

Review

Poetry on track

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Stimela: Railway Poems of South Africa is a fascinating little anthology of some forty poems will evoke memories of long-distance train journeys in many readers, though I suspect such journeys are much less frequent in these days of well-built highways and cut-price plane flights. Mine go back to my boyhood and early teaching years in Natal, when I regularly caught the Orange Express from Durban to Cape Town and back. It was a great relief, as an adult, to graduate from stuffy, overcrowded, second-class to first-class compartments. Living with five, usually adult, strangers for two nights and a day in a four by three-metre box had not been easy. They were not, for example, required to go outside to smoke!

The strangeness of the experience is in fact my dominant memory. Apart from the variously weird (in my severe, schoolboy judgement) company, there was the sense – which is vividly captured in poem after poem in this book – of being separated only by two large panes of glass from an endlessly unfolding view of unfamiliar worlds. Most strikingly, as the train clattered through the day after leaving the southern mountains (I'm thinking of the journey back to Natal), there was the huge, brown emptiness of the Karoo, what Guy Butler (one of several distinguished Grahamstonian poets in this collection: Chris Mann, Robert Berold, Don Maclennan, the late Sydney Clouts and others are here too) calls the "arid plain of rock and scrub" (from "The Parting"), where, "in the staggering air of noon / farm willows shake and evaporate", and "sheep huddle in their own shade" (from Harold Sampson's *A Train Window*).

But the Karoo experience is only one element in the variety of sensory, emotional and intellectual impact to be encountered in these poems. The collection begins with two late nineteenth-century poems by Lance Fallaw and Cullen Gouldsbury who both look zestfully forward to the realisation of Rhodes' great dream of a link from Cape to Cairo. Several others, including a splendid one (Rudyard Kipling's *Bridge-guard in the Karoo*) and two by the famous novelist Edgar Wallace, date from the Anglo-Boer War era.

Other early poems, such as Demetrius Segoo's praise-song-like *The Train* (translated from Sesotho), register the vivid impressions of observers from a non-industrial culture, as in "I am the centipede, rusher with a black nose, / drinker of water even from the witches' fountains". Conversely, Don Maclennan's *Lament for the Locomotives* unforgettably examines, in wonderfully observed detail, the actual hard, dirty, dangerous labour of the men on the footplate, and the awe-inspiring power of their magnificent machines. Maclennan's poem deserves a review to itself but space forbids. As the editor, Laurence Wright says in ending his Introduction, "Enjoy the ride!"

***Stimela: Railway Poems of South Africa* (ISBN: 978-0-620-41938-3) is published by Echoing Green Press and is edited and introduced by Laurence Wright. The anthology sells for around R140.**