



## CAL Waverley Library Award for Literature 2011

### ANDREW TINK'S 2011 NIB SHORT LIST SPEECH



Unlike most of you, I am already privy to the names of those who have been shortlisted for 'The Nib' Award this year.

Without giving anything away, the quality is so high that the last thing I would now do is to attempt to talk about literature to such a distinguished audience.

So I will do what all ex-politicians do and that is to talk about myself.

One of my earliest memories is of being read to by my parents. My childhood home was full of books. Apart from the usual nursery rhymes and children's story books, I was encouraged to pull out any books which took my fancy.

My parents enjoyed reading history. And history books, especially those with big pictures, fascinated me before I could walk. To this day I remember a vivid colour image of Napoleon on horseback which covered two pages in volume 1 of *People, Places and*

*Things*, published fittingly in terms of tonight's function, by The Waverley Book Company. I still have that book.

At Sydney Grammar, I enjoyed history and English. But apart from grammar, I was never taught anything else there about the craft of writing. English turned on the study of literature, including Shakespeare and Hemingway. It was only much later that the penny dropped – you can learn an enormous amount about writing by reading the writing of others.

My final year of schooling was spent as an exchange student in a huge co-educational California high school. After years of being buttoned down at an all boys' school, I ran wild among hundreds of blonde-haired blue-eyed California girls in Richard Nixon's America.

Trading on my cachet as an Aussie with an exotic accent – yes even my awful Australian twang sounded great to them – I was soon elected as vice-president of the school. And then the president resigned. Well, even at our recent 40th reunion, there were still mutterings about how that God-damned Aussie took over Los Altos High School.

Although I had wonderful history and English teachers there, I was so preoccupied by girls and student politics, that I didn't absorb much of my teachers' wisdom.

At the Australian National University, I studied Arts/Law and read history. While my regular lecturers taught me a great deal about the use of primary documents in research, there was again no emphasis on writing as such. Occasionally, we were graced by the presence of Manning Clark who always worked assiduously to look like Vladimir Lenin.

Manning Clark's lectures were more in the nature of performances by a master actor; his soft, silky and mellifluous voice was spell-binding. Although prone to exaggeration and invention, Clark taught me the importance of story telling in history. Looking back on it now, this was probably the most fundamental lesson I ever learned.

Within a few years I was a barrister. But my heart wasn't in it. The very best barristers can give a written answer as to whether a billion dollar take over is legal or not with a one word answer – either a 'yes' or 'no' – and then charge thousands of dollars for it.

Some of my advices were about things like whether a contract to sell a fish and chips shop could be avoided by the buyer because of the seller's fibs about the number of customers –almost literally about the number of battered potato scallops sold. Even so, I would take pages to cover the legal possibilities, developing an 'on the one hand/on the other hand' style; I was developing very bad writing habits.

Then I went into politics. Shadow ministers get no extra staff and so I wrote my own press releases. The first thing I learned was that if the point I wanted to make could not be expressed on one A4 page, I was wasting my time.

Soon it dawned on me that if I didn't get a journalist's attention by the middle of line one of the first paragraph, I was still wasting my time. Across a corridor from one office in the Macquarie Street press gallery, there is a smallish waste basket – enough of a challenge for those hacks who fancy themselves as having good hand/eye coordination.

Nothing gave me more incentive to write better than to see yet another of my carefully crafted releases being scrunched up and hurled towards that basket. The fact that the hacks rarely hit their target was of no consolation to me.

What I learned was that every word counted and that I had to make my most important point first. Suddenly I had a new appreciation for the spare prose of Ernest Hemingway, especially my favourite – *The Old Man and the Sea*. And so began my fascination with the craft of writing which has grown ever since.

I am sure that your former local member, Paul Pearce, will agree with me that the life of a politician can often be intellectually barren and depressing, especially during late night sittings of Parliament. And as the years passed, I began craving for some creative stimulation to make up for this, eventually realising that for me writing might do it.

So I began dabbling in writing and history. One day my antiquarian book seller sent me a catalogue which contained a mezzotint of Lord Sydney. I quickly became fascinated by this man behind the British government's decision to send the First Fleet to Botany Bay. That most historians have a low opinion of him, spurred on what remained of the barrister in me to represent this underdog of history.

By 2005 I had written a massive manuscript of Sydney's life. 'What do I do next', I asked my book seller. 'I'll go to one of my Eastern Suburbs dinner parties and find out', was the reply. A week later he rang back and said, 'You need a literary agent'. When I asked him who, he replied, 'I'll need to go to another dinner party to find out'.

Out of this rolling interrogation punctuated by dinner parties, Lyn Tranter's name emerged. And not long afterwards, Lyn agreed to be my agent. After taking up Lyn's many suggestions for improving the manuscript, it was circulated to publishers. Almost invariably the replies were along the lines of 'we think you can write. But Sydney's story (of an 18<sup>th</sup> century British politician) is not Australian enough for us'.

Allen and Unwin's editorial director said that if I could come up with an Australian colonial life, she might be interested. And that is how I came to write the first comprehensive biography of William Charles Wentworth. However I never let go of my ambition to get Sydney's life published.

Now this ambition is about to be fulfilled, thanks in no small part to my being awarded 'The Nib' last year for *William Charles Wentworth*. After six years of trying to find a publisher for *Sydney*, I have no doubt that winning 'The Nib' in 2010 helped push me over the line. And the prize money assisted me in paying a small subvention to Australian Scholarly Publishing which will see *Sydney* in book stores by the end of this month.

At this late stage, I am making the very last changes to the *Sydney* proofs, among other things correcting the bad habit I have of starting too many sentences with ‘And’ or ‘But’. It is my crude attempt to work on rhythm which I have come to appreciate is central to story telling. As Virginia Woolf once said, ‘style is a very simple matter. It is all rhythm. Once you get that you can’t use the wrong words...This is very profound, what rhythm is, and goes far deeper than words’.

As I have discovered, using too many ‘ands’ or ‘buts’ usually means that the wrong word is being used somewhere else in the sentence.

Whichever one of tonight’s short listed authors wins ‘The Nib’ in just over three weeks’ time will be interviewed by Suzanne Leal. I found this to be a delightful experience with one qualification. Suzanne, you never gave me the opportunity to publicly thank ‘The Nib’ Award’s sponsors.

So in conclusion, thank you to the Copyright Agency Limited, the Friends of Waverley Library and to Waverley Council for sponsoring this wonderful award, the only one which specifically emphasises excellence in research in the creation of literary works. .

Andrew Tink  
2 November 2011.

#### SHORT LIST EVENT PHOTOS



*From left: Peter Quartly (President of Friends Group), Simon Marnie (ABC), Ingrid Strewé (Waverley Councillor), Paul Booth (Copyright Agency Ltd) and Andrew Tink (Last year’s winning author)*



*Members of Friends of Waverley Library (FOWL)*