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REVIEW

Susan McKernan, *A Question of Commitment: Australian Literature in the Twenty Years After the War.* Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1989. $19.95. ISBN 0 04 355032 0.

Susan McKernan's book examines the changing responses of Australian writers to their society and their art in the twenty years from 1945 to 1965. Anyone writing on this period must go over ground already pegged out in John Docker's *Australian Cultural Elites* (1974) and *In a Critical Condition* (1984). Docker's books showed the need for a map of this period that would chart the broader groupings of writers, intellectuals, institutions and ideological positions. What remained was for this work to be done thoroughly and carefully - as Chris Baldick has done, for example, in Britain, and Gerald Graff in the United States.

Docker is the *enfant terrible* of McKernan's introduction, which charges "younger writers" with painting too conservative a picture of the "older generation". "The tendency to view the now elderly writers of the fifties as an establishment", McKernan argues, "should not obscure the facts that in the mid-fifties they were not established and that they faced considerable argument about their achievement and their role in Australian society" (2). In *A Question of Commitment*, Susan McKernan has made an important contribution to the mapping of Australian culture in the middle decades of the twentieth century. Her first two and last two chapters, in particular, exemplify the kind of balanced and wide ranging history of literary production we now need.

The first chapter, "Pursuing the National Tradition", offers a lucid and informative account of affiliations between Australian writers and the Communist Party in the '40s and '50s. The postwar years saw a renewed determination among writers, artists and historians to establish a national culture independent of the British past and the growing influence of the United States. McKernan examines the literature that emerged on this rising tide of nationalism and charts the writers' various positions in cultural politics.

The Communist Party offered a program for writers based on socialist realism that fitted well with current notions of the national literary tradition. Communist writers who met regularly from the mid '40s included Frank Hardy, Eric Lambert, David Martin, Jean Devanney, Ian Turner, John Manifold, Judah Waten and Dorothy Hewett. In 1952 the Melbourne Realist Writers Group began publishing *The Realist Writer*, which was incorporated

into *Overland* in 1954. The advantage of "the Party ideology" was that it linked literature with society and with the indigenous traditions of literary nationalism. But as McKernan points out, "It is difficult now to assess how seriously communist writers treated such prescriptions for writing" (29). Much of the critical discussion in the Party's journals and newspapers was written by people like Jack Beasley, who were not writers themselves, while writers like David Martin and John Morrison skirmished with the Party critics and continued to write with scant regard for dogma. Even those prepared to defend socialist realism, like Frank Hardy and Judah Waten, departed from it in practice in *Power Without Glory* (1950) and *The Unbending* (1954).

The Communist Party collapsed as a base for writers after 1956, at a time when anti-communists were organising a comparable network of cultural agency, and it is to the mapping of *this* network that McKernan turns in her second chapter, "Cultural Freedom and *Quadrant*". One absorbing issue here is the nature and extent of CIA involvement, a subject discussed by both Docker and Humphrey McQueen. McKernan has studied the papers of the Australian Association for Cultural Freedom, and concludes that while the CIA agent, Michael Josselson, footed the bills, he had little control over the funds: the propaganda initiatives came from the Australians. When the emergence of *Quadrant* in 1956 is compared with the emergence of *Overland*, two things are clear. First that *Quadrant* was an "artificial" creation: McKernan accuses McAuley of "naivety and political blindness" for not seeing that his journal would not have come into existence without CIA money. And second, Cultural Freedom did not genuinely represent a group of writers:

> It was an organisation created largely by the work of one devoted anti-communist, Richard Krygier, who was not a writer nor, at that stage, a friend of writers. The first membership consisted of a group of men powerful in their own right, many of them elderly, retired or nearing retirement. They were members of Australia's establishment: chancellors and vice-chancellors of universities, judges, publishers and professors rather than novelists, poets, painters, composers or young critics and journalists. (56)

As McKernan observes, "They could well have been the members of an exclusive dining club" (55).

These first two chapters are the fruit of substantial archival research, and are richly packed with information. They will become essential reading for students of the modern period. In them, McKernan offers a full and balanced discussion of literary production, including not only the various groups, journals and writers, but also most forms of writing - critical and theoretical essays, poetry, the novel and short fiction.

But then she begins what is, in effect, another book whose method is closer to literary criticism than cultural history. Her next five chapters deal with the lives and works of individual authors: James McAuley, A.D. Hope, Douglas Stewart, Judith Wright, David Campbell and Patrick White. These chapters offer succinct and reliable critical accounts of the works of their individual writers, and will no doubt be widely consulted by students of Australian poetry. But the differences in approach between these chapters and the two which precede them create problems for McKernan's critical methodology.

The reason is this. During the '50s and '60s a number of conservative writers, including Hope and McAuley, sought to divorce the "political" and "social" from truly "literary" concerns. In separating her "contextual" from her "individual-author" chapters, McKernan runs the risk of reproducing this separation in her own analysis. It is significant that prose writers with communist commitments, like John Morrison and Frank Hardy, are discussed in the "contextual" chapters, while poets with relatively conservative commitments, such as Hope and McAuley, are treated as "individuals" in chapters whose critical discourse often invokes ideas about literature these writers themselves espoused. This problem is compounded by the absence of a theory of the relation between literature and ideology that could distance the literary historian from her material. McKernan tends to use the term "ideology" in the sense in which it was used in the texts of the period: that is, as a set of doctrines or dogma. This means that her critical method does not always give her the kind of explanatory power that is necessary to move outside the discourse of literary criticism, which tends to be complicit with the material she is examining. The trap is that poets like Hope and McAuley were themselves key figures in formulating the discourse of "literary criticism" in this country, and a critique of their work cannot be mounted from within the same problematic.

The tendency to reproduce the period's own separation of literature and ideology is especially evident in the chapter on Hope. This is the most under-distanced of the individual-author chapters, and McKernan often appears to summarise Hope's views on poetry from within. In the chapter on McAuley, too, she is drawn to traditional "literary" value judgements that participate in McAuley's own critical discourse. McAuley is at his best when "conveying actual, living experiences", and fails as a poet when he

seeks to express his "ideological beliefs" (92-3). McKernan the literary critic is, therefore, at odds with McKernan the historian of chapters 1 and 2. The critic is forced by her discourse to pass unfavourable judgement on McAuley's poetry of the '50s, when the poet in him was led astray by "ideology". Yet the literary historian is fascinated by precisely this phase of his work and its ideological determination.

This does not mean that McKernan judges the poets solely by their own values. Far from it: she comments astutely, for example, on the politics of Douglas Stewart's deliberate turning away from ideological commitment, and points to the intense social purpose that lay behind Judith Wright's interest in philosophy and linguistics. But in retrospect, it may have been more productive to have collapsed the distinction between "historical" and "individual-author" chapters altogether, as McKernan has done to great effect in her essay on McAuley in *Australia's First Cold War*, so that "literature" could be studied in its institutional framework.

McKernan's selection of writers also tends to view the period through the very canon the period itself created. With the exception of Patrick White, all those given "individual" chapters are poets, and while some prose writers other than White are discussed, the focus on individual poets means that many prose writers active during the period are either treated briefly or left out altogether. These include Eleanor Dark, Martin Boyd, K.S. Prichard, Dal Stivens, Kylie Tennant, M. Barnard Eldershaw, John Morrison, Frank Hardy, Judah Waten, Vance Palmer, Ruth Park, Dymphna Cusack, David Martin, Elizabeth Harrower and Randolph Stow. To these names might be added others significant to the "question of commitment" at this time which slip through literary criticism's net of poetry, novel and drama: these include historians such as Manning Clark, Russell Ward and Ian Turner, cultural critics such as Bernard Smith and literary historians and critics such as Dorothy and H.M. Green.

Another significant absence from McKernan's book is an account of the academy in this period, when the canon of "Aust. Lit." was being formed. Apart from the obvious involvement of Hope and McAuley, one thinks, for example, of the roles played by Tom Inglis Moore and Dorothy Green and, later, by Leonie Kramer, G.A. Wilkes and others, both before and after the foundation of the first chair in Australian Literature in 1962. Here McKernan might usefully have returned to her earlier engagement with John Docker to refine his version of history in the light of her own research.

After the individual-author chapters, McKernan returns to her "contextual" mode to look at the drama of the period, and produces another fine chapter, as rich in detail as the first two. The tendency to work from within the canon is not in evidence here. Indeed, the very strengths of this

chapter arise from its questioning of the view that the drama of the period begins with *The Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*. As McKernan observes, "such a view of Australian drama adopts a very rigid definition of what drama means" (189). It is this questioning of received ideas - and the determination to conduct the kind of research that will put new ideas in their place - that produces McKernan's most informative and lively work. In this chapter she returns to a broader definition of literary production to examine the roles of writers, actors, theatre companies, entrepreneurs and audiences, as well as governmental and other institutional factors such as the formation of NIDA in 1958 and the coming of television in 1956. Her definition of "dramatic material" includes radio plays, serials and comedies, university and commercial revues, musical hall entertainment, circuses and sideshows.

Despite its unevenness of method, *A Question of Commitment* is a very good book on an important subject. McKernan's accurate research and clarity of presentation ensure that it will become a standard reference work on the modern period for some time to come. Obviously, my own preference is for the "production" chapters, which map out the web of culture beyond the individual authors, but the other chapters are also valuable as sound and thorough accounts of the works of six important Australian writers.