NANCY KEEISING
The following documents relate to the poetry and poetic “career” of Nancy Keesing who was a leading figure of the literature establishment in Australia. Nancy also contributed a significant amount of material on the Keesing and Michaelis families to the Archive of Australian Judaica housed in the Fisher Library at Sydney University.

Modern Australian Poetry, 1920-1970
A GUIDE TO INFORMATION SOURCES

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B. THE 1950S

That Nancy Keesing (b. Sydney, 1923), who published her first collection, IMMINENT SUMMER in 1951, is also a critic, short-story writer, and well-known anthologist (with Douglas Stewart) of the classic AUSTRALIAN BUSH BALLADS and other collections, may distract from an appreciation that she has been one of the more perceptive poets of the city and suburbs. "Compassionate," "Intelligent," "Imaginative," "reflective," and "cheerful" are other epithets applied to the best of her verse in three books, the last of which SHOWGROUND SKETCHBOOK appeared in 1968. But James Tulip, connecting her short stories to her poetry, in his provocative "Contemporary Australian Poetry," SOUTHERLY, XXXII (1972), 97-99, points, perhaps, to a more inclusive quality of her work: her direct feelings for and understanding of people, her empathy with them. (She had been trained as a social worker.) Keesing, he says, "has been at odds with the [Impersonal] role-playing principle of the Australian poet" and would have been "the ideal person to find the true idiom of Australian 'life studies.'" (See the section on major articles, p. 59, for a full annotation of Tulip's article and discussion of the challenge of Lowell and the 'life study' genre to the traditional apersonal role of the Australian poet.)

Keesing's empathy is also underlined by S.E. Lee in his review of SHOWGROUND SKETCHBOOK, in SOUTHERLY, XXVIII (1968), 301-02, in which, though impressed with her "mature intelligence" and "technical competence" and her "considerable facility in composing many forms and on a variety of themes," he is primarily taken with her ability to understand and identify with the people of her poems. The poems about children's experiences, for example, seem, in effect, "a rediscovery—though . . . observation and . . . identification with her own children's joys, fears, enthusiasms . . . and imaginative inner life—of her own last childhood." And in poem after poem, "rhythms, language and breathless piling up of image upon image reflect the energy and vitality of the child's direct and whole-hearted involvement in immediate experience." Keesing (Mrs. Mark Hertzberg) is currently (1977) chairwoman of the influential Literature Board of the Australian Council for the Arts, which provides subsidies, fellowships, and travel grants and is supportive of the younger, less established writers.

If the 1940s had presented in Kenneth Mackenzie, a good novelist whose later poetry suggests that, had he lived longer, he might have become a greater poet, so the 1950s introduced in Randolph Stow (b. Geraldton, 1935) a Western Australian novelist whose verse in ACT ONE (1957) promised a notable poet about whose later development there has been, critically, differences of opinion. The Melbourne-born poet, Alexander Craig (1923- ), for example, known in the sixties for his criticism in the Sydney BULLETIN as well as for his verse (THE LIVING SKY, 1964), opines that Stow has more than lived up to his promise. Having at hand at least one of the novelist-poet's two subsequent volumes of verse, OUTRIDER (1962) and A COUNTERFEIT SILENCE (1969), Craig, in an informed and probing introduction to his TWELVE POETS: 1950-1970 (see full annotation in the section on major anthologies, p. 40), sees Stow as seemingly "the only truly modern, midcentury Australian poet" for almost half of the 1960s.
AUSTRALIAN VERSE

An Oxford Anthology

Edited by JOHN LEONARD

Melbourne
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
tried to put democracy
back into centralism
the Russian tanks
rumbled through Czechoslovakia
she stood on the platform
in tears resigning
the Jewish Party Secretary
with a wattled neck
stared out the window
a veteran called her
the lady with the sob story.

NANCY KEESING (1923–93)

Old Hardware Store, Melbourne
Being un-organic, non-macrobiotic, lazy
I do not wish to return to the honest names
Or the slow, outmoded, heavy, intractable objects
As: mincers, mangles, mowers, mattocks, hames;
Collars and saddles of horsehair-padded leather;
Pots of cast and enamelled iron; hones
For sharpening blades of shares, shears, scythes and sickles;
Hafted axes; burrs and grinding stones.
But I value verbs: to mill, till, harrow, harvest, burnish,
Hew, strip, beat, toss, tether, render, comb,
Roast, brew, knead, prove dough — one returns to bread,
To meat, to bellies and bowels, to prick and womb —
To bear, be born, to suck, piss, shit, to cry,
To work, sweat, live, sing, love, pray, die.

Darlo and the Cross
1
As we walked home from school today
Past Darlinghurst Fire Station,
One lady took off her high-heeled shoe
And ripped another's cheek right through.
Gee, ladies fight like children do.
Ladies don't fight. You soon must learn
That every head of bottle blonde
Is not by any means true gold.
Please walk straight home as you've been told
Or you'll be sorry when you're old.

Near Lister Hospital this morning
A lady from an upstairs flat
Threw some prawn shells out the window
Onto the brim of Mary Lou's hat.
'What did she do?'
Oh, Mary Lou
Just tossed her head and they went on the path
And she trod them into a nice pink squash.
'How very dirty
Feckless and naughty
To make such a litter
She should have known better.'
The lady who threw?
'Yes, and Mary Lou.'

Right-thinking parents fear Mary Lou
They cannot imagine how she slipped through
The interviews for an exclusive school,
Her mother had broken every rule,
So I overheard, and the man's a fool.

I went to Mary Lou's flat one day
If I didn't tell where I went to play
What harm? She has a key of her own,
She can spin what she likes on the gramophone,
She eats pink bought cakes and has fun alone.

Mary Lou's mother wears swami scanties,
Mary Lou has lace on her weekend panties,
She can colour her lips and paint her nails
And wear patent shoes; she has kissed grown males
Who are not related. And if she fails
To pass the Inter they won't mind
By then she'll be old enough to find
A flat for herself and have cocktails and fun.
But she topped the school. Every prize she won
Including religion. She's now a nun.