The Land of Responsibilities

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Books—

By Andrew J. Kappel and Arvin Jupin

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Short and Simple Annals: Poems about Appalachia
by Llewellyn McKernan
Perfect Printing, Inc. (Huntington, West Virginia, 1979)
$3.00

Short and Simple Annals, published with a grant from the American Association of College Women, is Llewellyn McKernan's first book of poems. The title refers to Thomas Gray's famous "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard":

> Let not Ambition mock their useful toil,
> Their homely joys, and destiny obscure;
> Nor Grandeur hear with a disdainful smile
> The short and simple annals of the poor.

Like Gray in his poem, like Wordsworth, for that matter, in the *Lyrical Ballads,* McKernan in *Short and Simple Annals* demonstrates for us the value of the rural life as a subject for poetry. Country people, unlike, say, John Ashbery's alienated city people, live lives tied tightly to their surroundings. Unlike the urban poet's monotone of alienation, McKernan's song ranges high and low in order to register all the moods in which her country characters respond to their world. They are, like Wordsworth's characters, independent, extreme, eccentric, often very young or very old, often loners. McKernan finds for them within the confines of their country world many opportunities to reveal the unsettling extremities of human nature.

There is "The Cat Woman of Huntington" who follows cats into trash cans and "sits upon/something slimy she can't see." "Fur sprouts behind her ears/She begins to see in the dark/she licks her paw." There is "The Gardener of Gilmer County" who "tilled the small garden of her sensibility." She raised "carrots of happiness," "tomatoes of passion," "lettuce beds of meditation," "the bean of friendship,"

"the cucumber of compromise," "the onions of sadness" and "the potatoes of rage, which dug their roots deeper, their eyes filling with dirt." There is the little girl in the poem "Music" who tells about the front gate of her house "that creaked when the wind opened it." "This music," she says

> . . . rivaled the bee's tiny bell,
> the bird's bubbling promise. Most of the time
>
> I heard it: the iron gate's solo, its dog face
> looking both ways, its ears curled up like snails.
>
> Sometimes I made this music myself:
> Swinging back and forth, listening to
>
> the click and moan that sounded
> like my heart in the dead of night
>
> when in the bedroom alone I heard
> through the wall the ghost of a quarrel:
>
> mother's dark hair, pressed against the chair's
> pale flank, my father's fist raised and juggling
>
> the anger that when it fell smashed
> my mother's face in two like precious china.

Many of the poems in *Short and Simple Annals* are portraits such as these. The girl in "Music" is a recurrent figure in the book, and the other poems in which she figures are, like "Music," concerned not only with the demonstration of her intense, attentive nature, but as well with the rural family environment which provides her with so many opportunities for intensity, which obsesses her attention. She has a sister, her

> . . . arch enemy, It's true, really. The
> old cliche, We competed frantically
> for my momma's love: what there was
> of it. She used to wring the neck off
>
> chickens, wishing it was my daddy's.
> Screwing it till it popped off.

"Nothing frightened me more," she tells us, than her sister's violence,

> . . . unless it was my daddy,
> getting high on adultery, or me, trying
> to permanently throttle my sister.

The longest poem of the volume, "Mountain Magic," focuses on the relationship between the young girl and her mother; its aim is to define the effect of the mother on the child, to calculate a maternal heritage. Momma is an eccentric health food nut who will feed only carob to her daughter. John the Baptist, who used it to sustain himself during his stay in the wilderness, had given her the recipe—or so she claimed. The daughter is a victim, as the young often are in McKernan's book, overpowered by the wildness of the adult. But if she bears a grudge she bears it with love. She returns in the poem, long after her mother's death, to their old farm and enters the smokehouse still stocked with the foods of all sorts that her mother made and flavoured with carob. She brings along with her a jar of peanut butter.

> . . . I unscrew the top and digging a finger in
> it, I bring a milky-brown load up to my nose.
> I take a deep breath, praying as always that
> the smell and taste of things will change for me.
>
> For that to happen it would take a miracle, Even
> if it were ambrosia or mead or the manna Jehovah
> rained down on the Jews in the desert, it would
> hardly matter. Here in the stale dark smokehouse
> (and in my dreams) is the scent, and on my tongue
> is the taste of Momma's wilderness: the carob tree.

McKernan takes an interest in the experience of this little girl, in the experience of children in general for the same reason that Wordsworth takes an interest in Lucy, or that Henry James takes an interest in Maisie, or that Faulkner takes an interest in Benjy. It is an interest in the partial view, the raw view that has not yet been interfered with by what we learn to think and feel, the view that is necessarily only partially articulate, whose articulation has the peculiar tension of understatement. The vehicle of this articulation is the naive, outrageous metaphor, a process of violent association that provides a shock of understanding and stops there, short of any gratifying and relieving ability to act. The child knows and can do nothing. Visiting with her mother at the bedside of a dying uncle, the young girl in "Brief Encounter," witnesses her mother's suppressed tears and sees in them troubles she can do nothing about.

> I stand there in my dotted
> swiss, putting on my best face for company, hoping
> against hope my favorite Uncle will live forever,
> that my mother doesn't love him more than Daddy.

The child's experience of the world is the quintessential human experience: knowledge is a prison fully equipped with the machinery of torture. All that adults have over children is the ability to dream of the key.

Though McKernan's country figures are, like Wordsworth's, eccentric, independent, extreme, the world they inhabit is very different from the world of the leech gatherer, Michael and Lucy Gray. Wordsworth's country world is also full of troubles but not troubles for which the inhabitants themselves can be held responsible. The evil in Wordsworth's rural realm is impersonal, an inevitable part of the Way Things Are: dreams die, hopes fade, evil triumphs—for all of us indiscriminately. In McKernan's Appalachia people are responsible for what's wrong. Fathers shoot the lovers of their daughters, husbands cheat on wives, wives on husbands, husbands beat wives, sisters hate each other, daughters hate their fathers, children die, not like Wordsworth's Lucy because called by the storm beyond the reach of man, but because, as in the poem "The Strike," the workmen who buy the food are out of work. McKernan's Appalachia is the land of responsiblities, usually personal, usually shirked.

short and sweet

Arvin Jupin

THE ARROWHEAD SCHOLAR. Poems by Bennie Lee Sinclair (Wilderness Books, Cleveland, South Carolina, 1978).

A collection of twenty-two poems, *The Arrowhead Scholar* takes its title from the last poem in the series, written in 1967 in memory of the poet's brother Walt Sinclair. Like the title poem, most of the works in this collection are poignant renderings of the relationship between past and present, of loss and affirmation. A sensitive observer with a feeling for nuances of language and human character, Bennie Lee Sinclair is a poet of versatitity and power. Sinclair is from South Carolina.

OUT IN THE COUNTRY, BACK HOME. Poems by Jeff Daniel Marion (The Jackpine Press, Winston-Salem, North Carolina, 1976).

In his introduction, Robert Morgan, to whom the poem "Brakeshoe Spring" is dedicated, points out that "The first power of the poet is that of nomination; he sees and names." Morgan connects Jeff Daniel Marion's poetry with "This Adamic calling into symbolic life" represented in the tradition of Emerson and Whitman. Deeply infused with the rhythms of life in the East Tennessee hills, the poems in this volume are arranged in four sections: I. Farm II. Wintering III. Rural Route IV. Beginnings. The volume is illustrated with woodcuts from *1800 Woodcuts* by Thomas Bewick and His School which effectively complement the mood and content of the poems.

POEMS FROM A MOUNTAIN GHETTO. By Russell Marano (Back Fork Books, Webster Springs, West Virginia, 1979).

Now a resident of Chicago, Russell Marano grew up in the Italian ghetto of Glen Elk, part of Clarksburg, West Virginia. Several of these poems deal with Marano's life after leaving Glen Elk, but even in these poems it is the ghetto - with its ugliness, its confinement, its destitution, but also with its gardens, its traditions and above all its people - that is the poet's constant subject. Dr. Wallace Douglas of Northwestern University writes in his introduction: "These are hard poems, hard and bare like the country where they originate, like the lives they commemorate." The volume is illustrated by Bill Holpen.

THE MOUNTAINS HAVE COME CLOSER. By Jim Wayne Miller (Appalachian Consortium Press, Boone, North Carolina, 1980).

Born in North Carolina, Jim Wayne Miller has taught at Western Kentucky University since 1963. *The Mountains Have Come Closer* is his fifth book. Rich in imagery, Miller's poems deal with the paraphernalia and shams of modern life the gentle consolations of family, the conflicts of tradition and change, with unsettling dreams. Underlying all these subjects is a constant return to the strength of one's place. As Edward Field puts it: "Jim Wayne Miller is a poet of a particular geographical place, yet he sings, he preaches, and just plain talks in a language form the earth."