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We're one and many: remembering auto/biographically: the year's work in non-fiction 2008-2009

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WE'RE ONE AND MANY: REMEMBERING AUTO/BIOGRAPHICALLY : THE YEAR'S WORK IN NON-FICTION 2008–2009

This year as in years past, the story of self told by self or other is strongly represented in this article review, and ranges from Brian Dibble's impressive and endlessly fascinating biography of Elizabeth Jolley, to the earnest memoir of Paul Crittenden, crafted with integrity but a little too much attention to the dross of life, to Kim E. Beazley Sr. monotonous but historically worthy recording of his time as a politician who attained high office at state and federal level. Susan Lever's critical study of David Foster's *oeuvre* draws on "the writer and his life" template, and frequently reads as a biography of sorts of a writer of a rather odd sort but also of a body of work that, as she notes, is quite indistinguishable from its author; Rosemary Lancaster's *Je Suis Australienne: Remarkable Women in France 1880-1945* takes the prize for the most abstruse title while delivering an engaging and well-crafted study of a range of Australian women who spent time in France in the stated period. A couple of works from UQP's Series, Creative Economy and Innovation Culture, provide knowledgeable overviews of the fields of research they explore, and no doubt will prove extremely useful earners through that venerable profession of the "set text book." Among this year's work Philip Mead's *Networked Language: Culture and History in Australia History* stands out head and shoulders above the rest, at once a real pleasure to read and an intellectually prevaricating study of Australia's culture of letters. On occasion a little less scholarly brio would not have gone amiss, though it is a joy to engage with such uncompromisingly intellectual writing. A number of other works by renowned and unknown authors complete the list of non-fiction received by *Westerly* this year.

Brian Dibble's *Doing Life: A Biography of Elizabeth Jolley* is an excellent contribution to Australian literary scholarship, a product of thorough research, patient analysis and mature intelligence. Although there is never

any doubt how close the biographer is to his subject, Dibble's work shows that it is possible to write about that subject with deep affection and unflinchingly honest scrutiny. To say that the book offers a celebration of Jolley and of her work is not overstating or misrepresenting what it does with such critical insight and analytical sophistication. This is a densely researched study of the writer *in* the novels but equally of the novels as works of fiction that draw closely on the life experiences of their author. Each work is explored with patience and insight, its richness brought alive by an obvious closeness between the biographer and his subject, intellectual as well as emotional. As it comes to a close the biography opens up into a gentle and loud acclaim of the life and work of one of the most significant Australian writers in the last quarter of the twentieth-century and a woman whose life was as complex as her fiction. Jolley's work is today far less popular than a decade ago or so, as Dibble points out, yet it remains no less radically subversive and inexhaustibly enjoyable for the passage of time. The biography will not only fill in the gaps in knowledge for Jolley's extensive and varied body of readers but it will go on giving pleasure to generations of readers interested in the work of the much-loved and rather quirky West Australian writer.

Dibble quotes in his study Jolley's view that autobiography is only ever half as good as the life one has lived, a view of which she often reminded herself. To have experienced much and richly is no guarantee of a good story, or a story told well and entertainingly. She should know, having spent a lifetime mining what Dibble shows us to have been at all times a complicated but clearly rewarding existence. Paul Crittenden's *Changing Orders: Scenes of Academic and Clerical Life* seems set to illustrate Jolley's words. Crittenden is obviously a good man who has lived a remarkable life. As a philosopher he achieved enormous academic success, reaching the pinnacles of the philosophy establishment in Australia as professor and chair at the University of Sydney, and eventually Dean of Arts for two terms. He was, even if we hear of it first hand, a gentle and just leader, an inspirational teacher and an exemplary mentor; he is also, unusually in an age when everyone is a celebrity, a modest man who prefers not to dwell on his achievements. One of the book's most memorable aspects is the care and respect Crittenden conveys for the many "others" in his life, in a classic instantiation of the generosity of his memories, crowded not with his own self-importance but with touchingly ethical recognition of the masses of men and women he met and worked with. Among these there is an array of men, not all particularly appealing human beings, who played key roles in the recent history of the Catholic Church in Australia

and the memoir's drearier dimension rests in the detailed debates about Catholic intrigue and fine, or crude points of theology. To be sure, as a lapsed Catholic I found these laborious sections quirkily soporific.

In 1983 Crittenden abandoned his career as a Catholic priest for a life in the contemplative world of academic philosophy, a shift highlighted in the title of his book. It was, we read, an unbearably difficult decision, but clearly one for which he was fated. In the kind of behaviour that speaks volumes about the man, Crittenden himself regularly struggled with his own crises of faith but somehow stuck to his chosen vocation. At times it seems that this was less the result of his commitment to his beliefs than of a fear to hurt the men who taught him at the seminary, most of them teachers about whom he speaks with great affection and respect. In the final section of the memoir, and perhaps the most engaging for those whom the incestuous world of intrigue of the Catholic church explored earlier in the memoir did little to excite, Crittenden writes at length about the problems in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Sydney, infamous in the 1980s and early 1990s and of his role in the conflicts and their resolution. As a life, Crittenden's has been rich, complicated, adventurous, courageous, joyful, painful, and what he has to say in the memoir is a central element to Australia's recent cultural make-up. I wondered, though, if a more supportive editor might have persuaded him to let go of the minute detailing of a life lived most worthily but hard to narrate with the same intensity and nuance.

Kim E. Beazley's *Father of the House* is no less lead-footed in its obsessive concern with the act of remembering as an academic exercise, memoir less as an act of memory than as a list of things remembered chronologically. In between there will be moments worth recalling and some which by sheer dint of their historical significance ensure that the memoir will endure in its recording of a time in Australia's recent history. Reading the memoir some time after finishing Paul Crittenden's, I was reminded of the latter's comments, about a colleague: "unimaginative in outlook but well-meaning and proper in his ways." This is autobiography whose significance derives not from its memoro-aesthetics nor the revelations made, or indeed the peculiar insight provided on them. Its importance, perhaps its function, is deeply entrenched in the social history of contemporary Australian society, even if it is hard to imagine that any reasonably informed Australian will be surprised by what Beazley Sr. recalls or recounts. These are generally well-trodden historical memory paths he walks. The writing is methodical, perhaps even mechanical but also lively; Beazley writes with energy and a great sense of the drama that framed some of the events, and of his place in them.

The real significance of texts such as Beazley's is as historical documents for the use of scholars in search of direct witnessing of a colourful and problematic period of Australian political history. As a key actor in many of the most salient phases of Australia's twentieth-century life, Beazley Sr's portrait provides readers with an extensive account of dates and details, personalities and temperaments. Significantly, it provides also a representation of a certain way of being Australian. For while the memoir is often remarkably candid in its depiction of Beazley Sr's love for his wife Betty this is essentially the story of a man's world. This was most certainly not the Australian Labour Party that now includes among some of its top leadership women ranging from Deputy Prime Minister Julia Gillard, Health Minister Nicola Roxon, Climate Minister Penny Wong and the current Queensland Premier, Anna Bligh. To read *Father of the House* is to travel back to a time of overt, even naturalised sexism and unreconstructed patriarchal power. Betty's presence obviously meant the world to her husband but her role was to stand beside him, the quiet and unquestioningly supportive and loyal partner whom Beazley acknowledges so generously. Indeed, the theme of Australian masculinity is picked up in a different way in Crittenden's memoir, and here it is no less remarkable for its cloistered nature. To read Crittenden and Beazley is to visit a period of Australian history when "men were men," even (especially?) in the walled world of Catholic schools for boys, seminaries and the parliament.

Rosemary Lancaster's *Je Suis Australienne: Remarkable Women in France 1880-1945* is thus a welcome journey into a different world, noticeably away from Australia. The book consists of a series of stand alone chapters devoted to figures such as Daisy White, Jessie Couvreur (Tasma), Stella Bowen, Christina Stead, Nancy Wake and some of the nurses who served in European theatres of war. As Lancaster explains she is concerned with the "Australian women's changing sense of self and place, sharpened not in Australia, but, significantly, abroad". At her best, she stresses in her readings a cross-cultural sensitivity that the author obviously shares with her subjects, even if she treats them with a little too much reverence. Ironically, as an intellectual and structural conceit, the focus on France as seen through Australian eyes is most effective when the study addresses the experiential self the writing evokes, as in the case of White, Bowen and Wake, for example. Lancaster is especially insightful when discussing Australian women artists who spent varying periods of time in France through analyses of their autobiographical writings, diaries and even letters these women wrote to friends and relatives in Australia. The chapter on Stella Bowen is especially strong, as the material is rich, Bowen's writing

persona vibrant and honest and her life in Europe gripping. Lancaster's book is a labour of love and is marked by a deep sense of admiration for her subjects' risk-taking *personae*, for their exhilarating and messy lives, and the unpredictability of their daily experiences. In "Digger Nurses, the Western Front," the chapter she devotes to nurses who spent time in WWI, the material is "intimately revelatory" in Lauren Berlant's words, and captures the unique ways in which the self is shaped by often traumatic but also pleasurable memorable life experiences. While the chapters on the fictional writing of Tasma and Stead fail to produce the same level of insight and subtlety, as a whole this is the kind of study that will amply reward its readers.

Susan Lever's *David Foster: The Satirist of Australia* is an equally timely study of Foster's entire oeuvre to date, but as in the case of Lancaster and Dibble here too the tone at times is a bit too deferential. Lever is right to argue that Foster's work deserves greater critical attention than it has received to date; but to say that its intellectual and aesthetic complexity eludes most critics is to over-simplify the issue. There are many reasons why certain writers "go out of fashion," not least their own propensity to alienate the very public who reads their work and supports their artistic vision. Foster's writing can be intellectually provocative, ambitious in form and subversive in its treatment of complex themes and issues. And satire, his preferred *modus operandi*, is notoriously slippery as a form. But his work is also so obsessively concerned with the performance of a peculiar mindset in Australian society as to position itself at the most irrelevant margins of its cultural maps. Lever seeks to counter the veil of silence that shrouds Foster's writing through readings that are critically informed, imaginative and insightful. For this alone the book is a worthy enterprise and a genuine contribution to contemporary Australian historiography. For example, the decision to place the novels side by side with a series of essays that Foster himself has closely aligned with his creative work creates some interesting echoes and underpins some of the most polemic critical observations. Lever writes with authority and deep knowledge, in part the product of her long engagement with Foster's writing.

However it is hard not to let the unreconstructed narrow-mindedness Foster's non-fiction proffers overwhelm works of fiction that might otherwise have managed to go on to tease and taunt their readers, and through the latter's uncomprehending resistance to elicit original and intellectually gratifying responses. However, to be faced with the obvious links between the vitriol Foster likes to dish out in his non-fictional essays as the outpourings of an alienated soul and his imaginative writing is to see

the integrity of the latter undermined and compromised. Foster's growing sense of living in a state of siege, exiled in his own country because of his gender and of his skin colour, a man assailed at different points by women, gays, "multiculturalists" and Indigenous Australians, possibly also by the weather, has led to much cloyingly self-pitying nonsense. As a reader, I struggled to respond to Lever's meticulous and scholarly study of Foster's writing; her insistence on taking the reader from the novels back to Foster the man leads to a sense of critical schizophrenia that I felt I could not overcome. Ultimately, Susan Lever's critical skill, her patience and obvious analytical sensitivity simply could not make Foster or his work any more appealing, and I found myself, repeatedly, returning to Leigh Dale's comment that men like Foster love playing at being victims, a view that Lever quotes but clearly disagrees with.

The last of the works I have been tempted to place under the life writing category, though loosely understood, is Catharine Lumby's *Alvin Purple*. This is a study of the film by that name rather than of a "real AP", though the point of the book is that for a generation of Australian men and women *Alvin Purple* gained a unique sense of embodiment in a society caught up in challenging currents of social and political change. Lumby aims to place the film in the period of its production, and explores its reception and circulation partly to gauge the political temperature of a particular period of Australian culture. She writes: "*Alvin Purple* is a film that arrives on the brink of enormous social change but before the broader Australian public had processed their own positions on issues around sexual liberation and feminism". However, she also notes that "it would be a mistake ... to read too much social or political comment into the movie, despite the radical and avant-gardist pedigree of many involved in its production. But it is, in hindsight ... a valuable document of a particular moment in Australian film-making". Lumby's investigation of the film's outrageous treatment of gender roles is thus done with reference to what she sees as a quest by the film-makers for a form capable of taking Australian cinema out to a public yet to be persuaded of the value of home-grown product. Lumby suggests that Tim Burstall was determined to show to others as much as to himself that it was possible to create work with popular appeal and artistic integrity. To an extent he succeeded but the critical response and the vocal debates the film occasioned about censorship, changing social mores and the evolving power dynamics between men and women, not least in matters of sex and love, meant that *Alvin Purple* was immediately swept up in a whirl of ineffective controversy and noise. Lumby's study offers a thorough and critically provocative analysis of the film as an artefact, of

the networks of power and influence that framed it and of the limitations it exposes in the Australian collective psyche.

Philip Mead's *Networked Language: Culture and History in Australian Poetry* (Australian Scholarly Publishing) is the result of its author's "equal fascination with poetic language and with the networks of culture and history within which it lives." It is impelled by a desire to understand how poetry is linguistically embedded, and politically, institutionally, and so on. As Mead points out, one way of speaking of this web of relations might be to consider it a "discourse" but the term is now so weighed down with meaning as to be virtually meaningless. At another level, inextricable from the latter aim, the book's attention to poetry as an activist genre seeks to highlight its value as a thing of beauty. By insisting on a reading that places the poetic work in open dialogue with the material and ideological forces that frame it, the book ultimately underlines the relevance of verse as a cultural form. In the words he borrows from the American poet, Lyn Hejinian, "Poetry [...] takes as its premise that language is a medium for experiencing experience." This is a serious intervention in Australian letters, offering a series of erudite and conceptually very sophisticated readings of a number of influential and often contentious twentieth-century Australian poetic texts. Mead's obvious passion for the material, combined with an authoritative view of the field and his ability to cross-reference between Australian, American and British poetry and literary criticism means that there is hardly a dull moment in this book. Mead posits the book as a step in the articulation of "a small, fragmentary contribution to a less conventionally 'literary,' and in fact largely unwritten project, the sociolinguistic history of language art in Australia (theoretical and applied)." In *Networked Language* he succeeds admirably, producing six essays dealing with verse as diverse as that of Kenneth Slessor, James McCauley, Judith Wright, Lionel Fogarty and πo. In the process he creates a map for what might be described as Australia's long twentieth literary century, a project echoed in the book in a reference to Deleuze's own acknowledgement of Bergsonian *durée*. This is not an easy read, for Mead's writing is theoretically dense and critically challenging. However, the persistent and discerning reader will be rewarded by a critical study of Australian poetry that is simultaneously original, gutsy and generous.

Among the miscellany received by *Westerly* this year there are a number of unusual contributions that do not fit easily in any particular category. Cameron Raynes's *The Last Protector: The Illegal Removal of Aboriginal Children from their Parents in South Australia* is one such work, an earnest and painstakingly researched study of William Richard Penhall, a devoted

functionary whose actions resulted in so much suffering among Indigenous Australians in South Australia. Penhall was the last Aboriginal Protector in South Australia, between the years of 1939 and 1953 a force that determined with unflinching brutality and cold-heartedness the fate of countless Indigenous Australians. At seventy six pages this is a short book, a passionate polemic, but it is also so tiresomely repetitive that it feels as if it might never end. Given that so much of that knowledge is anything but new, this is the kind of work preaching to the converted while doing little to persuade those who will always refuse to see in Australia's treatment of Indigenous peoples a betrayal of basic human values. After all, it is worth recalling the mood of the period in which the actions Raynes finds so objectionable took place; perhaps far more shocking is how in recent years such actions have once again emerged as justifiable by governmental structures that remain primarily concerned with performing the deeds of a hegemonic whiteness. "Sorry" has a long way to go.

In *//Creative_ecologies// where_thinking_is_a_proper_job* John Howkins draws on the scientific understanding of ecology as "the study of relationships between organisms and the environment, which probably includes other organisms. An *eco-system* is an ecology of several different species living together" to explore the synergies between art and science, creativity and innovation. Howkins is concerned also with the structural and material networks that underpin creativity and innovation, ranging from institutional settings to the way individuals access, process and generate knowledge and creativity. While he does not set them in terms of a dichotomy, and might even be said to differentiate between knowledge and creativity, there is a sense in which they are inextricable. As he asserts in "New_Places, New_Policies," "A government's job is to know and control, but creativity is often not knowable and never controllable". Although the book seems designed with the academic market in mind, it is also a valuable contribution to the study and theorisation of "creative industries". Ultimately Howkins seeks to get to grips with how certain ideas and movements emerge and flourish, and others do not. Some of the issues he raises are especially topical in a world obsessed with objectives and outcomes, suggesting that true creativity is the product of imaginative processes – "thinking", as he puts it, "is a proper job".

John Rainford's *Consuming Passions: Australia and the International Drug Business* is a lively and informed story of the murky business of drugs. Rainford focuses as much in the drugs that make the 6 o'clock news as on the banal and perhaps far more pernicious trade in legal drugs. As he convincingly shows, this is indeed big business and not a pretty one either.

The key difference is that “[t]he market in illicit drugs operates in the same way that markets in other commodities operate” and the “degree of risk” varies. Rainford’s book offers a comprehensive exploration of how Australia and Australians engage in the business of drugs, legal and illegal, as well as of the equally labyrinthine economic and political structures that frame it. He is especially good at situating the debate about drugs within broader concerns that relate to political and economic power blocs, and aims in this way to argue that there is a close link between control over drugs and drugs as a form of control.

Colin Dyer’s *The French Explorers and Sydney* is one of those books that settler societies are wont to generate, yet another layer in the narrative of the white nation, variously refocused and rewarding. Through a reading of the writings of French sailors who visited Sydney over a period of many years Dyer in turn produces a history of Sydney’s growth from a campsite-like settlement to a vibrant, busy and sophisticated town that leaves lasting impressions on many of the visitors. Time and again the French visitors write of Sydney’s beauty, of the striking growth they notice between visits and, most of all, they remark on the hospitality of Sydneysiders and the elegance of their lifestyles. As a narrative conceit, the use of Sydney as a focal point on which to anchor the vast body of material Dyer draws on works well, the growth of the settlement providing simultaneously a foil for a detailed and insightful discussion of the relationships between the residents of Sydney and the visiting French. Through detailed analyses of the writings of French explorers such as Lapérouse, Bougainville and Freycinet, to name but the best-known among a large cast of French travellers moving through Sydney Dyer shows the differing viewpoints on matters of politics, culture, social mores and, indeed, etiquette. The French are less than impressed with the treatment of convicts, too, though for their part the English are shocked when they hear reports that one particular French expedition shot at a group of Indigenous Australians. Generally, the mood is one of mutual admiration, with one René Primavère Lesson asserting that “everything we saw in the settlements of New South Wales [*la Nouvelle-Galles du sud*] gave us a wonderful idea of the English genius for colonization”. He goes on, lavishing his praise on the spirit Joseph Conrad too would come to celebrate, only then with reference to Africa: “This nation’s understanding and organisation of the smallest details needed for the success of a civilisation, implanted onto shores once inhabited only by poor wretched people [*les peuples misérables*], deserve sincere praise”. [sic]

To see the above books as generally representative of non-fiction published in 2008–2009 might be a stretch, but it reflects a general mood in the field that is as capacious as it is unpredictable.

NON-FICTION RECEIVED 2008–2009

Those marked with an asterisk are mentioned in the above review.

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