Writing the life of an author poses particular difficulties: it would be ridiculous not to examine the author’s writings but there is not enough space to analyse them fully and the intentional fallacy looms large in such analysis. In literary critical biography it is easy to fall between the stools of literary criticism and biography. Joanna Woods politely notes that her project ‘produced a number of challenges’ (9) but each of these books straddle the divide remarkably well. Indeed, Michael Sharkey’s book on David McKee Wright exhibits a depth of research and poised, intelligent literary judgement. Strictly speaking, Charles Baeyertz was not a creative writer – he was principally a music critic – but his creation and long term editorship of the Triad magazine generate the same issues. McKee Wright was a creative writer but he was also an editor of the Bulletin for ten years (hence Sharkey’s title), so both men had strong magazine roles. Sharkey declares his ‘interest in coteries and networks of writers, editors and publishers’ (17) and McKee Wright’s magazine work and journalism enable Sharkey to work to his philosophical view that writers should be studied in relation to their society and times. Joanna Woods effectively concurs, so that both these books provide fascinating portraits of literary life in Dunedin and Sydney particularly, and in New Zealand and Australia more broadly, in the early decades of the twentieth century.

Baeyertz was born in Melbourne (in 1866) but left for New Zealand in 1891, returning to Australia, but now to Sydney, in 1914. McKee Wright was born in Ireland in 1869 but brought up in England from 1877; he emigrated to New Zealand in 1887 and moved to Sydney in 1910, leaving his wife and son to face the unpaid creditors. Baeyertz died in Sydney in 1943, McKee Wright in 1928, and each is mentioned in the other’s biography, not always in terms that flatter the other book. Woods shows that Sharkey’s statement that Baeyertz ‘regarded New Zealand as “Philistia” (Baeyertz’s term)’ (123) is misleading and that the description of ‘Morton’s Triad’ (296) – perhaps following Peter Kirkpatrick’s statement in The Sea Coast of Bohemia that the Triad was ‘nominally edited by its founder, C.N. Baeyertz’¹ – is simply wrong. Baeyertz and McKee Wright’s experience of literary life in both New Zealand and Australia make it unsurprising that they had friends in common, such as Pat Lawlor, Frank Morton (who from 1908–1923 wrote much of the Triad), and Adam McCay. A.G. Stephens also moved across the Tasman, as did Henry Lawson and others, and these two books deepen our understanding of literary and cultural interactions in what even in my childhood was commonly called ‘Australasia’. Both Baeyertz and McKee Wright were cosmopolitan in outlook, far from endorsing any Bush school or nationalism; both stood for artistic formalism and against Modernism; both led complicated maritval Bohemian personal lives; and both displayed a Victorian industriousness that can leave you exhausted just reading about it.

Baeyertz founded the *Triad* in 1893 and edited it until 1925, without any Arts Council funding, initially writing most of it himself, supplemented by clippings from overseas journals and newspapers. He took it to Australia with him in 1914 but changing times and libel cases took their toll, together with Baeyertz’s perhaps understanding New Zealand’s mœrs better than Australia’s. Woods accurately describes the magazine as having a ‘mischievous spirit’ (191), with Morton’s provocation of sexual wowsers and Baeyertz’s take-no-prisoners musical and artistic critiques being the principal sources. Baeyertz was a brilliant music critic, a kind of Antipodean George Bernard Shaw, impudent, brash and unafraid to take on big targets such as Nellie Melba and John McCormack. Nevertheless, a lot of what he wrote seems to have been bluff arrogance, which Woods is often inclined to let him get away with. She notes without apparent irony that in 1914, ‘Within a few days of his arrival, he had posted off an authoritative overview of Sydney’s cultural life for inclusion in the July *Triad*’ (163). Perhaps it is more important for such a magazine to be lively than to be accurate, and neither Baeyertz nor Morton hesitated to be provocative; certainly anyone experienced in literary and cultural magazines has to admire someone who could keep one going for 32 years, through changes of content, style and design. Its Australian contributors included Mary Gilmore, Ethel Anderson, Kenneth Slessor, and Hugh McCrae, who eventually took over editorship under the title *New Triad* until 1928. Woods describes how Baeyertz went on to present classical music on Sydney commercial radio (yes, commercial radio) and become the resident ‘Tutor in Voice Production’ at the ABC.

Probably because of the availability of source material, Woods is better on the public man than the private, although she does demonstrate clearly the gap between the two. She writes clearly and intelligently about a colourful character and goes a long way to achieving her aim of demonstrating how the *Triad* years in New Zealand included many ‘large-minded men and women’ (219) with a knowledgeable appreciation of the arts. The book is beautifully presented, with a useful index and a wonderful cast of photographs, and this can be said of Sharkey’s biography too.

Geoffrey Dutton once dismissed David McKee Wright as a writer of ‘particularly anaemic verses’², and this would be a pretty fair assessment of the way he has been seen for many years. Michael Sharkey notes that ‘revision of Wright’s literary status began in earnest as soon as he died’ (359) and he was ‘largely expunged from the record of Australian poetry’ (20); you would have to pinch yourself to recognise that he was once a literary giant. Sharkey claims that ‘it is impossible to argue with the taste of another age’ (361); personally, I don’t think this is true, but it is striking that probably no-one in the maelstrom of literary activity in Sydney in Wright’s period – the 1910s and 1920s – could have foreseen that Henry Lawson and Kenneth Slessor would come to be seen as the great writers. As Editor of the *Bulletin* McKee Wright published them both, although of course Lawson’s reputation was established before McKee Wright ever reached Sydney. Apart from his statement, ‘It is futile to suggest that Wright’s [light verse poems] were not up to Slessor’s standard’ (180) – Slessor’s best were better than Wright’s, but they were better than everyone else’s too – Sharkey proves an astute judge of McKee Wright’s voluminous output. He establishes McKee Wright as a witty satirist (including of himself), at times a delicate lyricist, and a poet with superb technical command. Sharkey demonstrates that much of McKee Wright’s bad verse – and he does not hide the fact that there was plenty of it – was driven by the need to earn money.


McKee Wright’s output, published under pseudonyms that Sharkey has detected as well as under his own name, is staggering. For example, he published 122 poems in the *Bulletin* in 1922 as well as ‘contributions to other journals’ (276). Sharkey calculates that McKee Wright published 1600 poems in the *Bulletin* in nineteen years, an average of more than 80 per year! Needless to say, he did not hesitate to publish himself. This together with his editorials, journalism, and publications in other magazines, including competition prizewinning poems, makes it difficult to complain about contemporary workloads, even given that this was an age in which poetry could be a form of current affairs. McKee Wright managed this while his private life was often in turmoil. He also built cabins and furniture, was a prizewinning gardener, bred chooks, became an expert collector of fine china, and it’s tempting to say God-knows-what-else. His life was extraordinary: he moved from being a Congregational parson and strong Temperance man, then a bushman, in New Zealand to being a bohemian beer-drinking poet, editor and journalist in Sydney, with one marriage and two other relationships, the last with the writer Zora Cross, and a number of children. It comes as a surprise to find that at the time of his death he was only 58, given how much he packed into his life.

Michael Sharkey explores this life fairly fully, with a poet’s eye and in fine prose. He is fair-minded and not afraid to make judgements, noting that McKee Wright’s poems ‘were characteristically vitiated’ by ‘padding’ and a ‘love of adjectives’ (251) learnt from Tennyson. McKee Wright’s editorship was by turns generous and astute then wrongheaded: he ‘dismissed George Moore and Bernard Shaw’ and proclaimed James Stephens ‘the saving grace’ of the Irish renaissance, and argued that Lawson’s poetry was better than his prose. Yet in many respects McKee Wright seems to have been an admirable writer and an admirable man. As with Woods’s study of Baeyertz, we never feel that we get inside McKee Wright; perhaps that is impossible. Michael Sharkey’s book remains a very impressive biography and an important contribution to our understanding of a period which lay the foundations for modern Australian literature.

Dennis Haskell