Simon Nasht. *The Last Explorer: Hubert Wilkins, Australia’s Unknown Hero.*
(Hachette Livre Australia, 2006).


On the cover of *The Last Explorer* a pair of anguished eyes peer at the reader out of a bearded face framed by thick furs. This is George Hubert Wilkins, the explorer of the title, and, according to the author Simon Nasht, Australia’s unknown hero.

However, anguish is not a state which Wilkins often entertained, if Nasht is to be believed. Wilkins – known as George until he was knighted by King George the Fifth and decided on the spur of the moment that he should become Sir Hubert rather than presuming to use the King’s name – seemed to breeze through his adventures with none of the angst which characterised many of his colleagues like Shackleton, Scott and Amundsen. Wilkins was seeking scientific advances rather than celebrity, which embarrassed him: his aim in life was to set up meteorological stations in the Arctic and Antarctic regions in order to provide solid data for weather forecasting around the world. In his time international rivalries made this impossible, but he worked away at research and exploration in the polar regions, north and south, all of which contributed to the knowledge needed to fulfil his aims once the political climate made it feasible.

Wilkins was born in 1888 on an desolate farm in the Flinders Ranges, and died in 1958. I lost count of the number of times during those seventy years when he faced certain death in flimsy planes, airships, leaky submarines, as a photographer in the front lines of World War One, and even before a Turkish firing squad. He could well be recruited as the hero of an adventure series along the lines of Hornblower or
Biggles. In the gung-ho tradition of exploring, he seemed content – or at least resigned – to making do with frighteningly inadequate equipment. He was the first to fly in the Arctic in the 1920s, when even the latest planes were flimsy things barely able to survive in temperate climes. The submarine he took to explore under the Arctic ice in 1931 was a rust-bucket and probably sabotaged by disaffected members of the crew. Radio technology was fairly crude so he was thrown on his own devices many times, always having left instructions not to send a search party if he didn’t return. Sir Hubert Wilkins, however, survived to die of a heart attack in New York at the age of seventy.

Nasht writes with patent admiration for the achievements of a practically self-educated colonial who became, briefly, one of the most famous men in the world. He is sympathetic with the publicity-shy Wilkins’ uneasy dealings with American media magnates who wanted – and tried to buy – dramatic stories rather than useful scientific research. He speculates about Wilkins’ lack of lasting fame, which may in the end come down to his own lack of interest. He didn’t care whether he was the first man to fly to the south pole or the first to take a submarine to the north pole, so he left others to claim the glory. And equally, he survived: not for him Scott’s valiant but misguided attempts at glory. But if Australia is looking for heroes, Wilkins, laconic, equable, resourceful and modest, might fit the bill.