rather than accusing and self-imprisoning. The book itself is a wonderful lesson in how control of the use of persona can result in a new control and creation of subject and diction.

As a result, the blood-imagery suggests the return of circulation to cramped limbs rather than the escape of blood from the body.

CHERYL TAYLOR

Carole Ferrier, ed. *Point of Departure: The Autiobiography of Jean Devanny*, University of Queensland Press, 1986. Recommended price: $39.95 (hardcover).

The tragic and bitter experiences recorded in this autobiography raise some tantalising questions. Was Jean's life as unhappy as she suggests, or was her choice of material influenced by unhappiness at the time of writing? Was she the innocent victim of brutality and negligence by the male-dominated Communist Party, or did some justification exist for the bureaucracy's treatment of her? Can any positive interpretation of her sufferings be found, or is the whole message of the book disillusionment, and the futility of political activism?

Jean sums up her upbringing as "luckless", and records her mother's lack of love and preference for her younger sisters. As a child she defended her mother and sisters from her father's drunken abuse, just as she defended the animals of a neighbouring farmer from cruel treatment. The origins of her lifelong identification with the underdog and fighting determination can be seen here, but her early emotional experiences could also have resulted in pessimism of the kind that fulfils itself in unhappy events.

Other aspects of Jean's early life may have prepared her for the role of victim. Brought up in the Nelson district of New Zealand's South Island, she left school at thirteen, to housekeep for her family and to work as a domestic. Although gifted as a musician, and a voracious reader, her lack of formal education and provincial upbringing partly account for her early focus on Communist ideology, in the end so destructive to her, and for the naivete of much of her fiction. Her marriage, at seventeen, although for love, followed the pattern prescribed for women of her class and era, and the relationship was later interrupted by years of estrangement and antagonism. The outcome was tragic also in that her daughter, Erin, died at the age of four, and her son, Karl, at twenty-two.

Jean's chief gift from her early environment was a love and understanding of nature, expressed in the most positive sections of the autobiography, at the beginning with relevance to her New Zealand childhood, and at the end in a sketch of later years in North Queensland.

The whole Devanny family joined the Communist Party soon after their arrival in Sydney, in the ominous year of 1929. Despite severe economic problems and persecution by the police, experiences to be repeated for many years to come, this seems to have been a time of expansion for Jean, in reaction against earlier restrictions. She developed her talents as a platform speaker and organiser for the Party; she went on speaking tours of the southern states, and took a job as a domestic on an outback station; she formed a sexual relationship with J.B. Miles, the General Secretary of the Party; even her brief imprisonments contributed to her broadening experience; above all she travelled to Berlin in 1931 as a delegate to the Workers' International Relief Congress, and visited Britain and the Soviet Union. She writes poignantly that her work for the Party gave her a warm sense of belonging.

Despite this intoxicated commitment, problems appeared. The Australian section of Workers' International Relief, which Jean founded and made successful, was destroyed by an arbitrary decision, and her many attempts to establish literary and other cultural groups under Party influence were all inhibited and finally ruined by the bureaucracy's demands for direct control. In failing health, her pleas to be relieved from platform work were denied; and at times almost starving, she was given little support. Her continuing friendship with J.B. Miles seems only to have compounded her difficulties.

The story of her expulsion from the Party in 1940, heavily censored in this account, is pathetic and ironic. Although she had served the Party devotedly for more than a decade, her expulsion was brought about by the fabrications of a group of recently joined male comrades in North Queensland, offended by Jean's criticism of their sexual morality and treatment of women. Her conflict with these men coincided with a crisis in her finances and health. While, unknown to her, the central committee, on the advice of the leader of the Cairns branch, was planning her expulsion, Jean was waiting in Cairns to undergo a dangerous operation. She confided to the Cairns leader, when he visited her, "all that the Party had meant to me in the past, and how I would strive in the future to make myself more worthy of it." (p. 245). A few weeks later she was expelled without a hearing, and without being officially informed.

Jean's life embodies a typical woman's conflict between generous self-giving on the one hand and the achievement of a stable identity and personal goals on the other. Her platform and organisational work was

accompanied by her recognition that she was leaving herself no time for serious writing, but even the advice of Katharine Susannah Prichard, a close friend, did not change her priorities. Feminism, relatively inactive in the thirties, failed to provide her with a stable centre, and she writes of her femininity as an occasion for service, not assertion: "Without becoming a feminist, the whole warp and weft of my political aspirations was deeply and ineluctably charged with concern for my own sex, and far and away beyond that, for the child." (p. 66). This book, on the contrary, will probably be read by women as a warning against commitment to social goals broader than feminism.

The last chapters speak bitterly of the bureaucracy's continuing hostility: of its refusal to inform Party members, after Jean had been reinstated, of its error in expelling her; of its interference in her plans to divorce her husband and remarry; and of its criticism of her novel, *Cindie*, for its favourable portrayal of the conditions of Kanakas on North Queensland sugar farms. This criticism at last brought about her resignation in 1950.

The tone of the writing militates against interpreting *Point of Departure* as a celebration of Jean's strength, talents, and idealism. Optimists among us, on the look-out for the rare cases where self-interest is submerged in a transcendent value, will nevertheless scan the text in the hope of justifying this kind of reading. The possibilities might have been clarified by further information from the editor on her typescript sources.

The middle version of the autobiography, written between 1951 and 1953, and concentrating on Jean's political and writing life in Sydney, has been printed here. A later version, *Rushed Affair*, cutting the New Zealand and Sydney sections and appending an account of her experiences as an amateur naturalist in North Queensland, seems to have been a more cheerful production. Jean's correspondence with Miles Franklin, described in the introduction to the present edition, reveals that she found the writing arduous, and her painful attempts at revision suggest an addition to our list of questions: why has Carole Ferrier decided not to give the reader access to the latest authorial text?

Feminists, readers of Australian literature, and residents of North Queensland are nevertheless indebted to the editor for presenting them with this version of Jean's life, and answers to the questions raised are to be hoped for in Ferrier's forthcoming biography.