

2023 Mark & Evette Moran Nib Literary Award Judges Report

Each year, the nominations for the Nib Award allow the judges to view a fascinating cross-section of Australia's publishing industry, the judges continue to abide by our long-standing guidelines, and as a result we have come to identify the following six titles as deserving recipients of the Alex Buzo prize:

The gifts and achievements of members of the Huxley family from the nineteenth century onward may be seen as an illustration of the process of evolution by natural selection. From T.H. Huxley, Charles Darwin's friend and supporter, to his grandsons Julian and Aldous, as well as his sister Marian, great-grandson Francis, and other connections such as that with the Arnold family, generations of intellectual and cultural brilliance can be seen as demonstrating the survival of the fittest. Yet there was also a human dimension to the accomplishments of these scientists, artists, poets, novelists, and popular science explainers, and Alison Bashford, in *An Intimate History of Evolution*, has researched not only the public lives of these celebrated, and connected, figures but their private, and at times scandalous, behaviour as well. By doing so she has created a compelling narrative, with themes of infidelity and depression as well as of philosophy and poetry (Julian Huxley's poems, extensively quoted, are strikingly modern), and at the same time offering a detailed and comprehensive account of the science the Huxleys were famous for, an account which makes the complex thinking behind evolutionary theory, and its developments over the years, clear for the average reader. Beautifully illustrated, this book is an instance of biographical research of the highest literary merit, while also being a highly readable work of popular science.

A young couple, with their baby daughter, are walking "in the meadows halfway between Cambridge and Grantchester". It seems that they belong to a life of privilege, as the young man discusses his dissertation, which might become "a golden ticket to stay on in the city". Then, from "the afternoon light glinting off the dormer windows of Clare College's dining hall, clouds floating past the spires of King's College Chapel, and the tourists on punts", the narrative leaps to the "middle of residential Saigon, down an unmarked alleyway", where the narrator's grandfather spent ten years imprisoned without trial by the Communist government. In chapters as short and evocative as prose poems, Andre Dao's *Anam* brings these different worlds together, as well as all the strands of an extended family, in a highly readable yet daringly experimental work that tests the boundaries of fact and fiction. Cambridge, of course, is the university attended by Charles Darwin, so this striking literary achievement bears an unexpected connection with the work of Alison Bashford.

The self-deprecating title *Emperors in Lilliput* suggests a subject of little significance, of interest only to the dwindling former elites who still pay attention to literary magazines. Yet Jim Davidson is a writer and historian of such skill that he has been able to make this dual biography of Clem Christesen and Stephen Murray-Smith, the founders and long-time editors of *Meanjin* and *Overland*, into something much larger. Sales figures, quoted by Davidson, might imply that the two magazines, with their imperious editors, were negligible in their impact, yet their contents and their stance reflected on all of the important issues in Australian life throughout the years of their existence (and both magazines continue to appear to this day). Thus this book does not just bring two formidable characters to life, with all their flaws - it is also an indirect history of our nation in the years since the Second World War, and a guide to the development of many of the political ideas that are current now.

A two thousand year old date palm seed, excavated near Jerusalem early this century, planted in a pot and quarantined in a greenhouse, germinates with the help of scientists, and in due course fruit that “resembled a cluster of large amber jewels” grows for the scientists to taste. Two millenniums old, the date has a “nice honey aftertaste”. This poetically recounted anecdote is one of many in *The Age of Seeds*, Fiona McMillan-Webster’s highly original account of the place of plants, and their reproductive systems, in the life of the Earth (though some readers may find her sub-title, “How Plants Hacked Time and Why Our Future Depends on it”, confusing, as explorers in the Amazon jungle hack plants with their machetes rather than the other way around). Ranging from Israel, Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq to the Cote d’Ivoire and the Arctic Circle, the author’s explorations also take in much of Australia and its island territories such as Norfolk Island and Lord Howe Island before venturing further over the Pacific Ocean to the Galapagos where the narrative overlaps the content of Alison Bashford’s book about evolution. Like all of the books on this year’s shortlist, this one too amounts to a multiple biography, both of the various scientists, such as Bill Gillespie, Nikolai Vavilov, and Charles Darwin, who have studied plant life, as well as being a biography of the plants themselves.

Ross McMullin’s prize-winning *Farewell, Dear People* consisted of a series of brief biographies of young Australians who lost their lives in the First World War. The sequel, *Life So Full of Promise*, is if anything an even more impressive work. There are fewer biographies, but the stories the author relates are of greater depth and detail than in the earlier book, so that the promise of the young lives lost in the war is revealed against the background of the places, the municipalities and schools, where they began. More important than this are the sports they played, as several of the young men portrayed might have gone on to become cricketers of international quality, or indeed scientists or other high achievers like the members of the Huxley family . Thus this book combines the best qualities of biography, local history and sports writing, while relating poignant anecdotes such as the fate of Norman Callaway, who made a double century in his only appearance as a first class cricketer, and enlisted in the army with some reluctance only to be killed in France, or of the talented batsman Claude Tozer, who survived the war and became a doctor only to be murdered by one of his patients. Callaway was a successful batsman for the Waverley cricket club, making his runs on the same Waverley Oval that adjoins the Margaret Whitlam Pavilion, twice the venue for the presentation of The Nib Award.

The first chapters of Shirley Hazzard’s most admired novel, *The Transit of Venus*, are set in a beautifully realised between-wars Sydney, before the narrative expands into a wider world. Hazzard’s life followed a similar trajectory. Born in Chatswood, she grew up in Willoughby before her successful father’s career took her first to other suburbs and then to other countries, New Zealand, Singapore, Japan and Hong Kong. Aged just sixteen she began to work for British Intelligence in Hong Kong; at twenty, she arrived in New York, and took a position with the United Nations. With the opportunities that began to arise for the young Hazzard in the United States, *Shirley Hazzard: A Writing Life* by Brigitta Olubas gains momentum. By the age of thirty, Hazzard had a contract with *The New Yorker*, at the time (though no longer these days) the most distinguished literary magazine in the world (Frank Moorhouse once joked that the title *Meanjin* was an aboriginal word meaning “rejected by *The New Yorker*”), and from that time onward her social life revolved around many of the most celebrated figures in twentieth century literature. She married Francis Steegmuller, a much-admired writer and translator a quarter of a century older than her”, and divided her time between New York and Italy, with a home on the island of Capri. The depth and breadth of research in this stylishly written biography includes many snippets of valuable information and gossip about the literary and artistic worlds in New York, Europe and even Australia. Though Hazzard never felt herself to be an Australian, she was always kind to those Australian writers who came into her orbit.

