

HELEN ALLAN

REVIEW

Maslyn Williams, *His Mother's Country*, Melbourne University Press, 1988. 235pp. \$29.95

Maslyn Williams' story of his salad days as jackeroo in the Australia of the 1920's serves to remind us of a time when it was the done thing to apprentice raw British lads of good family as jackeroos on our sheep and cattle stations. Goodness knows how many apple-cheeked new chums were shipped here for this purpose — or was it just to be made men of or in some cases to be got rid of? Definitely not the latter in Maslyn Williams' case. 'The lad', as he is always called in the book, came because Australia had been his dead mother's country and his Uncle George thought she'd have liked him to see it. He also thought the experience would broaden the lad's horizons. Well it certainly did that; but the method was pretty drastic. Perhaps we ought to spare a post-bi-centennial thought for all such pastoral pupils.

Maslyn Williams has done just that. Although his book, published in 1988, shares the preoccupation with nostalgia and history characteristic of much of that year's literary output, the spotlight in this case is always on the young outsider. It is through his astonished eyes that we see our own country as it was then, and through his reactions perceive what it takes for a newcomer to survive. Fortunately our lad, courtesy of that *deus ex machina* Uncle George, has been expressly directed to a station property in the beautiful New England district and is to serve under an upright and decent manager and find rough diamonds (of the first water) among the station hands. More power to him! He is a likeable lad who makes much of his own luck. But we must pause to remember too all those jackeroos who over the years have gone further and fared worse.

The author brings sophisticated talents to this story, in which he means to tempt our surfeited taste buds with just a little more local history and geography. As an experienced traveller and observer of people and their ways, as a radio and TV producer of documentary and film, he knows how to interweave the lad's experiences with local movements and organisations developing at the same time, and sets the whole against political backgrounds both in Australia and England. With an unerring eye for detail he brings his characters to life; each is himself, not a stereotype. The countryside around Glen Innes, where the station is situated, is evoked with affection and a poetry that sets off the humour and earthiness of station life. The result is an agreeable con-

sciousness of enjoying oneself while learning something at the same time.

The learning process occurs via the lad's letters from his aunt in England as she keeps him up to date with news of events there, reinforcing this with interesting cuttings from British papers. In addition there is another source of information — the author's own fascinating digressions. Seeming quite *a propos* of whatever context they spring from, these digressions fill in the social, political and historical background within which the protagonist moves. They cover a wide field — from Billy Hughes after World War I demanding control for Australia over German New Guinea and Nauru to the early days of the Country Women's Association, from imperial immigration policies to Australians' attitudes to politicians, from the relative status of Masons and Oddfellows in country towns to the philosophy of a sundowner. Maslyn Williams, believe me, can make all this great reading.

Often one gets a feeling of *deja vu*. In many respects, nothing has changed much. Take for example when Maslyn Williams quotes from newspapers of the twenties allegations made by Australian officials 'that some foreign athletes have used dope to improve their performance at the Antwerp Olympics'. Readers' comments at the time are characteristically xenophobic: 'What else would you expect from foreigners?' Another example is very relevant in the still-smouldering afterglow of EXPO 88 and consists of the aunt's comments after she has visited the great British Empire Exhibition at Wembley. Her ravings about the huge Australian Pavilion with its 'cattle station, sawmill complete with monarchs of the forest . . . stockmen driving thousands of sheep . . . a gold mine complete with fossickers . . . a model of the Murray River Irrigation System' — don't they ring some sort of a recent bell? And when, after all this 'trudging', Uncle George takes her to the Australian restaurant where she has 'lovely roast lamb with tinned vegetables' one can almost feel the need to form a queue.

Nothing is new under the sun. The author mentions early symptoms of republicanitis brought on by what Australian editorialists describe in the first years of the Great War as the 'drivelling senility' of 'bungling incompetent aristocrats . . . and posturing British generals who were sending their troops to certain death.' These fiery editors even felt that 'it was time for Australia to free herself from the bondage of a colonial system'. An outspoken editor from a well-known paper wondered whether it mightn't even be necessary for Australia to fight for its independence! Heady days!

And even then, contentious days. A 'joker' comes up from Sydney to address the Oddfellows' Lodge at Glen Innes. His theme? A variation on the Doctors v. Medical Health Scheme. 'There are influential men in

the medical profession who don't see things as we do' the 'joker' says. And later: 'They believe that they alone should decide how, when and where the sick should be treated, what the fees should be and how the nation's health services should be arranged The cost of medical services will increase and we shall have no say in the matter.'

There is a photo of 'the lad' (young Maslyn) in the front of the book. On his face is a pleasant half-smile that seems to express the sunniness of this agreeable book. Although the new chum must confront big challenges in his 'different' country and must rub up against loneliness, hardship and even tragedy, he treats himself to a minimum of self-pity and looks for any possible funny side there is. He has seen the beauty of the 'sunlit land' and seen the starkness 'a moonlit landscape so grotesque that it seemed unreal a petrified moonscape sliding by with armies of pallid ring-barked trees standing rigidly' and he has finally become part of it and wants to return. He finishes up understanding why his mother had loved it so much and why 'her stories (about it) merged into silence followed by a sigh'.

There is more in this book than immediately meets the eye. Take this brief encapsulation of a deeply ingrained Australian attitude, whether good or bad.

'Yes, sir' says the lad to the Boss.

'We don't call people Sir,' says the Boss. 'At least, not many people.'