The only answer available in the film is in Sybylla’s exceptional character, a quirk of her “individuality” and “genius”. (Admirers of Little Women and Horatio Alger please note.) And Miles Franklin, the author of the autobiographical novel upon which My Brilliant Career is based, undoubtedly believed in her own special spark as well.

But we don’t have to, especially in a film which itself subterraneously argues a contrary determining factor for Sybylla’s life and aspirations: the all-pervasive impact of British imperialism on Australian colonial life. As the whole film is at pains to lovingly display, colonial Australia is shot through with British taste in fashion, in wallpaper, in manners, and in ambition. It is no surprise then, given the weight of this imperial presence, that at the end of the film Sybylla pursues her career by sending off a manuscript to a British publisher. Career, for colonial Sybylla, is not a disembodied daydream, the product of individual whims and fancies. Rather, it is structured — particularly within colonial upper-class life depicted in the film — in a society infiltrated and permeated by British values — values which not only regulated obedience (mores and manners) but resistance (Sybylla’s aspirations) as well.

It is ironic that the circumstance which provides so much of this film’s glory — British colonialism, and its cultural lodgement in the country houses of Australian gentry — should be so absent when we attempt to account for Sybylla’s “career”. But then the film’s makers aren’t really interested in insights into Australian experience. Instead, the view seems to be that young-girl-makes-good in an exotic (but not too exotic) locale will satisfy the overseas market nicely, the crypto-feminism will satisfy any trendy thinkers in the audience, and Australians will love it because it is set in Australia. Let’s hope that somewhere in the ranks of Australian filmmakers beats the heart of someone who actually cares about this country and its history.

— Kathe Boehringer.

ERIC BURHOP — AN APPRECIATION

The obituary notices in January paid tribute to Eric Burhop the distinguished Australian nuclear physicist. A Fellow of the Royal Society, and Head of the Physics Department at University College, London, Eric was also the President of the World Federation of Scientific Workers (WFSW) and was himself an indefatigable worker for the causes of detente and disarmament. References were made to his key role in the negotiations between Frederic Joliot-Curie and Bertrand Russell in 1955. These negotiations resulted immediately in the so-called Einstein-Russell Manifesto against nuclear weapons. The subsequent result was the setting up of the Pugwash Conferences, bringing technical experts from East and West together and, in the opinion of many, playing a major part in averting nuclear disaster.

Behind these impressive achievements were some deeply-held attitudes which must command respect even if not complete agreement. Eric was an experimental physicist who never lost his faith in two great experiments of humanity: one the pursuit of science and the other the social experiment inaugurated by the Russian Revolution in 1917. Consequently his two pet phobias in recent years were the irrationality and mysticism of the anti-science movement and the prejudice and hostility of the anti-Soviet
movement. With his experience of the 1930s Eric could recognise both movements as stepping stones to fascism and thus as threats to world peace.

Although the strength of his views gained him the reputation in some quarters of being a hard-line technocrat he was by no means intransigent. At one high point in his career, in July 1975, he presided over a major symposium in Moscow on Scientists and Disarmament. It was the week that the Soviet and American satellites, Soyuz and Apollo linked up in space and it was a crucial time for his beloved cause of detente. On the last night, the week’s work by over four hundred scientists from sixty countries was to be amalgamated into a Symposium Report and an Appeal to the Scientists of the World. But it became apparent that many participants had reservations or even objections to particular points: there were cracks that could not be papered over. Unprecedented! Surely everyone was in favor of motherhood, disarmament and peace? What was to be done?

With only a few hours remaining for the final Report to be printed and ratified in the final Plenary Session, and under great pressure from the dominant Soviet and United States blocs for a single Statement by the Symposium, the easy way out would have been to set the dissidents aside and go ahead. However, discussions went on in rooms all over the Sputnik Hotel until, at about 2 a.m. and with the guidance and approval of Eric, six statements of reservation were at last agreed upon and printed together with the Final Report. The depth of the challenge to Eric’s diplomatic skill is shown by the statement from one group opening with the blunt assertion “True disarmament cannot come about solely through detente between the governments of the superpowers.” Adding a new and perhaps more directly individual dimension to the Appeal they argued that it is the duty of scientific workers to help produce a society where science can serve the people. This could be done, they claimed, “by taking up the struggles of workers, women, and oppressed national minorities in our own countries and by supporting the struggles of Third World countries for national liberation and their right to self-determination. We can only win people to the active support of disarmament, which is a step forward from the everyday reality of people’s lives, if we join them in their struggles.”

The full statement threatened to divide the symposium at its very climax. Eric Burhop must have been reminded of the tense moment twenty years earlier when Joliot-Curie argued with Russell that nothing in the Manifesto should deny the rights of national liberation movements to fight, with arms if necessary, for their independence. But Eric achieved a compromise solution that was acceptable to all participants and the result surely enhanced the credibility of the Symposium.

Recent years have seen a prodigious output of talks and articles from Eric on current problems in science and society. He was particularly active in opposing development of the neutron bomb and, as WFSW President, sent strongly worded letters to the relevant Heads of State.

He capped his distinguished professional career by spending a year as one of the high priests of particle physics at the European Centre for Nuclear Research, CERN, in Switzerland, and then going to New Zealand to deliver the Rutherford Memorial Lecture for the Royal Society. He returned to England via Australia in December 1979, when many of his friends enjoyed, for the last time, alas, the excitement of a discussion with him.

My own last controversy with Eric indeed arose from his experience at CERN and his wholehearted enthusiasm for Big Science. We both agreed that the cost of such an enterprise was not the point at issue. I held that humanity was being deprived of a wealth of talent that would better be deployed in other ways; he admitted some truth in this but felt that the organisation of CERN was probably the highest point yet of human endeavour, and if once taken down would probably never be built again. We promised each other to widen this debate by writing two articles for the WFSW journal Scientific World. With his tolerance and fairness in mind, I shall now have to present both viewpoints as well as I can on behalf of this fine scientist and fearless fighter for peace.

— Peter Mason, February 19, 1980.

DISCUSSION

Just for the record, I must correct the claim of Roger Coates that Ian Turner was the first manager of the Australasian Book Society. That honor, I am afraid, belongs to Will Wannan.

Back in 1951 when Bill was helping to launch the Society, Ian was still serving his proletarian apprenticeship with the Victorian Railways as a carriage cleaner.

It is worth noting that many years before the Gang of Six and the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution were combining to proletarianise China’s intellectuals, the Communist Party of Australia was already doing much the same thing here. Ian, fortunately or unfortunately, let him decide, was either the model or the victim or, perhaps, both.

— Joseph Waters.