

government refused to issue him a stage license. As a result of a speech he made protesting the decision, government troops destroyed the theatre. Later in 1982, when Ngugi was in England, he learned that he would not be allowed to return home. He was now a writer in exile.

Ngugi was not alone in this treatment. Since his release other scholars have been detained without charges and others have fled the country. The government was still unable to stem the tide of protest that flowed from the universities. Finally in frustration the government closed several universities.

Ngugi, the artist, has emerged as an activist struggling for the economic liberation of his people. His work, in the form of literature, frees the human spirit from cultural oppression.

— Thomas C. Maroukis
Capital University

Ngugi wa Thiong 'O. *Devil on the Cross*. African Writers Series 200. (Exeter, NH: Heinemann Educational Books, 1982) 254 pp., \$6.00, \$21.00 cloth.

James Ngugi without question is Kenya's most prominent and most highly regarded novelist to date. Of the same generation of writers as Achebe, Armah, Soyinka, and Owoonor of West Africa, Ngugi, like them, after a local university education, went abroad for advanced work. In 1964 at Leeds, Ngugi published his novel *Weep Not, Child*, written when he was a student at Makerere. Shortly thereafter, in 1965, he published *The River Between* which he had composed even earlier. With *A Grain of Wheat* the writer completed in 1967 a kind of trilogy, depicting for a western readership a literary explanation and clarification of the historic Kenyan struggle for independence. These novels, written in English, and some plays and short stories brought Ngugi an award in 1965 at the Dakar Festival of Negro Arts and subsequent critical acclaim and broad readership.

Ngugi faced problems common to many African writers: the chosen audience, the means of communication and language, the political message. Like others, protesting colonialism, he sought to downplay his Christian upbringing. He changed his name to Ngugi Wa Thiong 'O. He decided to address the Kenyan masses, mainly illiterate and non-anglophone. He undertook to criticize his own government after independence as elitist and partisan. As a consequence, he suffered harassment, imprisonment without charge, and loss of his academic

position. He did gain open backing not only from such literary organizations as the African Literature Association but also from Amnesty International and politically concerned civil rights groups. Upon his release after a year of detainment, Ngugi openly criticized the Kenyan government of the mid-seventies in his plays, his prison accounts, and in a subsequent novel, *Petals of Blood*. This novel is set in mythical Ilmorog (all Africa) and displays many techniques of oral folk art. On several levels Ngugi here proclaimed his commitment to the Kenyan masses. The controversy raised by his writings have made him the subject of much discussion in academe and even entire conferences have been devoted to his writings.

Devil on the Cross is actually his own translation into English of a work in Gikuyu, written on toilet paper in prison, confiscated, but eventually published in East Africa in 1980. The story frame is minimal. The plot action is relayed mainly through the eyes of the *new* Kenyan woman, Jacinta Wariinga, who grows from her traditional dependent, sex-object role to become an active auto mechanic and spokeswoman for the workers. The main part of the novel is a collection of supposed public speeches by the local and foreign exploiters of the people. They meet in Ilmorog at "The Devil's Feast; A Devil-Sponsored Competition to Choose Seven Experts in Theft and Robbery." The contestants' speeches are a combination of proverbial wisdom and invective against capitalistic chicanery and hypocrisy. The Thieves' testimonies are verbose and highly ironic: "I don't have much to tell. Too much of anything is poison. But a little is often sweet . . . My actions are the trumpet that sounds my abilities as a thief and robber. I myself am the best possible illustration of the sayings . . . that tallness is not a misfortune and a hero is not known by the size of his calves. For, indeed, I am the cock that crows in the morning and silences all the others. I am the lion that roars in the forest, making elephants urinate . . ." (109). Ngugi piles detail upon detail, using all the technological jargon in four languages to spice his attack. But, at least in translation, his invention seems somewhat stale, his imagery trite. The characters are stereotypes. The "good guys" are identified as the student union leader, the workers' union representative, and the peasant leader. These three are betrayed not only by the politicians but also by the corrupted police.

The story ends with an epilogue, set two years after the Devil's feast. Wariinga kills her first seducer, the rich old man who had connived with foreign experts and the local black elite to defraud the people.

Ngugi takes his title from Wariinga's dream in which she sees the Devil, first crucified by the people, later cut down by the bourgeois elite just in time to allow him to continue to betray any idealistic reformers or agents for positive social and political reform. Ngugi takes again the mythical Ilmorog, the all-Africa of his preceding novel for his setting.

The Gikuyu version of this story went into three printings in East

Africa, and apparently was enthusiastically received. But Ngugi has made a difficult choice, one many African writers, like Armah, are deliberating. In choosing to write for his own people in their own tongue, is he risking losing the Western readership once so admiring of his works?

Certainly, Ngugi's medium is difficult, but not necessarily impossible. Gabriel Garcia Marquez in his *The Autumn of a Patriarch* (1975) has more successfully argued a similar populist message using similar techniques: a fictionalized geographic setting common to other novels, a backward time view, political diatribe with heavy irony and Rabelasian exaggeration. Marquez, however, has produced a major work. In *The Devil on the Cross*, Ngugi has not.

— Charlotte H. Bruner
Iowa State University

William Oandasan. *A Branch of California Redwood*. Native American Series, No. 4. (Los Angeles: American Indian Studies Center, UCLA, 1980) x, 62 pp., \$5.00.

One of the best ways to introduce readers to the diversity of Indian literatures (and, by implication, Indian experiences) is to expose them to poetry written in English by Indians. One-dimensional stereotypes about Nobel Savages simply cannot withstand the rich variety of a literature that extends at least back to the 19th-century attempts of a few Indian poets—such as William Wilson (Anishinabe), Emily Pauline Johnson (Mohawk), and Alexander Posey (Creek)—to imitate and modify English language poetic models up through the recent poems of hundreds of Indian writers whose backgrounds and poetic inclinations reflect numerous tribal, reservation, and urban experiences, as well as literary influences ranging from tribal chants and Japanese syllabic verse to 20th-century experiments with open verse and typography.

William Oandasan's *A Branch of California Redwood* is a good case in point. As Kenneth Lincoln's brief but informative foreword reveals, Oandasan's ancestral landscapes include two very different coastal regions: his father's Filipino shores and his mother's Yuki (Ukono'm) homeland in California "where he was raised." He was also influenced by his wife's Laguna Pueblo heritage and his experiences as a railroad worker and a fine arts student in Chicago. (Since the publication of his collection, he has become the editor of the *American Indian Culture and Explorations in Sights and Sounds*. No. 4 (Summer 1984)