic world as it appeared to Commander Worsley, a plain seaman: by implication it is a comment on the strangeness of all human experience, the mystery of our existence’.<sup>92</sup> This theme continues throughout Stewart’s total works — it is a line of continuity which contributes to the poet’s central philosophy.

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<sup>91</sup> McCooey, op. cit., p. 365.

<sup>92</sup> Stewart, Introduction to *Douglas Stewart*, 1963, p. 12.