A Ngrugie Ngoppun
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Stephany Evans Steggall

CAN I CALL YOU COLIN?
THE AUTHORISED BIOGRAPHY OF COLIN THIELE
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MENTION COLIN THIELE’s name, and at least one
listener will sigh and say The Sun on the Stubble in
a wistful or regretful voice, depending on their
schooldays memories. This biography takes us on ngrugie
ngoppun: a ‘good walk’ with its subject. Largely chronologi-
cal, it begins with a glimpse of the writer poised to tell his
enduring story of the Coorong, Storm Boy (1963), and then
retraces his long life and career (Thiele was born in 1920). His idyllic boyhood
in the bosom of a loving farm commu-
nity, his academic studies as a young adult, his RAAF service and his long
distinguished teaching career are all laid out, leading to his subsequent fame
as a part-time writer.

Thiele has been a prolific and versa-
tile writer for over sixty years. He has
written poetry, short stories, plays, bi-
ography, textbooks and novels, while
working full-time as a teacher and then
principal of Wattle Park Teachers’ Col-
lege. He is best known for his novels
about his beloved South Australia, in
particular those set in fictitious settle-
ments in the Barossa Valley: The Sun on the Stubble (1961),
Uncle Gustav’s Ghosts (1974) and Labourers in the Vineyard
(1970), among others. Storm Boy is widely acknowledged to
be his best-loved story for children. Some of his short stories
for young readers are small gems: Danny’s Egg (1989) could
easily fit into the ‘Aussie Nibbles’ series. He has published a
biography of Hans Heysen (Heysen of Hahndorf, 1968),
and his own memoir of childhood, With Dew on My Boots (1997).
He published poetry in the notorious Ern Malley issue of
Angry Penguins, and had radio plays broadcast while still a
young teacher. His work has been adapted for cinema and
Television. Considering his long life, too few photographs are
included, but a note directs the reader to a website for more.
Young people seeking something about the author may be unwilling
or unable to read a 448-page book that contains so much extraneous
stuff: the fact that he kept envelopes in a lowboy in order to keep track of
the family finances is but one example of this. His war service is a compelling
story, with much technical detail that will fascinate; his difficulties in
administering a tertiary institution will be uninteresting to most. It seems
that Steggall had too much source material and felt compelled to use it
all, which inevitably leads to the reader being told the same thing more than
once, an irritant in an already exhaus-
tive account.

Why then has this book been
written is the question I kept asking myself through page
after page of domestic minutiae. It is difficult to write a bio-
graphy while the subject is still living. As the cover title makes
clear, this is an authorised biography. Maybe Thiele wants
to make the point that he was not just a writer for children.
It isn’t until the last few pages that it is clear that Thiele
considers he has written his last book — a wordy way of
announcing a retirement. It is evident from Michael Page’s
foreword that Thiele was given right of reply on the unfin-
ished manuscript, and I’m sure he wasn’t the only one. All of
which leads to the question of why Thiele didn’t simply write
this himself, as a sequel to With Dew on My Boots:

... to tell [Storm Boy], Colin had ‘to squeeze and wring the
words till they do what they’re supposed to do. They have to
be fresh and lively: walk when they are supposed to walk, and
run when they’re supposed to run. Then the sea comes rolling
across the pages. We have to know, to feel in our spirit what we
are writing about.’

It is a great pity that most of Steggall’s words plod through
this long ngrugie ngoppun.