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**THE BIOGRAPHER
WELL IN CONTROL OF
HIS WILD MAN OF LETTERS**

Craig Munro, *Wild Man of Letters: The Story of P.R. Stephensen*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1984, 320 pp. \$27.50

Wild Man of Letters is more than a biography of Percy Reginald Stephensen, writer, translator, editor, reviewer, publisher, publicist, aesthete, social critic and political activist and idealist. Craig Munro's study, with its pleasant prose style and clear organization of a mass of material, is also a synoptic history of Australia's cultural growth during Stephensen's lifetime from 1901 to 1965. Stephensen's intimate involvement with political theory and his ignorance or innocence of political reality validates the significance of his life as a cultural rather than a political phenomenon. In the end, this is a matter of emphasis, since political reality and culture overlap, but this is also a matter in which the placing of emphasis is important: something that Munro tacitly but most effectively keeps in mind throughout his book.

This biography does all that a biography should do. There emerges as clear a picture of Stephensen as is compatible with the complexities of human personality, and one has the sense of getting to know an identifiable man. That the picture, in this reviewer's case, for example, is often incompatible with pictures supplied by others, in one instance that given by Stephensen's former friend and later antagonist, Xavier Herbert, is a fact that serves to enrich one's understanding of human nature in general and pays added tribute to the reality that was P.R. Stephensen. Munro finds Stephensen an engaging and likeable personality, which has the effect of giving the biography a sense of that indefinable special pleading and defence to which everyone is entitled at least once in a lifetime, and if it can be done by as competent a writer as Munro, the subject is fortunate. This sense is indispensable to creating what might be called a just account of the history of any man or woman, however saintly or fiendish their life, and it is in a paradoxical way associated with the sense that something is, in the long run, written with true disinterest.

This account of Stephensen's life is satisfying also because Munro is thoroughly disinterested in dealing with Stephensen's cultural ideals and attitudes and in analysing his political preoccupations.

Frequently, biographers scrupulously withhold from their men and women any kind of defensive pleading, but indulge themselves in whole-hearted support or denunciation of the beliefs and causes to which their subjects dedicated their lives. This Munro does not do. Readers tend to feel that any writing which attracts them by its depth and generosity of understanding must be written by someone whose cultural and political prejudices resemble their own, and it would be natural to assume that Munro is thoroughly democratic in his intellectual attitude towards Australian politics, and aristocratic in his cultural idealism. In the descriptive and analytical passages of the book, however, there is nothing to support this or any other assumption about the biographer. As far as is possible in such writing, Munro's voice is perfectly disinterested.

This is a tremendous intellectual feat, equalling all the intellectual effort involved in researching, analysing, assembling and organizing the material of the book. The patience and energy required for the physical construction of a biography will not be underestimated by anyone who has attempted it. (There are academics who prefer to build a sizeable house, with their own hands, from the ground up, rather than research and assemble even a slim volume of biography). This initial effort granted, however, the discipline of sustaining a disinterested narrative of events and ideas of the kind that must affect personally any intelligent citizen, is a feat of comparable magnitude. Only in an occasional phrase or by a subtly ironic expression, does Munro indicate where his sympathies on an issue might lie. This begins early in the book where Munro refers to Stephensen's trial in 1944 for "political heresy", where many would talk about a trial for treason and sedition. Munro is right, of course. On the other hand, as a biographer, he is entitled to make judgements about his subject's decisions and ventures, and this he does aptly and with economy.

Such disinterest may not please all critics, some of whom point out that disinterest itself is a political stance. but if this is seen as a lack in the writing, the critic is asking not for commitment but for prejudice. Disinterest is itself a form of commitment.

Stephensen's family background is adequately investigated. Realistic but not extravagant connections are made between his Danish and French Swiss grandparents, settlers in southern Queensland during the last quarter of the nineteenth century, and Stephensen's later character, personality and interests. His teachers, patrons, friends and opponents are given convincingly appropriate space, and those who are themselves famous, like the Lindsays and W.J. Miles, do not overshadow others who, less significant as national

names, played more important roles in Stephensen's life. His long relationship with the dancer, Winifred Venus, a married woman, fifteen years his senior, forms a steady obligato to his life after their London introduction in 1924 by Jack and Ada McLaren. In spite of great difficulties, illnesses, Stephensen's internment and other emotional harassment partly due to their unregularized union, Winifred could write to a friend after Stephensen's death, "Our love affair blossomed till the end." Winifred and her son worked in Stephensen's business enterprises and supported him in times of penury as loyally as any family could have done. There is no suggestion that she was ever sustained by ideological commitment or any obsession like Stephensen's Australia First Movement. As Munro writes:

He had never been an easy person to live with, yet for forty years Winifred has been an unshakeable ally who faced all their misfortunes with a tough, uncompromising spirit. The saddest irony was that although she had worried half her life about their age difference, she outlived him by several years.

At the centre of Stephensen's literary and cultural achievement is his *The Foundations of Culture in Australia*, the long essay published as a book in 1936; ironically it was printed by the Communist Party printery. Although limited in some of its ideas and bigoted in others, *The Foundations of Culture in Australia* has a vision and a faith in Australian identity that aroused the enthusiasm of responsible reviewers then and earns serious attention now from students of our cultural history. To argue that its racism, cultural jingoism and other evidences of cultural parochialism put it entirely out of date is unfortunately not true. Yet if its silliness is not anachronistic, its intense belief in cultural heritage and cultural vision is as much needed now as it was then.

For many readers, Stephensen's long association with Norman, Philip, and especially with Jack Lindsay is the most important aspect of his literary achievement. It is this association and its products that give convincing evidence of Stephensen's work as an artist, for publishing is an art before it is anything else. Munro follows through the history of all the presses with which Stephensen was associated, the Fanfrolico, Endeavour, Mandrake, and Stephensen's own Australian company, and writes knowledgeably and therefore helpfully about the intentions, prospects and varying successes of these ventures.

Wild Man of Letters is carefully documented outside the text, so that while it reads fluently from page to page, it provides a wealth of notes at the end. When this method of detailing is used, there is no reason why the biographer should not expand footnotes as much as he wishes and his publisher permits, so that students like this reviewer can

plunge into the close print of the last thirty pages with as much enthusiasm as they read the narrative of events. The art of relevant documentation and footnoting should not be overlooked. What a useful perspective is given, for example, when a note recalls a political and intellectual climate:

. . . George Orwell wrote: "Part of the price we paid for the systematic lying of 1914-17 was the exaggerated pro-German reaction which followed. During the years 1918-1933 you were hooted at in left-wing circles if you suggested that Germany bore even a fraction of responsibility for the war".

Undoubtedly for some readers, the only real difficulty in admiring Stephensen wholeheartedly as a fallible Australian who contributed a great deal to our national culture, is his fascist sympathies. Fascism is so intricately involved with the need for order, clarity, assurance, security and self-definition that it can only be totally rejected by a perfectly balanced and wholly realized personality. Munro's biography shows how fascism was part of Stephensen's schooling, and how difficult it is for anyone who thinks seriously about democracy to avoid playing with the notion of fascism. Stephensen perhaps did more than play with it, and he certainly paid for this.

Like almost all notable lives, Stephensen's biography is an inspiration and a warning. He inspires through his energy and vision and his ability to take risks which in the end had nothing at all to do with self-advancement. His story is a warning, nevertheless, in that the attraction of risky thinking and the emotional and intellectual pleasure of shocking the bourgeois prevented him from arguing things through with the kind of persistence that one finds in another risky thinker like George Bernard Shaw.

Mentioning someone like Shaw, and recalling also Stephensen's friend Jack Lindsay, as men very different from Stephensen, raises another more serious consideration about Stephensen which Munro never glosses over, but which he, quite rightly in his context, does not hold up for indictment. Yet it is Munro's work that allows us to meditate on the nagging fear that there was something persistently adolescent and humanely ungenerous in Stephensen. There was a touch of the practical joker whose real motivation is the humiliation of the victim. Very likely this is the worst that may be said about Stephensen as a man, and Munro shows clearly how much of best there is to say.

On a final point, some may query the assessment of Stephensen that sees him as a scholar. Certainly he won a Rhodes Scholarship to Oxford, but it was against a minimum competition and he was

fortunate to get it. Moreover, it is not a matter of questioning his intellectual ability. Stephensen read widely and wrote fluently, and could analyse and synthesise ideas and theories. Yet the nature of his interests and the methods of his approach to any intellectual and aesthetic activity were those of an artist rather than those of a scholar. This point is exemplified in a letter he wrote to the editor of *Nation* some twenty-four years ago, and which is worth quoting because too much of it is relevant in 1985:

O Tempora O Mores!

In a world in which art is the cult of ugliness and literature is obscurantist; in which music is discord, sculpture distorted, and architecture solely utilitarian; in which justice is an instrument of propaganda; in which universities are career factories, in which primary education is a personality-cult instead of an instrument of social discipline: in such a world sir, in which mediocrity is paramount and equality is substituted for quality, to be a conservative is to be a revolutionary.

The Latin tag and the prose style are those of an artistic rather than of a scholarly temperament, and at sixty Stephensen was already an old man, which is often one of the effects of remaining in some ways a perpetual adolescent.

Stephensen, it may be hoped, does not represent the typical Australian scholar, whatever that may be, and Munro's phrase, that he led "a life of intellectual adventuring" seems much closer to the truth. If few people want to see others as able and as energetic as Stephensen follow the directions of some of his adventures, particularly his obsession with linking Australian literature to Australian nationalism, there is no harm in wishing for a few more minds as adventurous as his.