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 representa­
tives 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 oppor­
tunism which soon earned him a deep
distrust.

A thorough-going egocentric and
individualist, accustomed to remote­
ness 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 verg­
ing on larrikinism could not hide the
arrogance and brilliance which
divided him from most of his col­
leagues. He was attracted to the
Labor Party, not by its traditions, but
by the fact that it seemed the most
appropriate vehicle for the national­
ist 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 un­
matched by any other political lumin­
ary in our history.

It is easy to say that Evatt was
inconsistent. His actions during the
Coal Strike of 1949 were unquestion­
ably 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 ad­
tantage, 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, Pet­
rov.

Evatt was baited into the Petrov
Affair by wicked imputations against
his personal staff. Once compelled to
delve into the intricacies of its poli­
tical chicanery he fought it with a
tirelessness, courage and skill which
soon led its authors to find an excuse
for barring him from further par­
ticipation. I had the opportunity to
observe him closely during this period,
and was amazed at the stamina and
dedication of the man. Working uninter­
terruptedly 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 obses­
sion, provoking irrationalities which
estranged close supporters and admir­
ers. 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 move­
ment, 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 oversway 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


Observations of Australia by travellers 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