

A Bachelor's Bequests

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John Poynter

MR FELTON'S BEQUESTS

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ALFRED FELTON, a bachelor who lived for many years in boarding houses of one kind or another, might seem a familiar Victorian figure, particularly in a colony where there were not enough women to go around. But Felton was a bachelor with a difference. In the first place, as the co-founder of the prosperous drughouse Felton, Grimwade and Co., he was a colonial success story. He also had interests beyond business. His rooms at the Esplanade Hotel in St Kilda, where he spent his last years, were crammed with paintings, books and objects; some splendid, recently unearthed photographs document this 'obsessive profusion', as John Poynter describes it.

Felton's friends and colleagues might have dismissed his compulsive collecting as the harmless eccentricity of a wealthy man. His will, therefore, came as a considerable surprise. Having no direct descendants to provide for, Felton directed that the bulk of his estate should pass to a trust, half the income of which was to be devoted to 'charitable objects', the other half to 'the purchase of works of art' for 'the Melbourne National Art Gallery'. This latter provision, formally known as the Felton Bequest, enabled the National Gallery of Victoria (now marketing itself under the twin labels of NGV International and NGV Australia) to become, in Patrick McCaughey's words, 'the first encyclopedic collection of art in Australia'.

Mr Felton's Bequests is a massive book, but Poynter has a lot of territory to cover. About a third of the book teases out the life story of this very private man, while the remainder traces the history of the bequests from Felton's death in 1904 through to the present day. This involves, on the one hand, sketching in changing ideas of charity and philanthropy, and, on the other, a virtual history of the gallery in the context of Melbourne's often crony-bound cultural establishment.

Poynter is keen to correct Russell Grimwade's depiction of Felton as 'essentially placid and benign'. There was 'a more crusted and astringent' side to his personality; he was, after all, an astute and often demanding man of business. He was, however, 'a convivial man within the bounds of decency' and enjoyed gossip. As for his failure to marry, is it possible that Felton's sexual orientation was homosexual? Poynter concludes that his friendships with men were 'close, but seem to have been convivial rather than passionate': given the dearth of evidence, he leaves the question of Felton's sexuality open with the wry observation that 'some people find celibacy congenial'.

Most notably, of course, Felton was a systematically generous man. He stayed in touch with relatives in England, providing financial assistance; their needs were recognised

in his will. But he had no doubt that he was an Australian, once commenting that in England 'the light is sad, and the people are sad with you; with us the light is bright, and the people are bright'.

Felton's bequest to the Melbourne gallery made it, overnight, a comparatively well-endowed institution, with acquisition funds greater than London's National and Tate galleries combined. But the conditions of the bequest created a complex structure for its administration. A Bequests Committee was to have the responsibility for applying the income to the purposes of the will, but it could only purchase works of art which had 'an educational value' and were 'calculated to raise and improve public taste'. The trustees of the gallery could, however, veto the committee's choices, and could themselves make recommendations; and the gallery's director understandably wanted to have an input.

The first significant purchase, Pissarro's *Boulevard Montmartre*, for all of £300, might have augured well for the bequest, but soon the committee, its London advisers, the trustees and the gallery director were engaged in some long and spiteful wrangles. These were exacerbated by the long tenure and sometimes considerable age of those involved. James Levey, for example, was still chairing the committee at the age of ninety-eight. Bernard Hall, director from 1892 until 1935, was something of a loose canon and showed no signs of mellowing with age, while his successor, J.S. MacDonald, who once described most modern art as being the work of 'degenerates and perverts', was an altogether baneful influence. Only with the advent of Sir Keith Murdoch to the Board of Trustees in the 1930s was there a more sustained modernist commitment. (It was, incidentally, an all-male show until the appointment of Mary Woodall as adviser in 1964, and Dame Elisabeth Murdoch as the first woman trustee in 1968.)

Yet in spite of this divisive atmosphere, the period between the wars saw some of the bequest's greatest acquisitions, including the extraordinary Blake illustrations for Dante's *Divine Comedy*; the *Madonna and Child*, originally attributed to Van Eyck and long regarded as the gallery's most famous painting; and Tiepolo's *Cleopatra's Banquet*, bought from the Soviet Union and paid for in London with a suitcase-full of small currency, and which now has pride of place in the reopened St Kilda Road gallery.

With the rapid escalation of the art market after World War II, the influence of the bequest began to decline. The gallery was also acquiring other sources of income. Interestingly, the most important bequest since Felton's came from another bachelor, Everard Studley Miller, in 1956.

There is always a risk that a book such as this might become a case of one damn purchase after another — and there have been over 15,000 of them — but Poynter peoples his large canvas with a fascinating, if often cranky, cast of characters. *Mr Felton's Bequests* also tells us a lot about the changing cultural climate of Melbourne: how, for example, the city of Felton's day was a much more cosmopolitan place than the parochial imperial outpost it became in the 1920s and 1930s. This book is a handsome product of the Miegunyah Press, but it must be said that some of the illustrations are disappointingly muted.