

The Gorse Blooms Pale - Dan Davin's Southland Stories
Edited by Janet Wilson. Otago University Press, Dunedin, 2020.
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The General and the Nightingale - Dan Davin's War Stories
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Reviewed by Rachel O'Connor

These two new collections of Dan Davin's short fiction have a friendly, nostalgic appearance. With matching gloss white hardback covers, vigorous title fonts, and bright chunky artwork by Jenny Cooper, they are faintly reminiscent of New Zealand school journals; my twelve-year-old son, spotting them on the table beside me, assumed they were holiday reading I had picked up on his behalf. Between the covers, however, they are revealed to be substantial, many-faceted works that provide, along with the stories, a wealth of meticulously organised and annotated detail that richly rewards the concentrated reader.

The Gorse Blooms Pale is dedicated to Davin's stories of Southland, though not limited to the stories contained in the 1947 collection of the same name. Twelve stories selected from this original collection comprise the first section of this edition, while eight stories from Davin's *Breathing Spaces* collection, originally published in 1975, make up the second. A third section contains six stories not included in previous published collections. The three groups are divided by poems by the author that reflect Davin's intense and enduring relationship with the natural and social environments of his youth, and his persistent engagement with nostalgia, and with the transformations rendered inevitable by growth and time.

Written across half a century, and after Davin's departure from New Zealand, (the author travelled to Oxford University on a Rhodes Scholarship in 1935, graduated and married in 1939, enlisted at the outbreak of WWII, and at war's end settled permanently in Oxford, where he served as an academic publisher for OUP), the collection of Southland stories delivers an evocative account of Davin's childhood home, culture and community that is so closely aligned with the particulars of the author's own experience, and so unrelenting in its documentary realism that the stories defy, in many respects, their categorisation within the genre of fiction. The inclusion of a contemporaneous street map of Invercargill, along with the extensive footnotes, precisely identify and contextualise the locales, personas and peculiarities of language and custom with which the stories are infused, underscoring the authenticity and particularity of their origins, and providing a truly immersive reading experience. Davin's alteration of the names of some (but not all) of the recurring cast of characters, and occasional changes in location or in the sequence and evolution of incidents and events, constitute little more than imaginative embroidery on what is an almost obsessively accurate replication of Davin's own past and experience. Narrated largely, though not exclusively, from the perspective of Davin's alter ego, the young protagonist Mick Connolly, the stories reveal with sometimes painful honesty the intimacies and complexities of Southland's semi-rural Irish Catholic immigrants, a tight-knit community which constituted the most significant minority in the region at the time. Later stories signal the complexity of emotions, among them the duelling senses of regret and relief engendered by Davin's return, as an expatriate, to his region and people.

Despite their powerful invocation of time and place, Wilson effectively argues against the positioning of Davin's intensely realist stories purely as sociological record, quoting from

Davin's own declaration of his belief that fiction should combine 'a passion for the exact, the authentic, detail' with 'a power of feeling, a spirit,' to convey a deeper, more universal meaning and message, thus serving what Wilson terms the 'higher aims of literature.' Certainly, Davin's Southland stories deliver on the larger considerations of existence; the workings of fate, chauvinism, injustice, religion, desire and death are insightfully and eloquently exposed. The tales of childhood, particularly poignant, explore with carefully managed emotional force the struggles of a sensitive, contemplative boy to reconcile his own emerging psyche and manhood with the sometimes bitter realities engendered by the rituals and dynamics peculiar to his faith, family and farming communities.

Imbued with a curious blend of pragmatism and tenderness, these deft evocations of the minutiae of domestic and agrarian life, and of Southland's harsh but unforgettable landscape and climate, are enduring in their appeal. Wilson's alignment of Davin's naturalism with Flaubert's, his dramatic irony with Maupassant's, and his expatriate style with that of Mansfield and Joyce, may strike readers of Davin's longer and later fiction as ambitious, yet in this collection seem most justified. Davin's skilled delivery of cadence and timing, and of the telling detail that brings his world and people to life, enables readers of the Southland stories to enjoy this writer, and the land of his youth, at their very best.

The second of the collections, *The General and the Nightingale*, contains twenty of Davin's stories of soldiering with the British and New Zealand armies in World War II. Bar one, all stories were previously published in *The Salamander and the Fire*, a 1986 collection which Davin introduced himself. With again only one exception, the stories appear here in the order they did in the 1986 collection, reflecting the chronological progression of Davin's own war assignments and experiences along with those of the New Zealand Division itself.

This edition takes its title from one of the best-known and loved of Davin's war stories, a fictionalisation of the much-mythologised incident which occurred during the hard-fought Italian campaign, when the commander of the New Zealand Expeditionary Force, General Bernard Freyberg, brought his jeep and its occupants to a halt, in exposed territory overlooked by enemy guns, while he listened for the sound of a nightingale. It is a tale that epitomises the widespread admiration and affection felt for Freyberg by his forces, and by Davin himself, in the arena and the memory of that war.

Wilson's general introduction orientates Davin's short war fiction within his evolution as soldier, writer and New Zealander, and provides a richly detailed exploration of the relationship between the author's military and scholarly preoccupations, and the impact of his changing circumstances and attitudes on narrative tone, style and form. Wilson's long-standing scholarly engagement with Davin's life and work is evident, and in her scrutiny and classification of the stories she successfully balances her consideration of Davin's work as New Zealand diasporic writing, with its distinctive combination of affection and detachment, and as unique national record, documenting as it does, with insight and irony, the everyday business of WWII soldiering in all its associated horror and absurdity.

Some of Davin's war stories have stood the test of time rather better than others. The delivery of background is sometimes laboured, while Davin's employment of idiom can be stilted, and his application of the vernacular heavy-handed. For the lay reader, some narratives may venture too far into the personalised politics of a particular army to sustain interest. But the prose is agile and elegant, the details of gesture and setting are subtly rendered, and Davin's keen and

compassionate observation of the New Zealand soldier at war, exhibiting all the frailties and possibilities of human nature, remains eminently edifying and entertaining.

Wilson's suggestion that Davin's war stories more nearly resemble 'fictionalised accounts rather than imaginative fictions' is ably supported by the overall arrangement of the volume. A brief chronology of Davin's life, military, and publishing progress from 1939 onwards provides the initial context for the stories, neatly aided by a map that matches each tale with its wartime location. A useful list of abbreviations demystifies much of the recurring military jargon. The vigour and interest of this edition, however, is generated by the highly stratified contextualisation of its stories through their individual introductions and detailed annotations. Each story is positioned within its geographical, military, and historical setting, literary and linguistic references are explicated, and the origins of its events and characters traced back to the author's own experiences and acquaintances. Most intriguing and innovative of all are the frequent links indicated between aspects of the stories and their genesis in Davin's wartime journals, the transcripts of which are the work of Davin scholar Tom McLean. Throughout his years in military service, Davin systematically, almost compulsively, kept a diary of events, encounters and impressions, marking with an X those entries which he planned to return to and develop into fiction. The process reveals both Davin's sustained commitment to his chosen craft, and the ambition that he preserved, even in the midst of battle and bloodshed, for an authorial future.

The cumulative effect of the annotated volumes is compelling, if at times slightly overwhelming; I found myself zigzagging almost continuously between texts, notes and introductions, and was more than once grateful for the old-fashioned inclusion of the yellow ribbon bookmarks. For those who know Davin's work, these new editions offer a referential feast of illuminating detail, fresh insights into the workings of an extraordinary mind, and a fuller perception and appreciation of the author's place in New Zealand literature. For those who have not yet delved into Davin's short fiction, these collections together form the perfect place to commence that journey.