

way of getting themselves into print.

Economists who feel moved to follow Tullock's advice are welcome to contact the editor of *Policy*.

Australian Literature in the Cold War

Michael Cook, a postgraduate student of Australian literature and editor of the magazine Perspective, reviews A Question of Commitment: Australian Literature in the Twenty Years after the War by Susan McKernan (Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1989).

In the closing days of the 1988 NSW State election, voters were treated to the comedy of Barry Unsworth and Nick Greiner both claiming 'I'm the underdog, not him'. Much the same happens in academic scraps over Australian literature — with the difference, however, that the missiles hurled on literary battlefields rarely hurt anything but egos. Critics and writers try to show the mettle of their own faction by demonstrating various degrees of oppression by their opponents.

This is particularly true of the 1950s, when political differences were clear and deep and when the most important writers were generally cool towards left-wing radicalism and towards modernism, i.e. the trend towards experiment in literature initiated by T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, James Joyce and others. It was not until the mid-1960s that modernism established itself in Australia. This apparent conservatism is gratifying or dismaying, depending upon which side of the fence you live.

A Question of Commitment, Susan McKernan's balanced study of Australian literature during the Cold War period, is a refreshing injection of *glasnost* into the history

of this exciting period. Instead of pitting modernist against anti-modernist and communist against anti-communist, she attempts to show that the major writers of the era all shared a sense of what she calls commitment, 'their obligation as writers to society' (p.163). In those heady days, literature mattered: it had the power to transform society.

Every critic needs a target and McKernan's appears to be John Docker, a left-leaning critic whom she chides for 'simple political categorisations' (p.4). Docker argues in his provocative book *In a Critical Condition* that the teaching of Australian literature has been controlled by a 'metaphysical orthodoxy' whose canons are formalist, elitist, Anglocentric and metaphysical, and who systematically exclude nationalist, democratic and socialist writers. His analysis appears to assume that conservatism in Australian poetry at the time was a reflection of Cold War political conservatism. McKernan sets herself the task of showing that conservative literary forms in the novel and in poetry did not necessarily imply political conservatism.

The 1950s are often thought of as staid and sleepy intellectually, but McKernan succeeds in showing the great diversity of political and literary thought amongst writers of the time, even if they did, generally speaking, shun avant-garde styles. In fact, most conservative of all were the communist writers. The orthodox regarded themselves as 'engineers of human souls', in Stalin's words. There were profound disagreements about what actually constituted socialist realism, but in general, left-wing writers disdained modernist experimentation as despairing, elitist and self-centred. In McKernan's view, Australian socialist novels like Frank Hardy's *Power Without Glory* were often mediocre books with strong and colourful storylines that moved away from a realistic depiction of the working class towards melodrama. As McKernan points out, the working class's main problem in the 1950s was not repression by their bosses, but the boredom of suburban life. This was a spiritual

problem to which the socialist writers had no answer. And when Patrick White used modernist techniques in his version of the socialist realist novel, *The Tree of Man*, his novel was criticised as artistic elitism.

Left-wing writers produced some fine work. Judah Waten's *Alien Son* is well worth reading, though he was a committed communist who rejoined the Party after the Soviet invasion of Hungary as a gesture of solidarity. But their allegiance to communist dogmas fettered their creativity. John Manifold, the author of some excellent poetry, also produced *agitprop* verse like his 'Death of Stalin':

Such is his vast memorial's extent!

Here — like a fighter-plane,
his petrol spent,
But straining dauntless towards
a friendly drome

Whilst all his victories yet
blaze in air —

Here at the dawn-lit first perimeter

Of Communism Uncle Joe
reached home. (p.33)

In the early 1950s, the influence of the communists in literary circles appeared so great that the left seemed to be the only group that cared about Australian writing at all. This deeply concerned anti-communists and following the lead of groups in the United States and England, an Australian Association for Cultural Freedom was formed in 1954. In 1956 it gave birth to the cultural journal *Quadrant* as a challenge to the left-leaning *Meanjin* and *Overland*. The poet James McAuley was its first editor. It was a fortunate choice, for he was a strong personality, a good editor and perhaps the only outspoken anti-communist of any stature in the literary world.

But McKernan argues that Cultural Freedom was an artificial development in Australia, a front for anti-communists whose prestige grew as McAuley coopted well-known writers as contributors. 'Cultural Freedom,' she says, 'was interested only in political power

and was quite prepared to exploit writers to maintain the appearance of a liberal and independent position' (p.68). I find it difficult to sympathise with her indignation. Launching a journal is a difficult and expensive business and sponsors are needed. As she herself acknowledges, contributors to *Quadrant* have always included writers who could not be termed conservative. The revelation in 1967 that CIA funds had been channelled into the magazine was far more embarrassing for McAuley and Cultural Freedom, but McKernan's own research shows that the CIA never manipulated *Quadrant* for anti-communist ends. So long as *Quadrant* pursued a reasonably catholic editorial line, what difference did the politics of its original backers make?

McKernan appears to feel that conservatism was the cuckoo laid in the snug nest of Australia's *literati*: alien, strident and ugly. Hers is a more refined variation on the left-wing theme that the only true-blue Australian literature is democratic, socialist and nationalist. Her arguments might have been more persuasive if she had explained exactly what she means by concepts such as 'politically conservative' and 'right-wing extremism'.

In a history of political commitment, James McAuley is clearly a central figure because of his high public profile and his lonely, sometimes arrogant, refusal to truckle to left-liberal enthusiasms. 'I play a match against the age's mind', he wrote in his long narrative poem *Captain Quiros*. And to add to the scandal of his fierce anti-commu-

nism, he was a fervent Catholic convert. Like many other critics, McKernan feels that his commitment to these abstract ideas harmed his poetry, much as the communists had harmed theirs. There is certainly some truth in this, but what she dislikes most is his insistence that a belief in metaphysics was necessary for 'depth and resonance' in poetry. To her, this means that only believing Catholics could write great poetry.

In fact, the word 'metaphysics' does not imply denominational faith at all and McAuley did not mean it to. I suspect that much confusion amongst critics about McAuley's thoughts on poetry would be cleared up if they referred to the relevant entry in the Oxford English Dictionary.

In all of her quite competent discussions of the major writers of the period, McKernan makes a simple but interesting point: they cared about society, they believed in something. A. D. Hope opposed any overt political commitment, but preached the objectivity of the scientific method. Douglas Stewart also resisted political involvement, but encouraged an optimistic Australian nationalism as a poet, dramatist and literary editor for *The Bulletin*. Judith Wright felt that poetry could renew the human consciousness to avoid an imminent 'crisis'. Patrick White offered spiritual values to a materialistic nation in his struggle against destructive mediocrity. Even Barry Humphries's satires of suburban Australia drew attention to a banality that was worse than poverty.

If most of the writers of the

1950s eschewed the extremes of modernist experimentation, they were hardly hide-bound defenders of the status quo. In contrast, many (not all) of today's writers are so obsessed with the act of writing that they have forgotten about their audience. As McKernan notes, 'The pleasures of Australian writing in the eighties are more various, more playful, more linguistically innovative than those of the fifties, but the writing is less certain of its role and less certain of its audience than it was thirty years ago' (p.227). In other words, the manipulation of words has become more important than the ideas the words enshrine. Writers seem to have lost their nerve. It reminds me of Francis Fukuyama and the end of history: no more tub-thumping, no more crusades ... Have we become the people McAuley pitied?

But what of those whose powers, too long untried,
Have atrophied for lack of use
and died,
The disinherited defrauded rout
Who do not think or dream, deny
or doubt,
But simply don't know what it's
all about?

If nothing else, *A Question of Commitment* has performed a service by showing that the two decades after World War II were not a cultural vacuum, but years of intellectual ferment, full of great artistic and political variety. It was a time when writers felt a serious responsibility to shape the world they lived in.

Policy

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