Honesty, passion, understanding


Reviewed by Denis Freney

he autobiography is a genre in literature which too often begs for a biographer to tell the real story of a life. It is difficult for anyone to tell the whole truth about him or herself, or even to know that truth. It is even more difficult to faithfully report the events that have structured their lives, and to paint friends, lovers and enemies honestly.

Roger Milliss has done so with an enormous self-critical honesty, with passion and with great depth of understanding. Certainly, it is the best piece of writing to come from the pen of a committed Australian socialist that I have read. Only Frank Hardy's The Dead Are Many comes within cooee of Roger's book.

It is a long, dense book of over 480 pages, written in a spirited monologue, without paragraphs which, to the casual browser will give the appearance of something unreadable. But, on the contrary, it is a most readable book, one that it is almost impossible to put down once begun.

Roger Milliss weaves together a series of themes which were indivisibly linked in his life: the lives of his parents and particularly his father, Bruce Milliss; the fortunes of the Communist Party and radical politics in Australia and around the world; his obsessive loves; the changing fabric of Australian society in the past decades.

It has all the elements of a tragedy, almost a Russian sombreness in its passion, lit from time to time by some ironic humour and particularly by quite brilliant pen portraits of those from the editorial offices in Moscow to Sydney University in his student days.

The title, Serpent's Tooth, comes from King Lear: How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is! To have a thankless child! Roger's guilt over his lack of gratitude to his parents is the dominant theme, but one which may strike some as self-indulgent, a maudlin and "freudian" obsession. Perhaps it is, but Roger is not alone in his obsessions.

With a beguiling simplicity, Roger's regret is that he did not follow the advice of Goneril, Lear's daughter and "serpent's tooth": Never affliet yourself to know the cause; But let his disposition have that scope That his dotage gives it. But nothing is so simple.

Bruce Milliss became a communist during the Depression, while a prominent, if small, businessman in Katoomba in the Blue Mountains, west of Sydney. There he remained until 1951, the local town Red, while precariously keeping his businesses afloat.

But the Cold War finally forced him to retreat, to suburban Ashfield and to an import business, most of whose profits went to Party funds. Bruce Milliss pioneered trade with China, in days when it was the great ogre of conservative Australia, the red/yellow peril in one.

Bruce Milliss also pioneered import of Soviet films into Australia. But his greatest success, it seems, was Mao's Little Red Book after the Sino-Soviet split when Bruce Milliss turned to the Peking "Vatican".

While Bruce Milliss remained an unreconstructed lover of Stalin until he died, Roger went the opposite way. From 1956 he denounced Uncle Joe and went to work in Moscow in 1961.
in the days of Khrushchev, when the hope of a real flowering of socialist democracy in the Soviet Union remained high, despite Khrushchev's erratic turning on and off of "destalinisation".

It was Stalin's shadow that led to constant and screaming rows between Roger and Bruce, from Moscow to Ashfield. After each, the exhausted protagonists would have their reconciliation and Roger would resolve not to discuss the question again with his father. But politics was in the blood of both. "What else is there to talk about?" his father replied after one argument.

Bruce Milliss, the country town small businessman and devout Catholic, converted by what he saw in the Depression to a new Vatican in Moscow, then in his old age, turning to Peking when Stalin was removed from his pedestal, is a symbol of the tragedy of a whole generation.

Many who devoted their lives to socialism were misled and finally disillusioned. yet unable to face the reality: Bruce Milliss was not alone.

There were, of course, those who saw that either Moscow or Peking was not the same thing as socialism and who survived the shock to fight on.

Roger straddled the two generations: young enough to be a dedicated stalinist in his student days, yet also young enough to survive the crisis. Yet, for Roger, like, I suppose, the vast majority, the loss of a simple faith, the lack of quick and easy solutions, leaves a hole: "I want some star to steer by!" is the final line in the book.

There is not, and never has been, any such a star and those hucksters who offer one make it themselves from the dullest and cheapest tinsel.

Yet Roger's guilt as the "thankless child" is much more than just a product of political divisions. (Its complexities will no doubt satisfy undergraduates as a suitable field of essay-writing in the future.) His guilt is also not separated from his other great obsession with Suse, the pursued one; won, then lost.

It is an obsession that Roger knows is destructive, that in the name of love destroys love. It is Love with a capital "L," in all its Russianness, that cries for more than it says.

It is The Family reincarnating itself as it has always done, but here the process is set down in all its truth, outside the romanticised vision. It is not a new theme and will remain one of the great themes of literature until The Family finally, if ever, dies.

Roger's book is not informed by a feminist critique, nor for that matter a reading of David Cooper and his anti-psychiatry. Yet Roger Milliss, because of his utter honesty, lays it out like a textbook written with passion: the desire for immolation of the Self in the Other, yet the simultaneous resistance to self-death and denial.

The endless reincarnation of The Family explains much but not everything. For Roger, his "tragedy" is that he cannot reincarnate it in the image in which he perceives it, not even in the unhappy suburban security of his parents.

For those who find the personal tragedies too intense, the book offers much more. It presents a kaleidoscope of the history of the Communist Party, its struggles and defeats; of the changing mores of Australia over decades, and some magnificent insights into the Soviet Union.

Less satisfactory are its portraits of post-independence Kenya and Black Africa. These lack the depth and grasp of reality of Roger's years in the Soviet Union.

It is impossible here to convey the depth and breadth of this book. Sufficient to say it is compulsory reading for those concerned about the human condition and a socialist future.