

A Generous Man

by Charles Edward Eaton

"Poetry is the language of a state of crisis."

—Stéphane Mallarmé

**Days of Our Lives Lie in Fragments:
New and Old Poems, 1957-1997**
by George Garrett
Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University
Press; 222 pp., \$26.95



One of the most important things to say about George Garrett is that his is a generous talent, not limited or confined by a narrow point of view. It is as though he has been searching for the meaning of life in many ways and modes of expression, including novels, short stories, and critical studies, to give only a partial list. And, of course, poetry, always poetry: *The Reverend Ghost* (1957), *The Sleeping Gypsy* (1958), *Abraham's Knife* (1961), *For a Bitter Season* (1967), *Welcome to the Medicine Show* (1978), and *Luck's Shining Child* (1981). The present volume, *Days of Our Lives Lie in Fragments: New and Old Poems, 1957-1997*, is a judicious selection from these collections and 30 new poems, spanning over 40 years.

Garrett has always been something of an "outsider," refusing to go along with contemporary dogma both literary and political, at the same time that he has been in his amiable way an "insider" with a wide acquaintance among writers, and wishing, one feels, that he could assume the impossible role of peacemaker among the warring factions that distress our times. Consequently, he is a seminal figure reflecting our contemporary restlessness as he searches for some kind of rapprochement, not finding it altogether but not giving up either: "there are things so beautiful / and strange the mind can't hold / them though it wrestles" ("The Angels").

Charles Edward Eaton's 14th book of poetry, *The Scout in Summer*, will be published later this year by Cornwall Books.



Anatol Woolf

The title of the new collection is well-taken, faintly echoing T.S. Eliot's "These fragments I have shored against my ruins." The poems encompass all the variety one could wish for: poems about everyday experiences, a moving tribute to O.B. Hardison, the brilliant scholar who died too young, poems that refer to such literary friends as Brendan Galvin and John Ciardi, among others. One catches one's breath, and continues: poems that illustrate a wide interest in literature and art, the quotidian in tandem with the lofty and extraordinary. A lively and sympathetic interest in his students is apparent, and he must be a delightful teacher. The remarkable poem, "Out on the Circuit," is an account of the underlying horror of giving a poetry reading that should curl the hair of any ambitious young poet. And yet one feels that he carried off the mission with aplomb. There are many other examples in the book of Garrett the survivor, who has been able to make his way through the circumstances of our times, experiencing them but not being overwhelmed by them. In another life, he might have been a diplomat, wary and watchful, looking for a sane and civilized solution to many of our problems.

It is worth noting that without the modishness of the "confessional" poet, an informal, non-chronological autobiography emerges from these "fragments" as they accumulate. We learn of the many places he has lived, his devotion to wife and children, his love of women in general—few contemporary poets have written so lyrically, and sometimes voluptuously, about them. In the delightful poem "Grapes," we learn that he has been a soldier in Tuscany and, in the final poem of the book, "Holy Week," that he is a religious man. "The Magi" and other biblical poems confirm this fact.

Technically, the poems are smooth and fluent, employing a free verse that is not all that free. The early poems make an adept use of rhyme and meter, and they are an echoing presence in the later work. You feel that Garrett could easily slip back into rhyme if the occasion and subject were right and that he would not be awkward or ill at ease in doing so. One remembers that Amy Lowell, the Mother Superior of Imagism, insisted that the young poet should have a firm grounding and practice in traditional poetry before attempting free verse. In any case, Garrett is not prejudiced only in favor of untrammelled liberty, and would probably not argue with Byron's dictum: "Easy writing makes hard reading." The conviction arises from the poems that he knows all the fashionable creeds and attitudes about technique but can put on blinders when he wants to, and that he would not quarrel with Wallace Stevens' notion that the only useful thing to be said about technique is that the poet should be free in whatever form he uses.

Surprisingly, the Southern landscape does not hover in the background in many of these poems by a native Floridian. Urbane and cosmopolitan, rather than regional, Garrett does not belong

entirely to any actual place or landscape of the mind (unlike Robert Frost, whose North of Boston is a constant background and who could say of himself early on: "they would not find me changed from him they knew— / only more sure of all I thought was true"). But then, perhaps, our fragmented society requires a more roving perspective, a kind of going here and there. There is no doubt that Garrett has "gotten around," "made the scene," and extracted as much as he could from these experiences, dismal though they sometimes were.

But, for the most part, the lasting aura of the poems is genial, and gives off the glow of a pleasant man who remembers the essence of Isak Dinesen's "I do not come for pity, I will come for pleasure." This is rare enough among literary personalities to be worth emphasizing. Too often we admire the work, and, alas, deplore the author.

Has Garrett found life, particularly the literary life, worthwhile and satisfying? Yes and no. We find him constantly aware of the loss of traditional values with little else of value to put in their place. A number of poems convey the sadness and cultural malaise of Rainer Maria Rilke's "Each torpid turn of the world has such disinherited children / To whom no longer what has been, and not yet what is coming, belongs." At the same time, as I have suggested before, there is an incurable optimism in Garrett's nature in spite of the cultural stranglehold. After a poem about "gray thoughts dark laughter cold words" ("Pathetic Fallacy"), followed by "Gray on Gray," he gives us a very happy poem indeed, brief enough to quote in its entirety:

How It Is How It Was
 How It Will Be

How it is
on the next day after
the blizzard
how the sky clears blues brightens
cloudless and clean with the old
moon
floating here and there quiet and
grinning
and the quiet fallen snow
glinting winking glittering
(is there one and only word for it?)
with abundance opulence
extravagance
of (one and only) sunlight
how my breath and the river's

do steam and ghost and
shimmyshake
in this purely cold air
how now we know
that we shall surely live forever
how now we want to.

Perhaps his credo emerges best of all from a poem entitled "Postcard," which, ironically, is a good deal longer than any postcard I ever received, but then, as I have said, George Garrett is a generous man:

"Dear World, though I have
loved you
and lost you, times beyond
counting,
still I write upon this instant in

receipt
of all your ordinary music to
inform you

that I can't live without you.
I intend, by God, hell and high
water,
sleet or snow and the wheel of
fortune,
to come back for more of the
same. . . ."

This is enough for any man to believe in these days. The dust jacket states that Garrett's reputation rests mainly on his fiction. This fine collection demonstrates that it should include his poetry as well.

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Low-End Education

by James Hill

The Teacher Unions: How the NEA and AFT Sabotage Reform and Hold Students, Parents, Teachers, and Taxpayers Hostage to Bureaucracy

by Myron Lieberman
New York: The Free Press;
305 pp., \$25.00



Not too far from my house in Phoenix, Arizona, stands a Christian school that may just say everything about the educational reform debate in this country—and why it is so often impossible to make any sense of it, in particular. One assumes that what this school has to offer is back-to-basics education, superior teachers, a library of good books, and computer labs hooked up to the Internet: all things a parent would demand before shelling out tuition for a private education. In fact, the school's main appeal seems to be its easy access for sport utility vehicles, especially the mega-sized Suburbans and Expeditions so favored by the *nouveaux riches* these days.

Meanwhile, in the far reaches of the suburbs where retirement communities offer security and companionship for “only” \$90,000 and up, the *anciennes riches* complain of having to pay taxes to support a nearby, largely minority school district that must go back to the voters time and again to raise money to build more schools and modernize existing classrooms. In the past, the seniors' tactic has been to turn out in large enough numbers to vote down every attempt at funding those bonds. Now they wish to secede from the district and be done with the hassle so as not to interrupt their rounds of golf, while the state legislature continues to debate how it will bring the public schools into compliance with a state Supreme Court order mandating an “equalization” of capital funding—a nearly impossible chore if local control of school districts is to be maintained.

These senior citizens differ in one crit-

ical way from the Expedition drivers unloading their children at the Christian academy. The yuppies have made the decision to go private from concerns for status, their children's educational opportunities, and their safety; perhaps even for religious reasons. Yet they are content to continue funding the public schools through their taxes. Many of them might even be among the sizable crowd who tell pollsters that yes, indeed, the public schools should be equally funded. One never knows, after all: the law practice could collapse some day, and Junior might have to be educated among the great unwashed.

The problem, of course, is that “equal” funding too often implies a uniform mediocrity that destroys the choice parents have always had when it comes to public education: namely, of moving to a richer, safer school district in order to escape court-ordered busing, over-centralization, the disintegration of older districts caused by falling property values and the loss of highly taxed industries, declining test scores produced by an influx of immigrant children, militant teachers, and so forth. No wonder, therefore, that religious academies are beginning to sprout in the “burbs.” Unlike the old folks in their golden ghettos, parents who have moved into suburban districts only to find the schools there unsatisfactory cannot so easily launch a secessionist campaign; instead, they look for a safe haven. Perhaps, if the children can get better instruction and their chances for acceptance at a better-than-average college are improved, the investment will be worth it even if the cost is an arm and a leg (not to mention the mandatory Suburban). Yet this entirely free-market approach to education reform does little actually to reform education; indeed, it may be impeding it by gradually removing more and more of the general public from the necessary business of running the public schools.

Not that the public majority was ever involved in the first place, having long since been shunted aside from its community responsibilities. Federal judges have been running some districts for decades now. Political correctness, not community influence, all too often de-

termines everything from setting the curriculum to choosing textbooks to maintaining extracurricular activities. In the predominantly minority Oakland, California, school district, black English, or Ebonics, was pushed through briefly as an accepted language for instruction before the board retreated amid a nationwide outcry.

How public education reached this miserable condition is a question rarely raised and almost never answered, although we have been dancing around it for years now. The usual response has been to advocate simple cure-alls that bring us to a brief, feel-good consensus: spend more money in order to raise teachers' salaries, reduce class size, tap the federal treasury to fund before-school (and now after-school) programs. Yet classes are still considered too large by the President of the United States, among other people. Schools continue to cut back their curricula, most notably in music and other fine arts. Decades of preschool instruction have produced millions of children who cannot read at the third-grade level when in the third grade, or in high school. Most assuredly, though, teacher incomes have increased, largely by reason of inflation and the unionization of the teaching profession.

Teachers, of course, are grossly underpaid. Compared to auto repair, computer programming, or street-corner drug dealing, teaching is a low-end occupation. And teachers enter into their profession knowing full well that it likely will always be a low-end occupation, no matter how much they groan about being under-paid and under-appreciated. Teachers who are more willing to market themselves according to the laws of supply and demand—by moving, say, to a state where the pay ranges are considerably higher—can be rewarded more handsomely. But that still leaves Mississippi and other low-pay states with teaching jobs to fill, and applicants lining up to fill them. So there is something to the argument that teachers aren't compelled to choose their miserable lot, and if such people choose to take a vow of poverty in the interests of the commonweal, then they will obtain their reward in the hereafter.