Reviewed by Kate Middleton

*Lines for Birds*, a collaboration between artist John Wolseley and poet Barry Hill, is a sumptuous production: as an art book alone the volume is gorgeous, and tracks a particular subject in the works of Wolseley, who has drafted and painted birds in Australia and abroad for many years (though the majority of works represented here are from the last fifteen years, the earliest dates to 1959). To this extensive artistic response to birds, Hill adds verse written in response to both Wolseley’s artworks and his own avian encounters over the past decade.

As an artist, Wolseley has been deeply engaged with landscape throughout his career. The artworks reproduced in *Lines for Birds* are predominantly drawn from works on paper rendered in watercolours, ink and found charcoal; these works also display the effect of John Wolseley’s own version of “frottage” in which the paper on which he works moves through the landscapes he renders, allowing the landscape to rub against and infuse his backdrop. As such, his works on paper foreground the textural qualities of the their backdrop more fully than many other artists working in the watercolour medium. As ever, the reproduction of artwork in book form loses some of the textural mystery of the original object; nonetheless, the University of Western Australia Press has done the artworks justice.

Wolseley’s work is figurative, and also layered with information: landscapes are rendered with scientific tables or the contour lines of maps superimposed; portraits of birds recall early Australian art—often that of scientific artists—by not only presenting the bird itself, but also incorporating painted maps harking back to the
age of exploration. Elsewhere maps locate the reader: “Maps of Frazer’s Hill and Lamington National Park” resembles a stylised tourism brochure with its trails, marked buildings, handwritten place names and arrow indicating the direction to the Gold Coast. The various modes and layers of his work constantly surprise, and collection of these images displays a rich and constantly renewed engagement with a particular subject worthy of a life’s work.

For better or worse, *Lines for Birds* is packaged as a truly collaborative enterprise between the painter and the poet, with equal weighting given to each practitioner. In place of the essays of a typical monograph, poems sit alongside artworks, adding a different dimension of interpretation of, or reflection upon, the subject of the art. While repetitions in Wolseley’s output suggest an artistic unfolding of subject that has taken place over many decades, Hill’s poems suggest an exhaustive approach, and the result can be, at times, exhausting. The poems are portraits of birds, miniature travelogues, musings on art, music, politics and the state of the world—but as the book proceeds, poems blend into each other, not least so because Hill revisits his own material. The poem “The Feast” opens with the lines “As birds are flying flowers / why don’t leaves sing?” While this image of colourful feathered beings being flowers of the sky’s garden is effective, the next poem, “Vow: 3am” begins with the line “Since birds are flowers”. This immediate repetition suggests Hill can’t let go of the idea. Too often Hill fails to expand and surprise with this large collection of poems.

Often Hill shows his awareness that he is responding to works of art in the poems collected here. Rendering the scene and acknowledging the physicality of the painting and the existence of the frame don’t have to bring the reader away from the world of the poem and back to the original artwork, but Hill falls into prosy descriptions that make his poems seem as though they are working through a painting systematically—as in “Their Throats, the Artist’s Wave”, when he writes:

> With the last panel I see  
> a Gothic attempt at absence  
> a figure of speech to silence
—or in “Colours Awaiting Birds”, when he describes a Sardinian Warbler “making a little Wagner of itself at the sunset end / of the painting, rendering the Sublime worthwhile again”. The image of the little Wagner, puffed up with song is effective; the reminder of the canvas and its “sunset end” brings it down; tossing in the Sublime for good measure (has the Sublime been threatened with devaluation?) let’s a big idea get in the way of the poetry.

Hill’s poems work best when he allows a song-like simplicity and a true sense of wonder unaffected by a programmatic approach to the rendering of all things avian. In the poem “Song”, Hill contemplates the reasons a bird make its music:

It sings for its mate.

It sings for the song itself.

The notes unfurl for love and for space.

These simple answers ring more true than many of the elaborate responses to painting. The lines cut through the project and allow the reader to breathe in the song itself. And again, the bird’s song prevails in “The Pied Butcher Bird’s Notes for a Hammock”. Hill writes:

You think the song’s in the throat

but it’s not

its lift is out, up

That “lift out, up” contains more air than most of these poems, and in that simple moment shows the wonder still manifest beneath all these layers of poetic interpretation. When all is said and done, the bird’s song is still where it began: all around us.

The owl gracing the cover of *birdlife* resembles a child’s toy: its googly eyes gaze off to the side, and against the darkness its huge pupils draw the eye. This image is kooky in character, and uncanny insofar as the viewer cannot quite tell if the owl is alive,
stuffed or perhaps even artificial. The image is striking, though its humour doesn’t represent the range of the volume and perhaps leads the reader to expect a droll collection rather than the literary and artistic olio for which it is the opening act.

The artist Perdita Phillips and the art-writer Nyanda Smith are at the helm of this particular anthology, and they have assembled a trio of poets to contribute avian-inspired verse to the collection. The poets in question, Michael Farrell, Graeme Miles and Nandi Chinna are very different in their versification. Their disparate approaches to the work—and the fact that some of their poems have appeared previously while others are published here for the first time—add to the hotchpotch effect of the volume. Further explanation of how the project came about, and the approach of this collaborative effort would be welcome. Rather than forming a distinctive whole, the resulting collection proceeds anew with each new page. While this makes for a disorienting cumulative experience, the variety is also rewarding—especially through the contributions of the poets.

Phillips shows a varied approach to her subject: photographic portraits of birds appear throughout, as do images of birds eggs catalogued in boxes, a miniature triptych of birds’ skulls, macro black-and-white images of the patterns of plumage and, strikingly, a black and white image of a bird’s nest in which a white string is interwoven, drawing the eye. Alongside the photographic, Phillips offers sketches—at times accompanied by text—watercolours, and collages. These images are drawn from two particular projects spanning six years, as well as from notebooks and what she terms “guerrilla museum photography”.

While Phillips, like Wolseley, has clearly returned again and again to the subject of birds, the works here don’t always cohere. The cover image is disarmingly comical; other photographic images range from an emu that could well grace a zoo postcard—well captured, but ultimately the subject and not the photographer fires our imagination—to the documentation that would go into a museum archive. Many of these photographs disappoint. Non-photographic works fare better: rough swan’s heads provide a striking counterpoint to Chinna’s poem “White Swans”; a delightfully cartoonish plummeting duck sits opposite Miles’s poem “Gravity”; a bird rendered in pencil and a wash of ink or watercolour complements Smith’s “Foraging”. These images are most interested in the bird-ness of their subjects rather than the contexts in which Phillips has encountered them.
Nyanda Smith’s prose contributions to the volume are weaker than the texts provided by the three poets. Her short prose musings working in parallel to the subject of birds are impressionistic and fleeting. In “Locomotion (ground)” her descriptions feel awkwardly ornate, as when she writes “Bodies swell and move. A calf, wound tight, glistens hotly. Hairless limbs are giddily cast in fluorescent, shrink-wrapped tendons.” In contrast, when Smith keeps her writing simpler, the apposition of the human and birdlike behaviours feels more apt, as in “Foraging”:

She brings in these precious objects from outside, hiding them around the bedroom, small daily offerings.

Here the magpie behaviour of the subject is given enough air for the reader to breathe.

Nandi Chinna’s poetry likewise carries with it a sense of, if not quite domestic surrounds, of manmade settings. Her “White Swans” appear “In a hot December” at the railway station at Fremantle. These swans:

bake like clay in their nests
either side of the clock tower,
their breast feathers inexplicable white.

That inexplicable whiteness speaks of the wonder at how the untamed animals can keep their pristine coats; later Chinna has the same swans “hiss mutely”. Though this reads as an oxymoron, the phrase speaks to Chinna’s juxtaposition of the wild and the tamed. At times these juxtapositions turn prosaic, as in her “Birds and Seals—A found poem”, drawing upon the nineteenth century diary of Captain Charles Fremantle. This poem opens with the lines:

Finder nothing on the island but seals. Killed four.
Crew with tomahawks had a capital hunt after one.
Great fun, had no idea they travelled so fast…
As a found text, this fails to renew the source material sufficiently to make an exciting poem. What is striking in the poem is that Chinna returns again and again to the kill count of seals and birds until she comes to the human cost:

...Captain Currie unfortunately
having been shot in the head by one of the party
in the act of shooting a bird.

The poetry of Miles and Farrell stand out as the highlights of this collection. Graeme Miles strikes the reader with his precise images. The collection begins with his poem “Incubation”, containing the lines:

Your head’s soft shell
expects heat to wake it
as the walls of the world are an unknown
animal that coos and broods.

The egg and the creature inside it become one, while the world outside the shell is similarly transformed into one great organism; the application of heat sparks a transformation here as palpable as Dr Frankenstein’s electrification of his monster into life. All the walls—membrane, shell, world’s edges—become permeable. Miles is deft in handling these transformations and blurring the lines between the animal and the human. In one untitled poem he writes, “Their son had a hawk’s head. / His eyes were small and precise”. In another:

An ibis picks the sole-marks
of its footprint, scribes into its traces
inquisitive as a historian.

This attention to the creaturely gifts the reader many strikingly understated moments of such transformations. Less sure is his longer poem “An Ash-Wood Ladder/Wooden Wings” which flies through a number of references—here “a lone Wright brother” appears; there “you’re dressed like Captain Bigglesworth” and in
flight your surroundings “might be the Cloud of Unknowing,” while the world beneath “spreads out / like Achilles’ shield”.

Farrell’s contributions are energetic and varied in form: while birds appear and disappear, language itself is what continually undergoes transformation. In his work “birds & flowers” Farrell lists plausible—and very funny—names for the fauna and flora of the title. Instead of warblers or forget-me-nots he offers “come-here-oftens”, “shame about rays”, “big yellow taxis” and “labor party barbecues”. The whimsy of such naming delivers on the expectations created by the anthology’s cover image. Elsewhere he contributes a cut-up version of John Shaw Neilson with the poem “the becomes with/river bird edits”, which begins with a “river, drab & / aquiver eager to sing for us” and “bird eating a rainbow”, a poem built on stanzas of different syllabic constructions, and ending:

/a bird
must hug
strangers
& earn
its liv-
ing/

Yes, a bird must earn its living; so must an anthology. Overall Birdlife offers more than a few such embraces, though its parts are often greater than the sum.