



CAL Waverley Library Award for Literature

2010



THE WINNER 2010

JUDGES' REPORT 2010



While the quantity of books entered for this year's award was more or less the same as for last year, the quality of the entries was exceptional mainly in its consistency. Thus it has not been easy for us to arrive at a shortlist and a winner. Though the whole idea of any literary prize is that one book should be set above all the others entered, it sometimes seems unfair that we must relegate thoroughly deserving works at the expense of those we are honouring today. We could without any difficulty have chosen another shortlist equal in standard, but different, to the one we ended up with; if a parallel universe exists, we may have done so there.

For some, it might be expected that our parallel shortlist would include *The Colony*, by Grace Karskens. After all, this book has just been awarded the Prime Minister's prize for non-fiction. Indeed, all of the books that appear on the shortlist for the Prime Minister's prizes were entered for our award, and none of them are on our shortlist, which we see as proof of our ability to resist fashion. We are inclined to endorse the remarks of Robert Gray at this year's shortlist announcement, when he suggested that

prize-givers should favour literary style above politically approved content. As for *The Colony*, it did not help that one of its chapters flatly contradicted the thesis of one last year's shortlisted books.

The early days of colonial settlement in Australia was a recurring theme among this year's entries. There were other books about this period by Alison Alexander, John Thompson and the perennial Tom Keneally, and the handsomely illustrated *Sydney Harbour*, by Ian Hoskins, deals with it as well, but none of them were able to reach the final selection. There will be more about this theme in a moment.

Other themes dealt with by several of this year's entries include contemporary politics, with books about Malcolm Fraser and Julia Gillard, the two World Wars, and sex. Suzanne, who is new to the judging panel this year, found that there were so many sex books among her share of the entries that we could have filled up an entire shortlist with this one subject, but we were prevented from doing so by the fact that literary merit is an essential qualification for the award.

Most of the sex was to be found in novels, which may be why for the second year in succession we have been unable to include a work of fiction on our shortlist, even though there were entries from such well-regarded names as Laura Bloom, Peter Carey, Nick Cave, Peter Corris, David Foster, Phillip Gwynne, Tom Keneally (again – he had two books entered this year), Cate Kennedy, Alex Miller and Peter Temple (there are six Miles Franklin Award winners in that list). We try, each year, to produce a shortlist that is representative of the full range of writing styles that are eligible for the award, but this year the novelists have failed to fulfil the criteria, as the well-researched novels entered have lacked literary merit, while the well-written ones have lacked research.

One of the enjoyments for the judges in performing our task lies in the discovery of obscure pieces of information that arise in books we might otherwise never have looked at. That is an inevitable by-product of research. I had not previously known that the Arctic explorer, aviator and war photographer Sir Hubert Wilkins, who appears surprisingly as a character in more than one of this year's entries, was at first known humbly as George before his pretentious wife decided that his middle name sounded more dignified.

Wilkins ended up in the suburbs of Melbourne, a believer in theosophy and reincarnation, but his distinguished career fell into obscurity after his widow created difficulty over copyrights. Yet Melbourne, and its population of extraordinary high-achieving figures, is perhaps the most significant of this year's recurring themes. Half of the books on our shortlist have a distinct Melbourne flavour.

Perhaps the most celebrated of all Melbourne characters is Dame Edna Everage; in a memoir that develops the conceit that Dame Edna is a real person, separate from himself, her creator Barry Humphries depicts the suburbs and the city of Melbourne in the 1950s, its architecture, institutions, manners and speech, in such detail that future researchers should find his book *Handling Edna* a valuable resource. To the judges, however, the conceit was stretched too thin as the book went on, so Edna fell short of our final shortlist.

Instead, we began our shortlist with a snapshot of Melbourne in a different period. This was the time depicted in Kristin Otto's *CAPITAL*. From Federation Day, the first of January, 1901, until 1927, the capital city of Australia was not Canberra but Melbourne. The first quarter of the twentieth century was a time of dramatic change, as social and scientific progress overlapped the horrors of the greatest war the world had seen; the beginnings of the Australian nation saw a clergyman write a sermon boasting of the new land's "children", "they have built bridges over great rivers, and mighty cities near the homes of the wombat". Otto examines the "mighty city" of Melbourne in its time as the seat of government, and outlines political and technical developments alike through a framework of outstanding individuals, including the great Melbourne families such as the Clarkes, the Myers, the Coles, the Lindsays, the Murdochs and the Baillieus. She even has time to dwell on Peter Carey's grandfather, R.G.Carey, a pioneering airline operator. Her book is crowded with surprising facts, illuminating details, quotations, and well-chosen illustrations, so that it would be a pleasure to read even if Otto were not such a capable writer.

Melbourne is the setting, also, for *BREAKING NEWS*, by Ben Hills. Subtitled "The Golden Age of Graham Perkin", this is a biography of the man still regarded by those who worked with him as the finest editor to have been in charge of Melbourne's most respected newspaper. The subtitle contains a clever pun, as many of Perkin's colleagues remembered his editorship as a golden time, while the newspaper was (and is) called *The Age*. Perkin's life was cut short by a heart attack some thirty-five years ago, but his influence remains; this long book is more than just a biography, however; it is also a history of the time in which he worked, and a remarkable insight into the production of a major newspaper, written by one of the most accomplished of the journalists who learned their craft under Perkin's leadership.

Many of the factories and workshops that Leta Keens visited in the course of researching her book *SHOES FOR THE MOSCOW CIRCUS* are in Melbourne, and as a result her interviews there shed light on a hidden side of the city. Others, though, are in Sydney, Brisbane, and rural towns such as Ballarat and Tumut; the point of her charming and original book is not to explore a single place or theme, but to reveal the variety of unlikely yet still essential trades and occupations that exist across the country. From pianos to silver trophies, from millet brooms to dancing shoes, the reader is taken inside the manufacturing process for these everyday objects by the author, along with photographer Oliver Strewe. This is a book one can open at any page to discover information previously unsuspected yet still vital; as a practicing cricketer, I particularly enjoyed the account of the Dave Brown cricket ball factory. The Dave Brown Platypus, in my opinion, is the best ball made anywhere.

Another book that can be opened at any page is *VITAL SIGNS*, by Ken Hillman. The author is one of this country's foremost intensive care specialists, and even though his memoir begins with an informative summary of the development of intensive care units in modern medicine, he is as anecdotal and entertaining a writer as is Leta Keens. The stories he tells might be described by a medical specialist as case histories, yet they reveal depths of compassion and humanity in the author beyond what we would expect of a clinical report. We learn about treatments, successful and otherwise, of patients suffering from diseases such as cancer, pneumonia, and muscular dystrophy, as well as meeting the victims of unusual accidents such as the young woman whose "partner" had thrust a television aerial through the side of her skull. There is a

gruesome fascination even in those stories that end tragically, but the overall effect of this well-written book is uplifting.

Paul Keating and John Howard may have seemed the exact opposite of one another on the floor of Parliament House, but in fact both were born into a similar background in the same part of Sydney's suburbs, within five years of each other. *THE MARCH OF PATRIOTS* is the first volume in Paul Kelly's projected epic account of the years in Australian politics dominated by these two figures. As a senior journalist at *The Australian*, and one of this country's most admired political commentators, Kelly has been able to obtain unique access, in the form of interviews, to all of the important participants in the events described in this exhaustively researched book. As the politicians in these pages are often represented by their own words, the reader feels the immediacy of each major decision and turning point. The value of this study to the community can only increase as time goes on.

One of the first significant figures in Australian politics, and one of the dominating figures in the early years of colonial settlement in New South Wales, was the man for whom an electorate near here was named, as well as several other postal districts. His portrait hangs in the New South Wales parliament, and it glowers from the front cover of *WILLIAM CHARLES WENTWORTH*, a biography subtitled "Australia's greatest native son". Given Wentworth's significance in the history of Australian politics, it does seem apt that his biographer should have spent nineteen years as a member of the New South Wales Legislative Assembly. Yet Wentworth was not just a politician. He was, first, an explorer, then a successful poet (his poem on the topic "Australasia" was runner-up in the Cambridge Chancellor's Gold Medal competition to a poem by W.M. Praed, one of the wittiest English poets of the nineteenth century), then a lawyer, and a landowner of such wealth that he could buy the South Island of New Zealand, a purchase that was soon disallowed by the Governor of New South Wales. Apart from all these impressive achievements, however, he was also a notorious drunkard and womanizer, whose conduct was summed up delicately by one of his earlier biographers, who observed that Wentworth's "way of life became spacious to the point of lapses from his marriage vows." He was thus a precursor for not a few of the politicians of the present day, though not, I hope, for the "way of life" of Andrew Tink, who I am pleased to announce as the winner of this year's CAL Waverley Library Literary Award.