

Austin Present and Texas Past

By Michael King

HAVING MOVED from Austin a few months ago after several years of residence, I am by turns woefully homesick and glad to be quit of the place — often simultaneously. I miss its friendliness, its small scale, the beleaguered edenic greenness of its lakes and hills, the liveliness of its small arts and political community, and its unexpected pockets of free thought. I do not miss its inveterate and growing boosterism, the rapacious and inbred stupidity of its public institutions, the bathetic spectacle of state government, the de facto dictatorship of the developers, or the smug provincialism which too often masquerades as civic pride. Steeped in such ambivalence, I am probably a sucker right now for thoughtful books set amidst those Texas contradictions, and Dave Oliphant's book-length poem, named after his fair city, has been much on my mind.

Long a partisan of writing in the American idiom generally and in the Southwestern context particularly, Oliphant has taken as his great exemplar William Carlos Williams's *Paterson* and has "made a start, out of particulars" in his Austin locale and history, "rolling up the sum," for what becomes, in its nine sections and 195 pages, a long meditation on the history, mores, and people of Austin and of Texas. Where Williams had his one river, Oliphant has eight, from Guadalupe to San Gabriel, which lend their names to the principle streets of the capital city and the main divisions of the poem.

Williams's hero was a mythical male version of the city itself, beloved of the Passaic river. The historical personage who permeates *Austin* is both more real and more ordinarily human: Stephen F. Austin, the troubled impresario of the original Texas colony, who once dreamed of an academy to be built on the banks of the Colorado, at the foot of the mountains. It is here Oliphant begins his poem, considering Austin's

Michael King now lives in Houston, where he subdues the occasional twinge for Barton Springs with a growing passion for the Rockets. In the interests of full disclosure, he notes that he is honored to be remembered in passing in the narrative of Austin.

prison dream of 1833, of which the present day city and its university are the grandiose outcome.

at the center at the heart
of how & why have been & are
garden of wrongs must still recall

the seat of law & a greed feeds on
site come true from the "academy
scheme"

Estevan's dream in '33

of a campus of where to sit & listen
at the feet of a Bedichek Dobie or Webb
professor of a faith in a frontier way

Austin is almost invariably "Estevan" in the poem, to acknowledge his adaptation to Spanish culture, his initial reluctance to break with Mexico, and the poet's determination to acknowledge the central importance of Spanish and Latin culture in Texas. And while

AUSTIN

By David Oliphant

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Estevan is the historical hero, the poet himself, like Williams before him, is centrally entangled in his creation, and one crucial thread of his story is his courtship and marriage of a Chilean bride, Maria. So the poem ends with her:

& to Maria too gave something of the
measure due
"has lived with me and Austin for all
these years"

Their love story becomes part of Oliphant's autobiographical love poem, for the city in which they and their children live.

Between those two major chords, Estevan's life and Oliphant's life, runs the layered narrative of the poem, as an attempt to understand contemporary Austin by recourse to its now legendary past, and the rich evidence of its personalized present. The poem shifts quickly and almost imperceptibly from recent memories to historical documents — Austin's letters, the speculations of his biographers, the contemporary ac-

counts of the fight for independence. It is difficult at first, but the poem rewards the time it takes to decipher its levels of memory and reconstruction, for we seem to be watching a man construct a meaning for his poem and hence his life, from retelling his own tale in the context of where he lived it — in the process giving himself and his readers a sustaining sense of place. At one point, studying the layers of geologic time recorded in the neighboring strata, Oliphant finds an analogy for his own quest in the poem.

nothing new in these friends may be
though unique alone or in composite
feldspathic & pyroxene blends will end
with each of them extinct as any
species
yet inspire a try at the pentastich lasts

wanted from the first to trace their ways
the dynamic geologies of a present time
repudiated the fate of memorized fossils
out to seek instead a living history
to discover & add to its Texas line

then re-read that course's lesson
of a pressure-compacted past
to find those crystalline days intact
their embedded pyrite faces & phrases
in layers reassayed prove highest grade

those have metamorphosed & given
shape
to whatever nuggets any stanza contains
have solidified the feelings fast or slow
cooling the passion for deceptive gold
by mingling its magma with reason's
cold

Those last lines suggest the necessary ambivalence, or perhaps engaged objectivity, with which Oliphant addresses his subjects of Austin present and Texas past. Though he clearly considers Estevan's achievements heroic, he does not ignore the devil's compromise Austin made with slavery, nor the uneasy relations between Anglos and Mexicans which he and his movement inevitably aggravated — both bequests trouble contemporary Austin, still strongly marked by class and racial segregation. Oliphant remembers the struggle to desegregate the theaters:

how Estevan would not have been
pleased
but then he wasn't there to stand in line
march back & forth at the Varsity
Theatre
in that movement had its beginning in
'62
would integrate every off-campus movie
seemed harmless enough at the local
"Y"
taking part in meetings held by the SDS