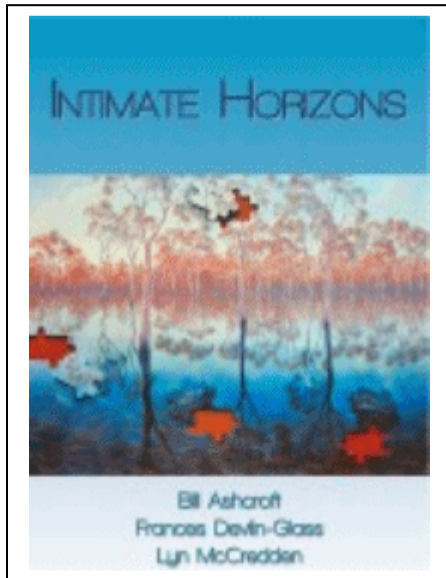


BOOK REVIEW

Ashcroft, Bill, Frances Devlin-Glass and Lyn McCredden. *Intimate Horizons*. Maryknoll: ATF Press, 2009.



This book explores the work of Australian writers and poets, including Judith Wright, Patrick Wright, Francis Webb, James McAuley, Les Murray and Alexis Wright, as it challenges the stereotype of Australia as a secular and irreligious society.

Ashcroft, Devlin-Glass and McCredden acknowledge that the sacred is difficult to identify in a nation enshrined in mythical imagery of the masculine mate, hard physical labour and the hedonism of beach, sport and material plenty.

They steer away from the cliché that the sacred has never been prominent in Australian identity by admitting that the Anzac myth, sporting idols and other national fantasies have developed the rituals and observances usually associated with more traditional

religious observance. Despite this, they acknowledge that the "twentieth century stands in the minds of many Westerners as the century when the gods finally died, or at least hid impassively behind the clouds of war, holocaust, and mass displacements of peoples."

Ashcroft, Devlin-Glass and McCredden map a transformation of the sacred which began to occur in Australian art and writing in the nineteenth century, originating in the colonial encounter with a new and threatening land: "While national mythology produced the self-confident notion of Australian identity, the literature which arose from that dimension of Australian life best described itself by terms of exile and displacement."

The authors then argue that, in the second half of the twentieth century, Australian imaginative writers uncovered a new sense of the sacred which was peculiar to their location. "Writing after the savageries of two world wars, and as indigenous people began to speak back to their colonisers, Australian writers began opening up new worlds of understanding about the land and human relationships within it. This is sacredness imagined as intimate relationship to place, not pre-eminently a universal or transcendent discourse. This is sacredness imagined as earthed, embodied, humbled, local, demotic, ordinary and proximate."

"The numinous, the unrepresentable, the awesome ... became projected in the Australian literary and artistic imagination onto the incomprehensible vastness of Australian space. The sacred offered a language in which to consider that vastness and that difference. This is the language of the sublime."

This book offers hope that the sacred has a place – is found in, and mediated through, *place* – in Australia, where writers, poets and artists are uncovering anew the mystery that is this land and its sacredness.

This review draws on the media release: <http://www.fionadawnhill.com.au/Releases/Ashcroft-Bill01.doc>