

Elizabeth Perkins

## A PERSONAL VIEW FROM THE PRECIPICE

Joan Priest, *The Literary Precipice*. Scribblers Publishing. 148 pp. \$19.95 (plus \$5.00 postage) from Scribblers Publishing, PO BOX 501, MUDGEERBA, QUEENSLAND 4213. ISBN 0-9586737-3-3.

Joan Priest, a helpful supporter of *LiNQ* for many years, as of many other little magazines, presents a clear, well-researched account of her long engagement with writing and publishing in Queensland. Known best to the general reading public as a poet and biographer, Priest is also gratefully remembered by hundreds, perhaps thousands, of beginning and accomplished writers whom she has encouraged and supported through her association with literary occasions, large and small, in south-east Queensland, and with academia, the Society of Authors and the productions of little theatres.

Although Priest's work for the Brisbane Warana Festival may remain uppermost in the memory of many writers, she has also had a long association with ABC radio, specifically with drama, and with the little theatres that fostered and nurtured the present richly diverse professional, pro / am and amateur theatre culture of Brisbane. As she says, "We had a plethora of good

theatre to attend in Brisbane in the second half of the 1950s. It was inspirational."

Unappealing as the fifties are to many of us who remember them vividly, the best aspects of two socially and cultural pivotal decades come alive in Priest's account of the forties and fifties.

Priest records the talents, the dedication and the personalities of many whose lives contribute to the cultural history (and the cultural present) of the south-east corner of the state; and whose influence in many cases spread much further. Barbara Sisley, Gloria Birdwood-Smith, Rhoda Felgate, Babette Stephens, Alex Foster, Eunice Hanger, Cec Hadgraft, Val Vallis, Joan Whalley and Jean Trundle are only some of the memorable people whose work and inspiration are recalled here. Also recorded is the work of actors, directors and playwrights like David Glendinning, Bryan Nason, Richard Fotheringham and Ian Austin.

Poets and writers also abound in *The Literary Precipice*—John Blight, Thea Astley, David Rowbotham, David Malouf, Janette Turner Hospital, for example. Priest's account enlivens their entries in literary histories and reference books with a skilful kind of reporting that does not indulge in personal enthusiasm or opinion, and leaves the impression that the account is both disinterested and yet warmly involved with the people

and events it records. A few notables, usually from interstate, encounter a more critical narration, but their often patronising behaviour is related more in sadness than in anger. There is nothing provincial about Priest's account; it places Brisbane and south-east Queensland in its national setting, but it is a regional history of the best kind. A reader knowing nothing of this part of Australia or of the fifty or sixty years recorded, will gain a very clear impression of time, place, events and people.

It is also an autobiography inviting the reader into the life of a family and their relations and friends, their involvement with the events, cultural life and politics of their generation. More and more this kind of history is seen as an essential contribution to the wide, general, socio-political histories of a nation, providing the real detail to history recorded in records, documents, newspapers and other media. For those specifically interested in the history of a nation, providing the real detail to history recorded in records, documents, newspapers and other media. For those specifically interested in the history of the arts, it strengthens the realisation that the history written up in mainstream accounts, encyclopedias and companions to the arts, is only the surface waters of a deep, strong stream comprising the work of thousands of people who supported the artists and their work through sheer love and unselfish commit-

ment to their belief in the essential importance of art.

As an autobiography, *The Literary Precipice* centres the writer in the foreground of the record, but she is surrounded by a very wide context. Modest, but with a definite sense of her identity, her abilities and her role in the cultural life of her community, Priest discusses her poetry and her biographical writing in a way that encourages one to want to turn to the poems and books themselves. Just as her encounters with the writers and theatre people already mentioned give a personal setting to their work, her accounts of *Scholars and Gentlemen* (her biography of the Mackerras family), *The Thiess Story* and *Sir Harry Gibbs, his Queensland Years* and other of her writing, tell much about the delights and vicissitudes of literary work. It is clear why Priest chose and called her autobiography *The Literary Precipice*: a writer stands on the brink, exhilarating in the splendid view, the vastness, the distant unreachable peaks and the sense of precarious achievement that one has at least reached one's own small eminence. The book has a good index of names, but, perhaps unduly modest, it does not supply a listed bibliography of Priest's own work.