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Publication Details

Cahill, Rowan (1990). More than a footnote: a biographical portrait of L. C. Rodd. *Hummer*, (27-January/April), 1-4.

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Abstract

A marina full of space age technology, cast in the form of pleasure craft, stretches before me; millions of dollars worth of monopoly money tugging gently on nylon leashes. My attention, however, is diverted from these state-of-the-art maritime fantasies to the iron-ribbed skeleton of another era, the barque James Craig, rescued from dereliction in Recherche Bay, Tasmania, now in the process of loving restoration by Sydney maritime buffs. On display in an effort to drum up the necessary restoration funds, she is a proud reminder of our seafaring past, when wood and wire and rope and iron and canvas were alchemised to poetry by Naval architects and craftsmen untrammelled by test tank computer science.

Skeleton though she be, there is about her enough to conjure up the past of fast passages, the wool and timber and general cargoes, the gales and the calms, and the sweat and blood of ordinary seamen who drove and laboured to make her come alive. And for me she still has a curious cargo, a psychological one of vague associations with the byways of Australian education history, literature, socialism, and Kylie Tennant.

Keywords

than, rodd, more, c, l, portrait, biographical, footnote

Disciplines

Arts and Humanities | Law

Publication Details

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Filed under: — CarlPower @ 11:05 am

Rowan Cahill

A marina full of space age technology. cast in the form of pleasure craft. stretches before me; millions of dollars worth of monopoly money tugging gently on nylon leashes. My attention, however, is diverted from these state-of-the-art maritime fantasies to the iron-ribbed skeleton of another era, the barque *James Craig*, rescued from dereliction in Recherche Bay, Tasmania, now in the process of loving restoration by Sydney maritime buffs. On display in an effort to drum up the necessary restoration funds, she is a proud reminder of our sea-faring past, when wood and wire and rope and iron and canvas were alchemisted to poetry by Naval architects and craftsmen untrammelled by test tank computer science.

Skeleton though she be, there is about her enough to conjure up the past of fast passages, the wool and timber and general cargoes, the gales and the calms, and the sweat and blood of ordinary seamen who drove and laboured to make her come alive. And for me she still has a curious cargo, a psychological one of vague associations with the byways of Australian education history, literature, socialism, and Kylie Tennant.

Simply, the skeleton would not be here was it not for one of her masters, Captain Lew Rodd; once in a hurricane in Hauraki Gulf he quelled an attempted mutiny with a pair of revolvers and saved the badly leaking vessel from certain disaster. I read about him and his adventures in a memoir by his son, Lewis Charles Rodd, and it is this latter person who causes in me these offbeat reverberations.

Roddy, as he was known to those who loved him, appears in the *Oxford Companion to Australian Literature* (1985) as a “social historian and author”, in the article on his wife, the novelist Kylie Tennant. There would, I dare say, be few who could say exactly in what regard he was either a historian or an author.

For this seems to be the fate of L.C. Rodd. He is a footnote person, part of the passing parade, one of those destined to be briefly referred to here and there in learned works, yet never really fleshed out; an appendage; one of those who, not being lauded with public acclaim nor driven by some publicity-seeking ego, exists in the shadows of history, to be eventually forgotten as time goes on.

My interest in Rodd was aroused in a roundabout way. A few years after I had become a country school teacher I read Kylie Tennant’s autobiographical fragment *The Man on the Headland* (1971), a lyrical account of the eleven years she and her school teacher husband Roddy spent in the little fishing village of Laurieton (setting for her 1947 novel *Lost Haven*) during the forties and fifties, on the north coast of New South Wales. The book captivated me and I warmed to Roddy, one of its main characters, who came across as a complex human being; a man of peace, courage, tenacity, humour perhaps with a dash of mischievousness, principle, understanding, and all this pervaded by an exterior calm. Though in her autobiography *The Missing Heir* (1986) Tennant

makes clear that beneath this appearance was a personality periodically troubled with bouts of suicidal depression.

The Laurieton years for Tennant and Rodd, spent in harmony with the coastal dwellers, the haunting coastline and the unspoilt bush, were obviously amongst their happiest. As a school teacher the Laurieton book shows Rodd to be deeply concerned with the lives of his pupils; realistically in touch with them he was aware of their strengths, accepted their weaknesses, and in the process managed to perform small educational miracles. Tennant notes in her autobiography:

It is not often that a boy or girl meets an inspiring teacher. There are good teachers, and the great ruck who go through their duties, but a brilliant teacher, really interested in each separate child, is as rare as royalty.

Rodd was one of these rarities.

In 1975 Bruce Mitchell's history of public school teacher organisations in New South Wales, *Teachers, Education, and Politics*, was published. As one then engaged in militant teacher politics and radical education reform in that State, I read the book, and again encountered Rodd, this time a radical teacher/educationist during the 1930's, a key and dynamic figure in a ginger group, the Educational Workers' League, which advocated teacher participation in education decision making and was opposed to education practices seldom challenged at the time, like corporal punishment, and the examinations system. A regular contributor to the League's journal, the *Education Worker* (1932-36), Rodd argued for curriculum change, and exposed a wide range of falsehoods perpetuated in the teaching of European and Australian history in schools. Because of his radical education views and activities Rodd was, early in his career, "punished" by his employer, the New South Wales Department of Education, by assignment to out of the way country schools in an unsuccessful effort to isolate him as an influence on his peers, and deny him association with, and support from, left wing organisations.

Historically the League was the springboard for a number of left identities who rose to prominence in New South Wales trade union and education politics during the forties and fifties, while many of its ideas about education have materialised since the 1930's as contemporary wisdom. But today the work of the League has been largely forgotten, while Rodd, one of its guiding spirits, has been neglected, his work built on and developed by others who feel they do not really need to know what, or who, went before.

My interest in Rodd aroused simply because his life touched in many ways the cartography of my own, I was led to an interest in the life and work of Kylie Tennant, and the largely ignored fact, but one she consistently emphasised, that L.C. Rodd had a central place in her literary life, to such an extent that together they constituted a literary partnership, in the same way we can speak, for example, of the partnerships of Vance and Nettie Palmer, Ruth Park and D'Arcy Niland, George Johnston and Charmian Clift.

Lewis Charles Rodd was born in Sydney in 1905. He died from cancer 73 years later on a Blackheath apple orchard in the Blue Mountains of New South Wales, nursed to the end by his wife. Tennant and Rodd met while studying at Sydney University, he a brilliant student of economics and psychology; in her words "a slim, impetuous, neatly dressed, crisp spoken young man whose underlying recklessness contradicted his surface". Their marriage in 1932, despite the initial doubts of onlookers, became a long, close and creative partnership. Lewis followed his career as a teacher, preferring face to face teaching instead of the "normal" pursuit of a promotional career into education administration and bureaucratic power; Tennant followed hers as an author. Together they supported and sustained one another, forging, as Tennant put it, a collective "career of sociological writing and protest that made people think we were crazy".

A High Anglican, caught up with the Catholic tradition within the Anglican Church, deeply interested in ecclesiastical and theological issues, Rodd had in his mid twenties contemplated entering the Anglican priesthood, a career direction diverted by his marriage. Thesis footnotes and a few labour histories blandly state Rodd was a Christian socialist, though what this means exactly in the context of Australia is not explained as researchers are only now beginning to enquire about it. As a movement it was small, so small as to be invisible today to all but desperate Ph.D. students in search of unfurrowed soil, yet in the 1930's and 40's its members cropped up time and time again as key figures in organisations opposed to fascism, militarism, and war. If we bothered to unravel the skeins of Australian cultural history we would find the influence of these Christian socialists reaching deeply into the intellectual and political lives of our nation, in the process giving impetus to a vast range of important non-governmental social work initiatives.

Christian Socialism had its origins in England in the late 1880's, combining a peculiarly English type of socialism based on the writings of John Ruskin and William Morris, with socialist interpretations of the Bible, emphasising respect for common man and compassion for the needy. Transposed to Australia in the late twenties the movement came to centre in Sydney on Christ Church St. Laurence, and the Reverend John Hope (1891-1971), a close friend of Rodd, described by Tennant as "a type of medieval churchman, a big handsome man with great spiritual powers". Subject of an engaging Rodd biography and social history *John Hope of Christ Church: A Sydney Church Era* (1972), Hope was, in his time, perhaps the most influential priest of the Church of England in Australia; he was a conundrum – a High Anglican but not conservative, being liberal, even radical, in his politics, intellect, and theology.

Christian socialists tended to lean towards Anglo-Catholicism, and in the Depression years wanted the Church to take an active stand on issues like unemployment, slum clearance, poverty, rent racketeering, fascism, and the threat posed in Asia by Japan.

Through Rodd, Kylie Tennant was drawn into this milieu, and when she speaks of protest she is not simply referring to her literary works which in a sense are works of protest, but also to the active day to day involvement in organisations and campaigns, during the 30's and 40's, in the struggle for a better world.

A catalogue of the organisations the Rodd – Tennant protest team were actively involved in, not only as backroom strategists (Rodd has been described by Tennant as a "cool strategist") and attenders of meetings ("he moulded the bullets and I fired them"), but as front line activists, shows the diversity of their interests and hints at the substantial time and energy they expended in the process ... the Labour Defence League, the Labour Education League, the Educational Workers' League, the New South Wales Teachers' Federation, the Beatrice Taylor Defence Committee, the Bush Workers' Committee, the Unemployed Workers' League, the Christian Socialist Movement, the Peace Pledge Union.

The Rodds operated in an unfriendly, often hostile political and cultural environment in which fascism found friends and sympathisers amongst the ruling elites and lackey editorialists, while much of their 30's campaigning took place in rural areas where, away from the urban ghettos of left support, their vulnerability was most apparent and they were often forced to rely on their own human strengths and resources. Regarded as Red when their only "crime" was being left liberals there is a sense in which they exhausted themselves in the two decades before the Cold War of the 1950's to such an extent that in later years Rodd would not vote "for the local Labour candidate if he didn't think he was any good or even vote at all" while Tennant became a self-confessed "old yoke-weary apolitical person".

Journalism aside Kylie Tennant did not start writing until she married Rodd and it is clear that for a long time she wrote as much for Rodd as she did for herself. Tennant's creative process was such that she enjoyed researching her writings the literary vagabondage entailed in travelling to and experiencing first-hand the different locales and milieux of her novels the library and archival

detective work involved in her historical works the compilation of note books; but the actual task of writing was something she tried to avoid. Rodd organised that aspect of her life which at least in the early part of her career she has likened to a teacher/pupil/homework relationship:

Roddy kept me in line, holding out his hand firmly for the chapter when he came home from school. I turned out a chapter a day. Roddy read it and criticised it. 'Where's the homework?' he would ask.

As well as encouraging Tennant to write Rodd, who was a collector of literary Australian introduced her to the Australian short story canon of which she became part; he acted as her critic (he threw away the manuscript of her first attempt at a novel) editor, typist, and accountant. Further, their relationship and the teaching job (although characterised by a low salary) provided the footings of the base that enabled Tennant to pursue a career as professional author and to take off on her legendary expeditions through Australia as she observed and experienced first hand the material she would later transform into literature. . Indeed some of her wanderings can be sourced to Rodd inspirations.

As the Second World War came to an end and Tennant's novels were unobtainable in Australia, but selling well in England and America, Tennant, Rodd, and father-in-law Thomas Walter Tennant, formed a publishing company, Sirius Books, to re-issue her novels in Australia. *Ride on Stranger*, *Foveaux*, and *The Battlers* became available in this manner, on cheap newsprint in runs of 5,000 to 7,500 copies.

In the late fifties and sixties Rodd and Tennant constituted a full-time literary team; they collaborated in compiling *The Australian Essay* (1968), edited manuscripts for rival publishing houses, and produced books of their own. Retired from school teaching Rodd wrote seven small books aimed at the education and juvenile markets, and with Donald McLean edited a collection of Australian writings about Australia *Venturing the Unknown Ways* (1965).

The Tennant- Rodd human relationship was not without its difficulties, and Tennant candidly wrote about it warts and all in *The Missing Heir*, not by way of keyhole vicarious sensationalism but as one interested in writing truthfully and helping others who may be kindred spirits. Rodd could be moody, depressive, suicidal – and more than once he attempted suicide – he was fascinated with the depressing psychological terrain mapped in the novels of Thomas Hardy. But in the two lives there was also great happiness and growth, lives in which difficulties aside or overcome, there was mutual understanding and support, co-operation and enterprise, love and devotion; and generated out of this came Tennant's works, a substantial and diverse body of writing notable for its affirmation of life.

Teacher, educationist, historian, editor, author, publisher, social critic, radical activist, Christian ... Rodd was no mere appendage. Indeed as Kylie Tennant was consistently at pains to establish, they were a partnership. Symbolic of this she dedicated her final novel *Tantavallon* (1983) to the man. The words she chose to explain this dedication are moving because of the generosity of the character they hint at, the debt they encompass, and the depth of relationship they suggest:

This book is offered as a tribute to one indifferent to tribute and now passed beyond it. His care it was – amid so many cares for others – to supervise and see into print all my books. This, the only novel he did not live to approve, is a belated and unworthy acknowledgement of all his devotion.

Note: In writing this article I have drawn on the books mentioned in the text; also Graeme Kinross Smith, *Australia's Writers* (1980), and an interview with Kylie Tennant by Sally McInerney, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 June 1983. I am indebted also to Kylie Tennant who graciously read and commented on a draft in 1986. Responsibility for the contents, however, is entirely my own.