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This is the author’s radio script of this article.


*The Land I Came Through Last* is a family memoir by poet Robert Gray – the title taken from a Christopher Brennan poem. Gray’s childhood had its share of all too common difficulties – alcoholism, poverty, illness, and intergenerational conflict – but in true Tolstoyan fashion, the Gray family was unhappy in its own way.

Though Gray’s father came from a wealthy family, he was not a good provider, and he was a pretty terrible father. He was a gambler as well as a drinker – he lost the family farm in a game of cards. But the stereotypes stop there: he was never violent to his family, and besides drinking his other great pleasure was reading. It was not until after his death that Robert realised something about the shadow that had darkened his childhood: that for his father there was never any question about drinking: ‘It caused so many problems for us, we assumed he had a problem too. But he never joined AA, or would have dreamed of doing so; never went on the wagon, showed the least regret, apologised, wavered, or wanted to change. … His only problem was our objection. … A determined wastrel. Almost admirable, in his independence.’

Gray’s mother was saint to his father’s sinner: she, poor woman, thought that by marrying him she could save him from himself. There are harrowing descriptions of Gray as a young boy – the eldest of four children – searching the property with his mother in the early hours of the morning to find his father collapsed under a bush on the way home from the pub, and dragging him home to bed before he caught pneumonia. Nina Gray consoled herself with the Jehovah’s Witnesses: Robert went
along with that until at the age of fifteen he could stand it no longer. ‘Children are natural stoics,’ he says, ‘or they used to be: they don’t know enough to pre-empt their futures, and realise they simply have to wait on life.’

Along with the privations involved in this kind of life – including a gruelling year in a children’s home when the social workers thought his mother couldn’t provide for him – Gray recounts his artistic and intellectual development. He’s not ashamed of admitting an early addiction to the crime novels of Ross Macdonald, and finding inspiration in *The Wind in the Willows*. He claims that he learned more about writing from his work on the Reader’s Digest Handymans Guide than by any other means. Nevertheless, Gray is sometimes too taken with his poetic imagery – ‘a steam-ironed, flat, polyester sea’ strains too hard for effect, though sometimes he gets it right: ‘The man, short and powerfully built, arrived in the room like a tennis service’ gives an immediate and comic picture.

Gray strays from his family theme for a couple of chapters, recounting friendships with the likes of Bruce Chatwin, Les Murray and Patrick White. But he is no sycophant and these portraits are intriguing. He is modest about his own work: ‘To see a work of mine in a bookshop filled me with remorse; those parts I have come to think of as failures usurping in my attention all the rest.’

*The Land I Came Through Last* is not a quick read, and has a few dull and even sententious moments, but all in all it’s an absorbing book, deeply humane and often very moving.