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Brenda Niall. *Life Class: The Education of a Biographer*. Melbourne University Press, 2007.

Review by Gillian Dooley for Writer's Radio, Radio Adelaide, recorded on 26 May 2007.

Brenda Niall, author of four biographies, has now produced a thoughtful and engaging book about her own career, though, as she makes clear in her Preface, it is not 'an autobiography, scarcely even a memoir.' Some scenes from her Melbourne childhood are followed by her account of gradually becoming a biographer and how she has gone about conceiving, researching and writing her books. An engagement in 1956, broken off with embarrassment but, it seems, little pain, is the sum of the personal life she reveals.

So *Life Class* is very much an intellectual journey. Niall is no drama queen: her schooling was that combination which so many memoirs have made to appear oxymoronic: a happy Catholic education. Born in 1930, she felt that she, like her classmates in the Convent, 'were all destined to be nuns or mothers', and that she 'would [have been] happy to leave the workforce and be like everyone else', if she had married in 1956. Instead she almost accidentally fell into working for Bob Santamaria, helping him with a never-completed biography of Archbishop Daniel Mannix, then somewhat belatedly, in her thirties, enrolled in a postgraduate degree at the Australian National University.

Always modest but never striking a false note, she moves through the years, concentrating on her research which began, with Edith Wharton, Mary Grant Bruce and Ethel Turner, and Martin Boyd, in literary criticism but then developed into biography. The interest of *Life Class* lies in Niall's account of the genesis of her

various projects – why she chose these subjects and rejected others, and the problems – how to start, how to structure the narrative, how to deal with skeletons in cupboards: although the subject of a biography may be dead, the descendants of a famous ancestor may not react kindly to revelations of a seedy past. She was worried – needlessly, as it turned out – about her discovery that the celebrated Boyd family were descended not just from a convict but a criminal from a family of thieves, who made his fortune by establishing a Melbourne brewery and several pubs. She discovered that Hugh McCrae, editing the diaries of his grandmother Georgiana in the 1930s, had not only pruned but embroidered her text to make it more entertaining. How to break this to the family? Then her biography of Judy Cassab brought a different set of challenges, since here was finally a subject still very much alive, with whom she could have a real two-way relationship.

In her Afterword, Niall asks, with apparent seriousness, ‘Could I have been a serious scholar?’ After her account of years spent in archives, carefully weighing evidence, it seems an astonishing question. If her work is not serious scholarship, it’s difficult to know what is. At 75 many would be ready to retire, but Niall makes no concession to her years; as this book ends, she is embarking on another project, a life of Father William Hackett, close friend of Archbishop Mannix, Jesuit, Irish republican, and family friend, another ‘border crossing into [an]other life’, as she puts it.