INTRODUCTION

Wherever the poet goes he takes his sensibility with him and in Glen Phillips’ orbital working life the quality of that perception has been tested on three continents. Poems record this unlikely journey of the soul, one that his outback dwelling parents could not have suspected for their son, who was born of Goldfields hardship and Spartan expectations in Southern Cross in 1936 and later lived in the southern Wheatland in lean post-war years. This was when so much that was to become for us the dynamic Australia slept like a crop in the ground awaiting rain and the efforts of many still untested immigrants in what was their new continent and one which most needed understanding. Still does, is the message of certain alarms and temperatures taken in this poet’s poems, though the medium is as like to be birdwatcher on a southern shore as a bauxite mine project stripping away for the bottom line beyond the cover of the foothills it threatens.

Everything in Glen Phillips’ early world had to cannily survive on a slim regime exemplified by the exhausted soil. Had the humans exhausted it in two and a half generations? Well, they had not helped. They cleared. This was one thing they were truly excited about and called it Taming the Land. They cleared and cleared, as the poet records, looking with pathos at what was left, growing up with what was left. Wheatland fragrance and harvest bounty not to be forgotten, nor the cost. Perhaps it’s a hunger for the Super of a more sensitive experience of place that has made him a traveller subsequently.

It is these formative years in an extraordinary yet spare and already suffering landscape, with the courage essential to its inhabitants, that have given this poet a sense of pared beauty and it never leaves him as a reference point (one might say a love). It makes him equal
to any subject, and after a time of steeping in it, to any social milieu. This is beauty where it is most unexpected, and with it an acute awareness of loss and attrition, though there’s much of the human comedy in this collection. In Italy for him the landscape can make jokes, in China the people.

It’s clearly stated here in a poem such as ‘My Windows’ (find it if you will) that a lively curiosity arose out of childhood often spent at the edge of a salt lake. Now that is not, in the European sense we still have, a pretty lake. It has a fringe of ominously dead trunks and limbs. What it distils is a restless and fearless appraisal, still a wonder, like the prospect of a climb on to the lowliest granite tor, majestic in a land of peneplain. This becomes in another poem, ‘In the Hollow of the Land’, the ice-age history of a rock. No small rock, a whole formation that, it happens, is beloved of tourists. But here we learn about that ice. Events more terrifyingly distant and transformative, when all water was that kind of frozen rock and the land under some kilometre thickness of it, a pre-life occupation of this Our Landscape for a term difficult to imagine; and possibly without the scintilla of a cell of existence. Yet that is what made the tor a tourist magnet, that and other familiar yet not so familiar elements, I leave you to discover.

The above poem speaks for eons, as others speak for the present and though they seem on one hand to relegate humanity to complete insignificance yet there is something exalting and of course human in the truth. Like the Casuarinas in the outback singing, the plunge of paddles into a Chinese ‘Woman River’ or the sprawling new suburbs of a megalopolis that have usurped an idyll in ‘Bubbling Well Road’, as the name alone continues to signify. Familiar changes. Yet few Australians could wake up in a Shanghai hotel room and describe the life of a city at night in China with such relaxed urbanity—and acute pathos for something its inhabitants have lost, however
stoic their adjustment. This is not only societal, but personal—‘Melon Sellers’, it is not the overlooked gift of fruit that stings but something only memory acknowledges, desire. This is sublime understatement, and like the layered city talk or country sooth in this work, a profound comment on human existence—it’s a long road from Southern Cross and Lake Grace. Enjoy.

Peter Bibby