

Best Recent Poetry

Colonials, confessions & cricket

The return of an old hand, an impressive debut and a sporting chance.

by NICHOLAS REID

SPARKS AMONG THE STUBBLE (Cold Hub Press, \$28) is John Weir's first poetry collection in nearly 40 years. Priest and poet Weir has spent most of the past three decades editing the collected works of his friend James K Baxter. Weir's style is

modernist and these poems are presented in familiar orderly stanza form, but his ideas are subtly subversive. Many are about ageing and eternity, the best being "The Rite of Spring", where he views ironically all the things we accumulate in life. Keener is the gallery he creates of canonical writers, everybody from John Ruskin to Robert Lowell, some of whom he treats almost sardonically. But he is sharpest when he turns to the body politic, with works such as "The Negotiations" and "The Ambassadors", which take cracks at colonialism. Perhaps his most subversive poem is "The Immigrants", which suggests a critique of the missionary enterprise. I was surprised to find the troubled avant-gardist Antonin Artaud as the dedicatee of Weir's envoi.

In stark contrast, Kirsten Le Harivel's **SHELTER** (Cuba Press, \$25) is the work of a newcomer. Glasgow-born, Kāpiti Coast resident Le Harivel writes prose poems, confessional poems, aphorisms and sometimes poems in more traditional stanzaic forms. She addresses



Kirsten Le Harivel

foreign countries and youthful angst. "I am a damaged buoy, floating in a turgid sea", she declares in "Butterflies". She writes frankly about sex: "The bedroom" looks as if it was written to see how often the words f- and f-ing could be used on one page. Just occasionally, her meaning

can be somewhat opaque, as in "National identity project". But she's at her best when she writes about her earlier life. Her most exuberant and relatable poem is "A Weegie lass", a raw account of being a young schoolgoing, street-exploring, chips-eating Glaswegian girl. Not that she wallows in soft nostalgia. Her poems about returning to Glasgow are more dispiriting. At the least, this is a very impressive debut.

Mark Pirie's **SLIPS: Cricket poems** (HeadworX, \$30 pb, \$45 hb) is the most eccentric of poetic genres – a whole collection devoted to sport. A poet and prolific publisher, Pirie is also a dedicated cricket follower who has regularly contributed poems to a cricket magazine and has edited an anthology of other people's cricket verse. In *Slips*, he celebrates the feats of both well-known cricketers and ones who would not be known by the uninitiated. But

the general topic allows him to address other things as well. There are wild flights of fantasy, such as "Space Cricket" (literally about extra-terrestrials joining in the game) and "Ice Cricket", which sounds like a cricketer's nightmare. "At Brown's Bay" is really a love poem, where cricket is mentioned only because the lovers walk past cricket pitches. Then there is Pirie's wittiest poem, "Islands of Cricket", which considers how cricket caught on with Indians in India in colonial times, but did not catch on with Māori in New Zealand. This becomes a cunning comment on imperialism itself, as does "The Reverse of Imperialism". In the main, though, this is one for specialists. ■

