

Books

EVATT THE ENIGMA,
by Allan Dalziel,
Lansdowne Press, 186pp,
\$5.50.

WHY IS IT that, hardly had the Warren Commission completed its report on the assassination of John F. Kennedy before a whole library shelf of analysis, criticism and contradiction poured from the typewriters of American journalists, lawyers and academics, whereas here in Australia, 13 years after the inauguration of the Petrov Royal Commission, the only exposure of this most scandalous episode in Australian politico-legal history has been undertaken by a Communist writer and predictably treated as a non-book by press, pulpit and parliament?

Alan Dalziel, in his lively and perceptive recollections of H. V. Evatt, attributes such tame acceptance and apathy in the face of political outrage to the "sheeplike" characteristics of the Australian community. But was not Professor Hugo Wolfsohn closer to the mark when he suggested (some years ago in *Dissent*) that the distinguishing mark of Australia was not the conformism of the populace but the narrow philistinism of the Establishment?

In the United States the pundits and the dissenters are constantly engaged with one another, and their controversies rend the air in every direction. Here, until very recently, they have lived in separate worlds, and the media which might have brought them into abrasive contact served rather as supine props of the elite.

The public, deprived of the nourishment of independent information and informed dissent, has inevitably displayed helplessness in the face of many issues outside the range of its immediate experience.

Most intellectuals reacted to their enforced isolation by various forms of academic introversion, in which state they could safely be disregarded. A minority identified themselves with the parties of political opposition, inviting the kind of massive discrediting for which this country ought to be notorious. Of these latter, Evatt was the most distinguished example, and it is a testament to the power of the Establishment that he finally became its star victim. The fact that his weaknesses and erratic qualities aided in his own destruction detracts not one whit from the malevolent ruthlessness of the campaign perpetrated against him.

The Petrov Commission was the climax of Evatt's struggle with the legions of conservative orthodoxy, and Dalziel rightly concentrates upon this period in outlining both the causes which animated Evatt and the response which he gave. Here he appeared both at his best and his worse, rampaging like an enraged bear against the highly organised conspiracy which opposed him and at the same time hitting out wildly against the imaginary foes which his suspicious and demanding mind conjured up at every turn.

When Prime Minister Menzies first pulled his Petrov rabbit out of the hat in April 1954, Evatt made the extraordinary mistake of taking it seriously and treating it in a non-partisan manner. The truth is, as Dalziel notes, that Evatt was never at home in the hurly-burly of the political game, and in this arena could easily be outwitted by the wily Ming. Evatt could intrigue with the best of them, as Dalziel again brings out with accounts of his secret meetings

with Santamaria and other representatives of the Catholic Right, but the single-mindedness of his own ideals and ambitions blinded him to the interests of others and led him to treat them with a degree of opportunism which soon earned him a deep distrust.

A thorough-going egocentric and individualist, accustomed to remoteness from the throng by his many years of intellectual studies and his judicial duties, Evatt belonged more to the style of the labor aristocrats of England (Dalziel shrewdly mentions the name of Laski) than to the rough-hewn stamp of the Australian labor politician. An ebullience verging on larrikinism could not hide the arrogance and brilliance which divided him from most of his colleagues. He was attracted to the Labor Party, *not* by its traditions, but by the fact that it seemed the most appropriate vehicle for the nationalist and democratic values to which he was dedicated. He was in no sense a social reformer, and hence many of the central concerns of labor, and its divisions into Left and Right, meant nothing to him. He would cross such, to him, irrelevant boundaries in search of the backing which he sought to feed his overwhelming sense of personal mission.

His causes were those of the liberal nationalist, and he will be remembered as a foremost Australian patriot, a champion of the rule of law, a civil libertarian and a committed supporter of the concepts embodied in the United Nations Charter. On the High Court bench, as President of the UN, as Attorney-General and leader of the Labor Opposition he pursued these ideals with a zeal and courage unmatched by any other political luminary in our history.

It is easy to say that Evatt was inconsistent. His actions during the

Coal Strike of 1949 were unquestionably in conflict with his civil liberties principles. He, who prided himself on the title of democrat, was autocratic in temperament and unmerciful to those who fell out with him. But, in a world where politics is invariably the art of trading principles for advantage, Evatt was conspicuous for the long line of names and titles bearing witness to the implacability of his commitment — Ratliff and Thomas, Devanny, Kisch, Communist Party Dissolution Act, 1951 Referendum, Petrov.

Evatt was baited into the Petrov Affair by wicked imputations against his personal staff. Once compelled to delve into the intricacies of its political chicanery he fought it with a tirelessness, courage and skill which soon led its authors to find an excuse for barring him from further participation. I had the opportunity to observe him closely during this period, and was amazed at the stamina and dedication of the man. Working uninterruptedly 20 hours a day for weeks on end, reducing all those compelled to keep up with him to physical wrecks, he surged on without apparent effect, fortified from the daily hamper basket which his chauffeur brought to a park near to the courthouse and the whisky flask which he carried in his hip pocket. Nevertheless, the strain did tell. The affair became an obsession, provoking irrationalities which estranged close supporters and admirers. The simultaneous break which he forced with the Industrial Group elements within the ALP seemed to drain the last reservoirs of strength and political acumen which this strange mercurial personality could summon up.

If ever Evatt needed to tap the popular springs of the labor movement, it was in the aftermath of the Petrov Affair and the split in the Labor Party, when he was desper-

ately trying to launch his party on the path of a political comeback. But he did not know how to do it. He had no populist attributes, and thought that the working people would follow his star blindly. He could not effectively combat the absurd pro-communist allegations made against him because he so little understood the world of politics. In point of fact, I doubt if he ever bothered to define his attitude to Communism very seriously; in the world of his ideas, it would rank as but another system, and in that political game wherein he stumbled so often communists were only one of the many elements which at various times he sought to harness to his chariot. So far as his own credo was concerned, it was conventionally liberal; thus he could speak convincingly of the 1951 Referendum proposals as "utterly non-British and the very antithesis of the glorious traditions of our race."

Mr. Dalziel's book does not pretend to be either biography or political history. Consequently, it does not supply answers to some of the most intriguing questions in Evatt's career—for example, the factors which led him to make his abrupt and shattering break with the Industrial Groups in 1954.

But it does trace the highlights of Evatt's outstanding life as barrister, historian, judge, statesman, politician and defender of public liberties. More valuable still, it describes with admirable objectivity the virtues and weaknesses of this astonishingly erudite, wilful, impetuous Australian.

It is obvious that Dalziel himself is still not immune from the power of Evatt's personality, and attributes to him qualities which, in other contexts, he is conscientious enough to qualify or discount. Only those who did not know the man could be surprised at this. Evatt may not have

been the most eloquent of advocates, but the force of his intellect and his overpowering self-confidence could easily overshadow one's better judgment.

In some senses, Evatt was a political failure. But there is no question that, intellectually and morally, he stood head and shoulders above his arch-enemy, the Prime Minister of the day, not to speak of the puny figures at the moment of writing contesting the leadership of the Liberal Party. He deserves a definitive biography, but in the meantime he has been served well by his astute and humane secretary.

REX MORTIMER

**AUSTRALIANS ABROAD,
An Anthology, edited by
Charles Higham and Michael
Wilding, Cheshire, \$3.50.**

Observations of Australia by travelers from overseas are frequently heard and read; less frequently heard or read are those comments made by Australians about other countries, especially on the earlier years of this century and the second half of last century. This anthology has brought together a number of such passages in which Australians have recorded their reflections and feelings on encounters abroad.

All the passages are selected from letters, memoirs, fiction or direct reports, written by well known literary figures. This could be regarded as a limitation but as Leonie Kramer points out in her Introduction to the book, the major works of these writers seem to declare them chiefly local or else narrowly nationalistic. However, one will be forced to reject this notion and see that not all Australians are uncritical and lack insight when they emerge from their southern isolation. For indeed, as the