The Great Obituarist

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Philip Jones

ART & LIFE

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BOOK COVERS ARE just expensive hints, and the jacket adorning Philip Jones’s memoir of Heide and beyond is suitably suggestive. Jones may not be especially literary, but he looms at us — first youthful, now in his early seventies — as a kind of antipodean Auden: languid, floppy-tied and with searching eyes. That direct, if hooded, gaze introduces us to a soi-disant minor figure in our cultural history, but one who had an intimate place at Heide in the 1960s and 1970s, and who has known some of the authentic characters and creators in Australian art and letters.

Like many memoirists, Jones feels his way into the book rather gingerly. ‘I am not myself a person of outstanding achievement,’ he tells us. ‘I have, however, known many of the creative people of my time and country.’ He also has a few scores to settle, and his own case to advance following the brouhaha about ownership of the old Heide house that followed Barrett Reid’s death.

Students of recent federal elections may quibble with Philip Jones’s (and Harold Stewart’s) epigraph that ‘All Australians are anarchists at heart’, but there can be no doubt that many of their autobiographies are ringingly anarchic. Art & Life is one of them. Jones introduces us to his early life in Kerang (he was born there in 1932) and his colourful family. His father is cheerless and friendless, and young Philip soon excises him from his feelings; but his mother sounds wonderful — sharp and irreverent. One night Philip overhears them arguing about his own proclivities: ‘My mother screamed, “Of course he is not a normal boy because he does not have a normal father.”’

Soon, though, Jones, as if unable to resist, interrupts the rustic narrative with an update on his current social life: lunch at the Florentino or the Melbourne Club; the latest opening, with those interminable speeches; more radio interviews; yet another funeral. Slightly jangling at first, this constant darting about rather suits the author and produces an entertaining series of snapshots of a life.

Philip Jones has long suffered from that dubious social affliction: He Has Known Everyone. In 1952 he and his family moved to London, just in time for some of the worst pea-soupers of the century. Jones joined the Q Theatre in Kew, and had coffee with Joan Collins (‘nice and chatty’). T.S. Eliot, a board member (he thinks), was often seen mouching around in the shadows. ‘I said, “Good evening, Mr Eliot,” but he did not reply.’ Such is life.

A ‘natural republican’ and ‘dyed-in-the-wool socialist’, Jones finds people more congenial in Australia, and heads home to act with Frank Thring’s Arrow Theatre and Gertrude Johnson’s (not Johnston, as in the book) National Theatre. He begins to act in radio dramas, often being cast as ‘gentlemanly men of action and leadership, including Prince Philip’. Then he meets Barrett Reid at the Public Library (now the State Library of Victoria), and his life is never the same again. Reid — poet, editor, librarian — introduces him to John and Sunday Reed at Heide, and suddenly Jones is surrounded by the art of Boyd and Perceval and Hester. Although they stay together for decades, Jones never seems wholly at ease with Reid, the consummate politician and literary figure. Movingly, Jones says this about his lover and critic: ‘Above all Barrie was a proud Australian. I think perhaps I had never met one before — at least in the cultural rather than xenophobic sense.’

Their life together seems to have been frantic as they roamed between different cities and houses, and gave huge lunches and dinners. Greenhill, one of their many homes, was a kind of open house, like their relationship. Along the way, Jones meets just about every celebrity then living or passing through Melbourne — and he hasn’t forgotten one of them. Jones befriends the Moras and lists the stars he meets at their parties (Hepburn & co.). Even glancing meetings are recorded: ‘My only recollection is of [Stravinsky’s] tiny feet encased in black shiny patent leather shoes.’ Jones describes H.V. Evatt as ‘sweet-natured’, which must be a first. Zara Holt clatters through the pages quite winningly. Robert Duncan comes to dinner and offends with his hauteur and his impromptu performance (‘I will now read a Duncan’). Jones meets Norma Major, wife of the British prime minister, and finds he has nothing in common with her — but it must go in, as in a diary, especially one intended for publication. Occasionally, the gossipy nature of the book, however qualified, seems bizarre. Of Kathleen Raine he says, ‘She fell in love with Gavin Maxwell who (it is generally believed) was gay. When their celibate relationship ended (so the story went), she cast a spell on him causing the death of his otters, a cancer diagnosis and eventually his death.’

Jones isn’t a punitive memoirist, but some of his portraits are scathing. He doesn’t take to Albert Tucker, whom he finds stuffy, too conscious of being addressed as ‘Mr Tucker’ by young artists. William Dargie he despises for his wooden art and his ‘outrageous cronymy’. He doesn’t much like Sydney,
and he may not be popular in Emerald City after his dismissals
of Lloyd Rees, Brett Whiteley and John Olsen.

But Hal Porter and Sidney Nolan are in a class of their own
— monsters of egotism, if Jones is to be believed. He has very
mixed feelings about the great memoirist (‘anti-feminist, anti-
Semitic and homophobic’), though they must have been rea-
sonably close at one point (Jones launched The Paper Chase
in 1966). There is a hilarious account of a journey from
Adelaide to Melbourne, with Porter in a sorry, sodden state.

Jones’s perceptions of Nolan are inevitably coloured by the
painter’s desertion from Heide and the breakdown of his
relations with the Reeds following his marriage to Cynthia,
John Reed’s sister. ‘As an artist he was a genius: as a human
being, something of a psychopath.’

Jones’s loyalty to the Reeds is one of the more endearing
features of this stoic but largely affectionate book. He regards
them as his ‘surrogate parents’ — reshapers of the cultural
climate of Australia — and remains distressed by the obloquy
often heaped on them. In the 1960s he went into a bookselling
business with them, and the ensuing ructions did not shake
their friendship. Ultimately, the Reeds willed Heide to Jones
and Barrett Reid until the second of them died.

In the 1970s and 1980s things began to go wrong. One
of their houses was destroyed in a fire, his business faltered,
and Barrett Reid became ill and increasingly patronising —
especially when he found himself in charge of four houses
following the Reeds’ death within ten days of each other.

Finally, Reid asked Jones to leave and changed the locks,

dispossessing Jones, in his view. Twenty years after their
separation, he still dreams of reconciliation.

Ironically, it was Reid’s death in 1995 that launched Jones
on his new career as ‘Australia’s foremost obituarist’. He
wrote Reid’s, moving some, scandalising others. Proud of
his vault of obituaries and keen to establish his bona fides,
he says: ‘I believe I am, or at least have become, a natural
researcher.’ At times this chapter becomes rather surreal, as if
we’re in an early Evelyn Waugh novel: Jones attends the
Great Obituarists’ International Convention in New Mexico.

But if you must die, Jones is clearly your man. He will find out
whom you bedding, which religion you abjured and whom you
had lunch with every day of your life. He even provides his
own obituary, as an afterword.

The book looks fine, but there are too many factual
errors. Indira Gandhi declared a state of emergency in 1975,
not 1974. Patrick McCaughey is not the Director of British Art
at Yale University, but he is a former Director of the Yale
Center for British Art. We might overlook ‘Vida Horne’, but
‘Randolph Stowe’ (twice) is unforgivable. Jones’s style is
not always felicitous (‘I once lunched with her father and
he and she told me … ’). Sometimes it borders on the quaint:
it’s a while since I came across ‘withal’.

As Jones states, his life has been haphazard: ‘Little was
planned ahead.’ The tone of his book is admirably realistic
and increasingly sure. He doesn’t look back on green pas-
tures: ‘There were no good old days.’ And will he attend next
year’s conference of the Great Obituarists in Bath? ‘Perhaps.’