CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION TO

DOUGLAS STEWART'S POETIC CAREER
Scottish by ancestry, New Zealander by birth, Australian by choice. Douglas Stewart (1913-1985) shows his interest in all the three. His literary career, marked by writing poetry, plays and critical essays, is distinguished by a distinctive stand unlike other Australian writers. Memory and nostalgia contribute to his writing poems about the country in which he has spent his age of tenderness and innocence. So, his early poetry, describes a passionate memory of the beautiful landscape of New Zealand.

His adult life in Australia continues his enthusiasm for the new landscape. There is no sense of astonishment when he starts writing about Australian landscape although many before him had not found it attractive. He is equally at home in his perception of new landscape as he had been of New Zealand. The Scottish ancestry in his veins often leads him to writing ballads about explorers and heroes who are remembered for their heroic deeds.

His poetry therefore comprises lyrics dealing with New Zealand landscape, Australian landscape and heroic men who have hallowed the pages of New Zealand and Australian history. Douglas Stewart may be said to
inaugurate a new attitude towards the Australian continent. His contemporaries A.D. Hope, Mc. Auley, Kenneth Slessor and others no doubt have begun the new tradition of addressing themselves to history, myths and legends of Australia although there is a certain reservation about the validity of their claim. A.D. Hope, with his Oxford education and European training, often wonders whether his interest in Australian literature has isolated him from European literary tradition. So he proceeds with caution and pursues the dual approach of not totally rejecting the European tradition and of discovering of a genius which is Australian.

With Stewart there is no dilemma and no prevarication like Charles Harpur, one of the early native Australian poets. Charles Harpur wrote with a sense of pride about his experiences in the country he dwelt. The historical importance of Stewart therefore consists in his giving the needed impetus to the course of Australian poetry. Immediately before him there were poets who appraised the continent living as outsiders. For them the land was nothing but a wild, chaotic, disharmonious mass. Its birds did not sing nor its plants bloomed. The men were guilty because they were all convicts.

The writers therefore have found nothing delightful and positive about them. They are very condescending with the men who have needed reform and regeneration, but for the native Australian and for all the chaos, the land is hospitable and promising. Douglas Stewart represents the native voice and hope and gives an unprejudiced account of the land and its people.

Stewart expects of major poetry that it can be an art which accepts and presents a heroic image of the life of the man. He responds to what is vigorous and life-affirming, "the note of arrogant vitality and joyous gusto" He is opposed
to self-pity, railing at life, defeatism, glumness or lumpiness. He accuses art and literature of tending two vices - the rejection of life and the flight into subjectivism. He dislikes poetry which is marked by confusion and obscurity because he believed that poetry required discipline and control. His interest is in three kinds of poetry-narrative, lyrical and dramatic. He does not approve of poetry which is didactic and abstract.

The poetry of Douglas Stewart partly derives from the romantic stream. At the head of the stream is Sir Walter Scott with his ballads, his mixture of romance and realism. Though the Australian vitalists Norman Lindsay, Mc Donald, Douglas Stewart Dorothy Auchterlonie are descriptive poets, the best of them avoid the two crippling obsessions of much previous Australian poetry; that to look at scenery is in itself to have poetic experience and that not to deal with themes specifically Australian is to be derivative, second hand or academic. These poets unlike writers of fiction have no pressure either from the publisher or the public. Therefore they are free to write on themes which are not necessarily Australian.

Before judging Stewart's work it is worthwhile to understand his beliefs about poetry and what he expects of it or to be understood. A poet like Stewart whose mind has considerable integrity and whose work does not baffle with incoherence or falsity or pretence we must understand his critical reviews clearly. "The Flesh and the Spirit" declares his position very well. It tells us what he looks for in literature and indicates the canons by which his own work is to be judged.

The best Australian poetry today gives the impression of poets who start from the local scene as something given, whereas the impression, the older poetry gave, was that of poets who aimed at the local scene as something to be
domesticated in literature. But the poetry of older poets and newer poets has shown tendency towards descriptive type like American poetry influenced by the Romantic Movement.

Australian poetry begins under the influence of the Romantic Movement. As A.D. Hope comments; "The shade of Wordsworth haunts our poets from Harpur and Kendall in the early nineteenth century to Douglas Stewart and Judith Wright at the present day, it would hardly be unfair to say that ninetenths of the poems, written in this country deal with its scenery ("Standards in Australian literature ")

Hope adds that in poetry there has always been no other tradition which is distinct from poetry written under the influence of Romantic Movement. The poetry, written by Brennan, McCrae and Nielson is simply poetry and does not try to be Australian poetry. They deal with traditional subjects of poetry with the primary passions of the heart and the universal facts of human life. A.D. Hope therefore finds some poets writing about Australian scene and others writing about universal themes.

Just as England has witnessed so many isms in the early 20th century Australia too had a period of literary measles in the twenties and thirties. Imagism, surrealism, apocalypse and other experiments have overtaken the literary scene. However the poets have returned to writing in the main stream of the tradition and making it new in the traditional manner. A.D. Hope lists a dozen poets with a high degree of craftsmanship - Kenneth Slessor, Robert Fitz Gerald, Judith Wright, Rosemary Dobson, James Mc Auley, Herald Stewart, Vincent Buckley, David Campbell, Nan Mc Donald, Dorothy Stewart and Dorothy Auchterlonie.
Stewart's Selected Poems (1936) begins with a section entitled Early New Zealand Poems. Evidently these poems are about New Zealand where he lived for about twenty years since his birth. The interesting character in his imagination is that he does not distinguish New Zealand scene and Australian scene separately. New Zealand experience and Australian experience are not different but are complementary. It is this counterpoise which makes him understand the one by the other.

In his early work the Australian landscape is drawn with breadth and gusto. They lack the intricate experienced detail which enriches his Australian nature poetry. As Nancy Keesing observes, "At first he gained exceedingly compelling effects in a (usually) rather general manner. This is in contrast with the thoroughly assimilated detail in the New Zealand poetry published by him. There should be nothing really surprising in this impression or in one's suspicion that his early Australian poetry perhaps owed a good deal to his father's adventurous stories. Yet those bush rangers, dossers, bunyips and oracular beasts did surprise because Stewart seeing them for the first time himself used them symbolically as no Australian writer had done before him". Nancy Keesing (Australian writers and other their work).

Three volumes of poetry Green Lions, The White Cry and The Elegy for an Airman are about New Zealand. The first of these was published when he was twenty three. It was his response to the country where he had lived as a boy. It was written after his return from Australia and his impressions were not the same. It was a young, questioning assertive man who looked at the landscape. By then he had read Blunden, John Cowper and Powis whose influence could be
seen in his description of New Zealand. There was brooding and dark country feeling in his poems.

The title poem *Green Lions* captures, in vivid detail, the manner of animal life with a brevity and realism. The shift is from wild nature to inland where domesticated *drudge denied the jungle of young years*. The contrast is between energy and action that characterises the natural world and the dull world of civilized human beings. It has been pointed out that this volume shows symbolic awareness of colour and power to evoke emotion. His preoccupation with snow and ice makes him evoke white and silver colours. Some critics have found that many of the poems in the volume *Green Lions* do not have a focus and the poet also fails to achieve a wholeness. His favourite colours are silver gold and saffron.

In 1939 Stewart published a volume entitled *The White Cry*. It is a volume which has to be read along with the poet's early manhood spent in New Zealand. Not only in theme but also in technique it is like his earlier volume. The major themes of the volume are love, despair, determination and pride. The title poem 'The White Cry' a new born lamb, so frail against the breath of ice,' is reduced to *a dream, a white cry*.

Both "Green Lions" and "The White Cry" are marked by lyricism. Though they do not have the poetic wit which the poet has tried to achieve it. His habit of using colours appears to be fresh in individual poems.

The next volumes "*Elegy for an Airman*" (1940) and "*Sonnets to the Unknown Soldier*" (1941) contain poems about war. They have robust style. The title poem *Elegy for an Airman* written for his boyhood friend *Desmond Carter,*
has been considered the best in the volume. Stewart says I wrote it after I had come to live in Australia and looking back nostalgically to New Zealand, remembered how beautiful the country was. The importance of this poem is to combine the realistic lament with the romantic vision. It is also a poem in which the poet adopts a personal style.

The demise of an airman was an occasion to describe the landscape where his friend and he lived like kings. Another most beautiful poem of this period was "River" which was of importance in the development of Stewart as a poet. The poem shows his imagination and linguistic skills and free from the cliches of colour and light.

The poem "River" has an abstract theme. It is one of the most beautiful poems that Stewart ever wrote. This poem blends high imagination and rich resources of language. It becomes a landmark in his career as a poet. The poem continues the sleeping rhythm of elegy, but avoids the symbolism of colour. The poem moves from one image to another image. The poem holds out the promise that he will write poetry one day. "Heritage" however, adverts to Stewart's Scottish ancestry in which, as his understanding of country life and ecology he took pride. The images of storm and of black and of the whiteness of snow are used again as representatives of the harshness of the Scottish and New Zealand terrain and climate.

Stewart's Australian poetry was written after he had come to live in Sydney. He was now in a new country, holding a new job at a time when the country was passing through a crisis. His poetry showed response to the crisis when international uncertainties, anxieties and fears threatened all sentient men.
They indicate his acceptance of two poetic kinds new in his work but ingrained in the history of Australian poetry as represented by the Bulletin. We find Stewart extending his use of colloquialism, employing legendary fantasy, in order to create a sort of literary populism. The results remain hybrids, uncertain in tone prolix and willful.

The poems published in 1946 entitled *The Dosser in Spring Time* marks a decisive development in Stewart's poetry, from the suggestiveness of his early work towards ballad-like statements of a robust cheerfulness. It announces too the beginnings of a vein of fantasy and whimsy in his work. Stewart has clearly made a significant contribution to the adoption of this form in modern Australian poetry. There are no nature poems in the volume *The Dosser in Spring Time*.

Stewart's early Australia owed a good deal to his father's adventurous stories. The bush rangers, dossers, bunyips and oracular beasts which he saw for the first time himself. They are closely observed and fully imagined creatures (even the true fantasies - dosser and bunyip exist), but the landscapes and inhabitants are broadened, the presentation as may be seen by a comparison of the *Lizards* from *The Dosser in Spring Time* and *Lizard* from *The Birdsville Track*.

In the earlier piece the blue-tongued Lizards are unmistakable blue-tongued Lizards but through them Stewart comments on human love and lust and rage and kindness. The later Lizard is entirely *Lizard*. When Stewart discovered the *White Old Dosser* in his cave down a gully in the innocent Sydney suburb of Cheltenham he was already a myth fixed in his cave of legend, but a comparative new comer from New Zealand was the first poet to find him.
I’ve been cooling here for years with the gum-trees wet and weird;
Says the white old dosser in the cave.
My head grew lichens and moss was my beard
The Creek was in my brain and a bull frog in my belly
The she-oaks washed their hair in me all down the gloomy gully;
Says the white old dosser in the cave

The Dosser in Spring Time, may be compared with The Man From Aadaminby a much later ballad “This man, during the course of his ballad, is shown to be as legendary and symbolic as any dosser but he is no mere fortuitous prop, in an existing background and he is not stationary.

Hard to say where he came from
May be the Great Divide
Where the sun like a golden raindrop
Rolls down Kiandra side

Any way on his white horse
He rode down out of the hills
His pick-axe over his shoulder
His two black dogs at his heels

The origin and fate of the man from Aadaminby are in that of poet’s imagination which has grown completely Australian.

The poems published in 1947 are entitled Glencoe. Among the narratives Glencoe has pride of place. Stewart tells us that it was given work, composed in five days amidst other business; “it seemed that all I had to do was
to take down the ballads as they came". The complex events leading to the
massacre have been rendered with marvellous simplicity and sureness. The style
is a natural continuation from the ballad tradition and Scott, and it has great force,
swift movement and deep-feeling.

In daylight golden and mild
After the night of Glencoe
They found the hand of a child
Lying upon the snow

Sigh, wind in the pine
Cover it over with snow;
But terrible things were done
Long, long ago

Glencoe came as a decisive advance from the early volumes of poetry
and marked the beginning of his period of greatest strength.

Sun Orchids (1952) is the first of the volumes containing substantial
numbers of the meditative nature poems for which he is best known. They are
highly visual poems 'A Robin', "Mare and Foal", "The Moths", "Helmet Orchid",
and others lightly hold a symbolized human relevance as well as metaphysical
sense of the unearthly within the earthly. "Terra Australis" is a light-hearted
fantasy ballad of an imaginary meeting in the pacific between Captain Quiros
sailing west to found paradise in the New Hebrides and William Lane sailing east
to found a Utopian New Australia in Paraguay in 1893.
The poems published in 1955 entitled *The Birdsville Track* represented a search for significant images in the stony desert and semi-desert in land country. Like most travel or place poems they are notations that fall a little short of full poetic existence. But the exploration of images is striking.

'It tore a great gap in her mind

*Harsh as the loose sheet of iron that bangs in the wind*

and

*The bright-red dresses of the gins
Flowering in the hot country
Like lilies in the dust's soft pond*

The nature poems in *The Birdsville Track* are frequently short pieces of one sentence each, articulated on an image of varying fancifulness; a mignonette orchid "like little green bats on a steeple, Beetle, beetle and beetle". The frequent use of the word 'little' in these pieces, the microscopic, miniaturistic view of the world they imply, points to a deliberate restriction of sensibility and imagination. "Flowering Bloodwoods spider gums". The Snow-gum A Robin and Brindabella are marked by a joyful reticence and a controlled flow of feeling without dryness and untouched by preciosity.

In the 'Snow Gum' Stewart is concerned with an entranced moment of perfection, describing a Snow Gum of the basic cliches of Australian iconography, its photograph frequently appearing grocers' and butchers' calendars and it is typical of Stewart to take up such a worn subject and to invest it with new life and meaning.
The book *Rutherford* was published in 1962. Rutherford remains Stewart's most substantial single book up to the present time and is among the finest works of recent Australian poetry. It contains all kinds of poems in the variety of tones which the poet has mastered. It shows a new development in his use of the discursive mode in pieces like 'Fence' (the life of Hogans is described) the rhetorical *Easter Island* and *Rutherford*, the title poem of the collection.

"Rutherford", written in the long looping casual line that Stewart has frequently favoured, is a meditative discourse on the nature of responsibility and power, developed around the schematic images of the wheel and the hand. Rutherford took its title from a splendid long poem celebrating *Early Rutherford Nelson* (1871-1937). At the centre of this volume *Early Rutherford*, the New Zealander who first disclosed the nature of the atom. Stewart calls him the great sea farer of the science. Rutherford's reflections on man, his ideals and objectives in life, his understanding of human history, his speculation on the outcome of atomic knowledge are variously dealt in this volume. The poem was truly unified work in which all major themes of Stewart's work are enclosed. Man's good and evil, his endurance, his depravity and grandeur are accommodated in this volume. The language and technique show variety.

A large number of satires and explorer poems written since *Rutherford* are included in the *Collected poems* 1936-1967 in a section called *The Flowering Place* as too are works showing that Stewart has not abandoned the writing of short poems of close observation and ironic comment. However at the time of writing (1969) some of the finest *Explorer poems* are not yet published in a book form and also uncollected are two important works, *Memories of a Veteran* and *Elegy*. Each of the three long satires in *Collected Poems* is a tour de force in
which mature virtuosity and technical brilliance are displayed with pleasure. The starting point of *Four Letter Words* a comment on Censorship, is the London trial of D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. In *Reflections at a Parking Meter* Stewart discusses the ways in which man, historically today, has tended to lose his identity in trappings of power. *Farewell to Jindabyne* is remarkable not only for its technical effects as also its sure rhymes and scansion, but also for the way in which, after nineteen almost farcical verses, a gradual change of mood is introduced so subtly that there is no sensation of abrupt alternation, when at the twenty fifth stanza, the satire becomes a true lament informed with deep pathos for a town drowned beneath dam-water.

Explorer poems continue to express the idea of scientists who are like Rutherford, great *Sea farer of science* many being nineteenth century scientists who were also in a more direct sense, explorers or travellers. Darwin; Mungo Park in Africa; Bates on the Amazon' D'Albertis in New Guinea. There is also some political significance in these groups of poems and thoughts about the modern world which could be dated from *Rutherford*. *Two Englishmen* is really a swan-song for the *British Empire* in *D'Albertis* and *Formiga de Fogo* nineteenth century expansion is seen, for all the courage of the explores as a devouring force. 'B Flat' contrasts the ideal citizen with the enormity as well as the enormousness of the world.

This body of poetry can also be seen to use and develop the three themes of Rutherford into elegant conjectures about creation, evolution and art. *The Peahen* speculates about the evolutionary processes which led the male to magnificence.
Although the Stewart could not be labelled as religious poet in the sense in which the term ordinarily denoted, there was however no doubt about his interest in metaphysical ideas. In a poem like *One yard of Earth* his observation was not very different from Darwin's theories. The poem described Darwin's experiments and his grave doubts.

Thus in a long career spanning four decades, Stewart wrote poetry of considerable significance fulfilling for himself and to the nation a promise he held out early.