



Archived at the Flinders Academic Commons:
<http://hdl.handle.net/2328/27231>

This is a scan of a document number DUN/Speeches/3617
in the Dunstan Collection, Special Collections, Flinders University Library.
<http://www.flinders.edu.au/library/info/collections/special/dunstan/>

Title:

Review of 'Stirring the Possum' by James McLelland [by] Don Dunstan

Please acknowledge the source as:
Dunstan Collection, Flinders University Library.
Identifier: DUN/Speeches/3617

© Copyright Estate Donald Allan Dunstan

Review of "Stirring The Possum" by James McLelland.

Don Dunstan.

How often, in the theatre, one sees a play containing a minor part, so well performed that afterwards one thinks "Wish we'd seen more of him."

James McLelland has been that sort of player in Australian politics, and interested observers are prompted to ask why a man of considerable intellect, a skilled wordsmith, capable of ~~considerable~~ charm in address and evidently possessed of reforming ideals, should ~~play~~ have accomplished less than to be expected from ~~his~~ ^{his} ~~ability~~ ^{one of his ability}.

He lays a finger on the reason in commenting on the ~~period~~ ^{time} when he dropped out of Melbourne University after two not very successful years and completed his arts degree as a part-time student. He says "This period prefigured the dichotomy which has characterised my life between self-indulgence and a sometimes almost monastic devotion to things of the mind. It has been a fairly even contest between the id and the ~~super ego~~ ^{super ego}."

In his mid-twenties he became a Trotskyite and followed that band of zealots with the fervour ^{with} which as an adolescent he had followed Catholicism.

It was to lead to his becoming an ironworker, joining the A.I.P. as a front, to be influenced, being ~~expelled from the~~ ^{expelled from the} ~~railroaded out of the~~ ^{railroaded out of the} Ironworkers Union and his job by Ernie Thornton, the implacable Communist Federal Secretary of the F.I.A.

That sent him off to a war he did not believe in, and afterwards to Sydney and a C.R.T.S.-supported law course at Sydney University. While there his faith in Trotskyism, failed as had his Catholicism before it.

He rejoined the Labor Party in Sydney

and through his local member, Clavie Martin, was articled to Cedric Cahill's firm; a good beginning for a labor lawyer, and set up practice on graduating with the solicitor for the A.R.U. His Labor Party membership appears to have lapsed around this time, and he did not rejoin until ~~1960~~ the early sixties. In the meantime he was in the forefront of the struggle against Communist control of the Ironworkers, successfully waged by his fellow ex-Trotskyite Laurie Short, and in which he regularly briefed John Kerr. This led to work for factions in other unions, and an extensive and lucrative ~~civil injure~~ law practice. Why did he not then seek a political career? The drudgery involved, it seems, was unappealing. As he says of his seeking endorsement for the Senate in 1970, "I had always been temperamentally incapable of conducting myself in the obligatory style of a candidate for pre-selection for the lower house."

So Tim went to Canberra at Tim O'Connell's death in 1971, and had to "serve his apprenticeship" in Caucus until he was elected to a Cabinet vacancy in February 1975. To get a range of policies into effect takes some years. Not only did he not have such time, but as Minister for Labor he was forced to spend his energies to stop the wage spiral which had taken off so disastrously the previous year, and seek some sort of wages accord in conditions which were unpropitious in the extreme. That he did as well as he did is why so many of his admirers, myself among them, wanted more. It was not to be. Tim's ministry was struck down by his former close associate, Sir John Kerr, in circumstances that caused him to feel an acute sense not only of national, but personal, betrayal. As Tim says, he is a good hater. Kerr does not emerge well from the book.

He left the ~~bench~~ ^{Senate} to return to his beloved Sydney and the bench. He admits to an infatuation with Sydney, which he feels bound to explain. What he does not explain, (probably because he does not perceive), ^{is} that this infatuation results in his treating events and developments elsewhere in the continent ~~of~~ as of little concern or importance. For many politicians ~~to~~ in New South Wales the life of the nation lies on a Canberra-Sydney axis, ~~to~~ and this attitude evidences not sophistication but insularity. Australia does not consist of Sydney and the bush.

Tim embarked on the role of Chief Justice of the N.S.W. Land & Environment Court with vigour, and soon was publicly at odds with Ministerial or legislative intervention which appeared to him to negate the participatory processes in planning decisions.

His ~~land~~ ^{major} public task was as President of the Royal Commission on the British nuclear tests in Australia in the 1950s. In this he was able to expose the callousness & deceit of some who were involved in decision-making at that time, ~~for which~~ ~~numbers~~ the results of which were significant in cost, social disruption and pain to numbers of Australians. He did it all with determination and ~~verve~~ which served the nation well.

The book is written with an impeccable sense of literary style, and without ~~to~~ his falling to the temptation of ^{indulging in} the acid bar meat which has sometimes, ^{in the past} caused distress ~~to himself~~ ^{to} other, and problems for himself.

Bill D'Arcy's office, FAX 841 1866.

Dear Desley,

Herewith the Bulletin article.

When typed it should be faxed to

James Hall, Associate Editor, The

Bulletin, Rapifax (02) 267 2150.

Thanks,

Don Dunstan.