



**CAL Waverley Library
Award for Literature**

2009



The Winner 2009.....

Judges' Report

It is not difficult to judge a literary competition when most of the entries are of a low standard. I once spent some time as a reader of unsolicited manuscripts for a publisher, a position otherwise known as a “poison taster”, and I realized then that while it is possible to calculate accurately the different degrees of badness from one manuscript to another, all of the good ones are more or less equal. We all know this, of course; it is the reason for the existence of libraries, for we are never satisfied, having read one good book, with that book alone. We hunger for more of the same standard, preferably in slightly different form.

Yet this very fact has created a problem for the judges of this year's Waverley Library Literary Award, as far too many of the books that have been entered are undeniably good, and therefore by my definition more or less equal with one another. It was hard enough for us to arrive at a short list, so that I feel I should at least mention some of the titles that we were forced to overlook in the first step of the prize-giving process.

The titles I will mention are in no other sequence than alphabetical order of authors, but in another year many of these might have been eligible for the Alex Buzo short list prize; all of them are available at Waverley Library, for anyone who is interested. To begin with, there is *Behind the Exclusive Brethren*, by Michael Bachelard, a book that appealed to Kathleen, our expert on cults. Then *Sea of Dangers*, by Geoffrey Blainey, our winner in 2004; *The Lost Life*, by the Miles Franklin Award winner Steven Carroll; *The Horse in Australia*, by Fiona Carruthers; *Pasteur's Gambit*, by Stephen Dando-Collins, a readable account of a little-known aspect of the biological control of rabbits; and *Andrew Fisher*, a biography of a lesser-known Prime Minister by well-known historian David Day.

There are many more: *Arabesques*, by Robert Dessaix, who was on our short list in 2005; *The Many Lives of Kenneth Myer*, by Sue Ebury; *And So It Went*, by Bob Ellis, a book we read with horrible fascination, while suspecting that some of its research may have been fiction; *Joan in India*, by Suzanne Falkiner; *Churchill and Australia*, by Graham Freudenberg; and *Brief Encounters*, by Susannah Fullerton, who was a member of our judging panel until two years ago.

Another book entered by a former winner was *The Racket*, by Gideon Haigh, who received *The Nib* in 2006, while David Hill, who was on the short list in 2007, entered his book *1788* this time; *Gough Whitlam*, by Jenny Hocking, is a well-researched biography of another Prime Minister; and *The Tall Man*, by Chloe Hooper, may have won every other prize for non-fiction in the country this year, but the competition here was too stiff

for it; *Lives of the Papunya Tula Artists*, by Vivien Johnson, is a superb production, but we could find room for only one art book on our final short list.

Last year two works of fiction were on our short list, but unfortunately this time there are none; in another year, perhaps, *Life In Seven Mistakes*, by Susan Johnson, who was on the short list for 2005, might have come close to winning; *House of Exile*, by Evelyn Juers, has just been awarded the Prime Minister's Prize for non-fiction; *Unfinished Business*, by David Love, is about a different Prime Minister, Paul Keating, though it also has some fascinating insights into a third, Malcolm Fraser; *Mr Darwin's Incredible Shrinking World*, by Peter Macinnis, is little more than a list of the events, discoveries and scientific theories of the year a hundred and fifty years ago when Darwin published *The Origin of Species*, yet it is full of surprises and revelations.

Ransom, by David Malouf, is a novel based on a classical theme, just like his much-admired early success *An Imaginary Life*; *Shooting Balibo*, by Tony Maniaty, is the book of the film; *Manning Clark*, by Brian Matthews, is a biography of the once famous, now notorious, historian; *Belonging*, by John McCallum, is a study of Australian drama, with a chapter on the work of Alex Buzo which seemed to me to have somewhat misunderstood the work of our founding judge.

Darwin's Armada, by Iain McCalman, is yet another of those publications aimed to coincide with the sesquicentenary of the theory of evolution; *The Roots of Civilisation*, by John Newton, is a beautiful book about vegetables; *Up From the Mission*, by Noel Pearson, is a collection of essays by the prominent aboriginal advocate; *The Brickmasters*, by Ron Ringer, is a most improbable success, a book which set out to be no more than a corporate history of a brick company, but that turned out as a powerful social history of Australia, seen from an unusual angle.

Stella Miles Franklin, by Jill Roe, is a definitive biography of one of Australian literature's most influential pioneers; *The Red Highway*, by Nicolas Rothwell, bears comparison with his previous book *Wings of the Kite-Hawk*, which was shortlisted for this award in 2003; *Golden Boy*, by Christian Ryan, is a portrait of Kim Hughes, the tearful former captain of the Australian cricket team; *Ladykiller*, by Candace Sutton and Ellen Connolly, tells the story of a convicted murderer who seems to have been guilty of several other crimes.

The Blue Plateau, by Mark Tredinnick is a beautifully written memoir, rich with a sense of place; *The Accidental Actor*, by George Whaley, is the biography of one of our finest actors, Leo McKern, who developed a whole new reputation toward the end of his career when he played the part of Rumpole; and *Lighthouse Girl*, by Dianne Wolfer, is a children's book based on actual events at the time of the First World War.

These books alone, in all their variety and depth of research, have been enough to make the task of judging the award this year both arduous and pleasurable. There were, however, six books that stood even higher in our view. Value to the community is a significant criterion in the judging process, and there have been few books entered in the years of the award which could equal the value to us all of *THE ACCIDENTAL GUERRILLA*, by David Kilcullen. To many, the growth of international terrorism threatens the survival of our society, and most of us agree that something needs to be done to avert that threat without having a clear idea as to what that something should be. As a former Australian army officer with first-hand experience of combat against insurgents and other

guerilla forces, David Kilcullen has an international reputation as an expert in this field; his solution begins with an effort to understand the motives of those people who are sometimes propelled by accident into becoming what we know as terrorists. In researching and setting down his solution, Kilcullen fulfils another important criterion for this award, by writing well.

In the nineteenth century, there were accidental guerillas in Australia, too; these were the aboriginal people who resisted the incursion of European settlers onto their ancestral land. Yet when Tom Wills, one of the first celebrated sportsmen of this country, learned that his father had been killed in a massacre in Queensland on his way to take up a new landholding, he did not seek vengeance for his loss. Instead, he sought to help the aboriginals, introducing them to sport and promoting aboriginal cricket tours. Wills was a remarkable sportsman with a tragic flaw, which led him to take his own life at the age of forty-four; it was this early death that first prompted the curiosity of Greg de Moore, a psychiatrist with an interest in alcoholism and depression. Curiosity led to research, and de Moore's research in *TOM WILLS* has uncovered a story that enables us to see relations between aboriginals and settlers in the nineteenth century in a new light, while also providing insights into the early development of cricket and Australian Rules football.

Cricket and football lie at the heart of Australian culture, but from the beginning there have been other forms of culture in this country as well. We think of art, not football, when we first hear the word "culture", and it is said that more people go to art galleries these days than to football matches in Sydney. No one knows more about the early development of Australian art than John McDonald, as the first volume of his encyclopedic *ART OF AUSTRALIA* proves. I use the adjective "encyclopedic" with reference to his book's inclusive scope and its physical weight, but it does not read like an encyclopedia, for his writing combines astute critical insight and a strong central narrative with a rich sense of anecdote and humour. The reproductions of paintings in McDonald's book add even more to its value.

In the earliest days of European settlement in Port Jackson, most of the new inhabitants were convicts. Like prisoners anywhere, many of them dreamed of escape, even though at the end of the eighteenth century little was known about the geography of the place they had been transported to. David Levell, in *TOUR TO HELL*, has investigated an idea previous historians have dismissed as no more than a rhetorical ploy or a deception: that is, the notion that some of the early convicts genuinely believed that it would be possible to get to China by walking north from the prison colony, while others were convinced that there was a colony of white people some three or four hundred miles to the southwest where they would be "assured of finding all the comforts of life". These beliefs have a haunting, poetic quality to them now, though as Levell points out they are not much more improbable than the belief common to many of the early explorers in the existence of an inland sea.

There have been so many books about the First World War entered for the award that I would have thought nothing new could be written about it; but Marina Larsson, in *SHATTERED ANZACS*, shows us the war from the perspective of the families and friends of those servicemen who returned alive but in some way damaged or changed. More soldiers returned from the war alive but disabled or shell-shocked than those who were buried in foreign fields; and death is much more final than the sufferings imposed on the survivors and those close to them. Marina Larsson's research, involving interviews

with family members as well as extensive use of archives and case files, gives us a whole new way of seeing Australian society in the aftermath of war's traumatic interruption.

Robert Gray's father, too, served in a war, though it was the Second World War, and he returned from New Guinea undamaged but supplied with anecdotes. Gray himself was born in the year the war ended, and grew up to become a poet, and not just any poet but one of the finest this country has produced. Some of his best-known poems offer glimpses of his father, but the idea of writing a prose memoir about his early life and family background led him to research the events that turned his father into "a remittance man in his own country". Gray's father was a drunkard and a gambler, but he was also a well-educated man with a fondness for word-play, so that despite his weaknesses he comes to dominate *THE LAND I CAME THROUGH LAST*. Yet he is far from the only striking character in this evocative, vividly written memoir. Bruce Chatwin and Patrick White are the best-known names among the supporting cast in a book that sheds light onto several of our other short listed titles, not only on the problems of returned servicemen, and of alcoholics like Tom Wills, but also on art, for as well as writing poetry Gray has been a painter and an art critic, and even on the mentality of prisoners, as he recounts his harrowing experiences in a home for underprivileged children, where he was sent for a year. More important than the depth of the research in this book, and outweighing its value to the community and its readability, is the sheer quality of the writing. Of all the books to be entered for this award, including all those we have chosen as winners in past years, there is only one that we can be sure will still be read in fifty years' time, or in a hundred, and because it has that quality I am pleased to announce that this year's winner is to be *THE LAND I CAME THROUGH LAST*.