

IN MEMORIAM: MARGARET DIESENDORF

Born: Vienna 1912

Died: Australia 1993

Australia has been immeasurably enriched by men and women whose dates and record of birth and death are like those of Margaret Diesendorf. Margaret is one of a generation whose work for Australia may one day be recorded as a distinctive thread in the text of Australian cultural history, along with the convicts, pastoralists, drovers, city builders, politicians, armed forces, capitalists, sports leaders, artists and the rest of us. Margaret is one of the Europeans who left a country and culture in which they were so deeply rooted and whose languages they respected and loved so honestly that it came with them inseparably from their physical presence. People like Margaret are never migrants; they belong naturally to every part of the world because they have an essential understanding of what culture is, a knowledge that is as instinctive to them as the knowledge of breathing is to most of us. In Mexico, South Africa or the Philippines, Margaret would have worked exactly as she did in Australia, and given her unconditional love to the people and their arts.

For the last ten years Margaret has been a loyal supporter of LiNQ, as she was of so many literary journals whether their circulation was great or small. She seldom received an issue of a journal without writing a note of appreciation to the editors, a note which might include a gentle critique of anything that she felt fell below the standard she expected. Her friends know her as a reliable correspondent, her letters often adorned with gossamer-thin pressed leaves and flowers. At evenings on the weekend, one could expect a telephone call from Margaret, her voice sometimes weak, until it seemed she took strength from the contact and communicated over the distance her unique wit and wisdom and insight into a topical aesthetic matter or a recent publication or exhibition.

We need a history of Margaret's work with Grace Perry for *Poetry Australia*, a formidable journal which helped to open the way for the flood of enthusiastic journals in the late sixties and seventies. We need also a history of her work with so many of the Australian writers whose writing she encouraged after she left *Poetry Australia*. Although her standards were high, her taste and understanding were eclectic, and although she was never deceived by factitious or raw work, she was open to experimental work, even when it did not perhaps appeal to her personal taste. Because of this she could help and encourage many writers whose more interesting work did not immediately or ever catch the attention of the mainstream critics.

Margaret's love of literature and art allows her to soar above factions and fashions. She never compares European and Australian culture, and never criticises Europe for its cruelties or Australia for its ignorance. Where the writing of many Australians born overseas is understandably nostalgic, Margaret's writing simply celebrates and commemorates all that had touched her and all that she found worth preserving in poetry. One of the most memorable poems from her European childhood is the description of an impoverished respectable father on a tram, carrying a cardboard box

the people around you look disinterested	they are not aware
that the carriage has become	a holy shrine
the body of an innocent child	so small it lies
hidden in the grey carton	and so pretty
on its way to the cemetery . . .	

Margaret was proud of her work, but constantly sought and listened to advice. She was proud of her husband and her children and their families and of her friends. Everything sat naturally with her eagerness and enthusiasm, and with her great learning and aesthetic integrity. In later times, it was perhaps the stresses of the years before she left Europe in 1939 that filled her imagination with troublesome intruders, so that her friends understand Manfred Jurgensen's apt reference to her "beleaguered house" in his poem "visiting the poet m.d." In later years, too, light and the sun, which she loved, troubled her eyes and her skin. Deeply though we miss Margaret's earthly presence, her friends are comforted that she need "fear no more the heat o' the sun."

Elizabeth Perkins