

## Book Review

***Ian Henning (1905–1975): a Man and his Times*, by Kenneth R. Dutton, Mount Nebo [Qld]: Boombana Publications, 2002.**

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‘I am not at all certain’, says Ken Dutton in his preface, ‘that Ian Henning would have wanted this book to be written.’ Be that as it may, students, colleagues and friends (who are remarkably often all of these at once), as well as those who knew (or thought they did) the second McCaughey Professor of French either personally or by repute, have been superbly served, as has its subject, by Professor Dutton’s erudite and entertaining biography.

And it is a biography with a difference, very much more than the sorbonnical ‘l’homme et l’œuvre’ of Henning’s Paris student days and beyond. The subtitle ‘a man and his times’ gives us the clue that it is the intention of the author to place his subject against a broad social, political, intellectual and academic background. Fascinating it is, and fascinating too the family situation of Ian Henning, and its profound influence on every aspect of his life. It is partly in the thoughtful way that the public and the private Henning have been understood as a whole, and brought together for the reader, that this work is so very outstanding. Ken Dutton had available to him (or himself made available: extraordinary as it seems, some of the photographs taken by Henning in Paris in the twenties had not been developed, let alone printed, before Dutton dug them up) a considerable body of letters, personal and official, and other documents, along with comments from a number of colleagues and Henning family

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members; and full and scholarly use has been made of them.

The basic plan of the book is straightforward, allowing it to be read, losing nothing, in chunks. We have the pre-history, as it were, of Henning, followed by his schooling at Bondi Public and Sydney Boys High, his undergraduate days at Sydney University, his postgraduate years in Paris (with a delightful prelude in the voyage over, and interludes including London, Strasbourg, visits from friends ... ), his return from Europe and search, in a period of stagnation or contraction during the Depression years, for an academic position; and a review of his teaching, and the philo-sophical basis of his teaching, in German, French and Italian. The extent of Henning's departure from the Nicholson legacy may come as a surprise. How many of us knew, for example, that Henning, that so-called Nicholsonian clone, taught Italian, Commercial French and Science German in New Zealand, and was the foundation master of a hall of residence there, in the early thirties? How many of us knew that his immediate idea, on seeing the talkies for the first time in Paris in 1929, was that modern language teaching must certainly benefit from that technology? And how many of us knew that Henning was, even from his undergraduate days, a considerable journalist and broadcaster on language matters?

After a period of teaching French and German at Sydney University, Henning was appointed, in 1946, to the Chair. To what extent would his earlier prediction—that if he found himself in a position to do so he would turn the Sydney language-teaching establishment upside-down—be fulfilled? Professor Dutton's book must be read for a full answer to that, but it is clear that at a time of huge expansion of student and staff numbers Henning never ceased to be a person of reasoned, generous and independent vision (though the present reviewer remembers receiving from Henning the occasional Nicholsonian Gamma for proses, and alas! the odd Theta, even though he always assiduously pinned the sheets together in the top left-hand corner in accordance with the departmental directives).

Ian Henning's academic life spanned a most interesting period,

and through the pages we meet the likes of Nicholson ('Nic'), Christopher Brennan ('Chris'), Waterhouse, LeGay Brereton, Todd, MacCallum, Chisholm, Farrell, Carey Taylor and Gladys Marks. We are also treated (both in the text and in Professor Goesch's Appreciation) to some quite splendid anecdotes and examples of Henning's wit: the Ahahlians, the process of enrolling for a doctorate at the Sorbonne (how things have changed!), contact with French administration (how they have not!), the description of a *soutenance*, lunch with the Comtesse de Pange, Ralph Farrell losing his lines in Labiche, Henning's meeting H. G. Wells and Maurois, his courtship of Pat Massie, his appropriating a staff tea room against the wishes of the Deputy Principal, the imitation of him by a nameless colleague (it was KD, although he is too modest to say so in the book), and many more. The transcripts of sections of Henning's French teaching broadcasts reveal a wild wit worthy of a Ionesco or a Milligan, though they predate those authors. This reviewer found particularly poignant the story on p.295 illustrating Henning's great kindness to students, since the student concerned in the story is my wife; and the mention of his invitation to senior students to Cronulla in 1967, which has brought back happy memories to us both.

The whole book is like that. There is a delight on every page, yet although Ken Dutton quite rightly appreciates and illustrates Ian Henning's deep humanity and intellectual integrity he never allows biography to descend to hagiography. The high spots and the low spots of Henning's career and family life are treated openly and fairly, and the resulting portrait benefits from Dutton's even-handedness and thoroughness. As Angus Martin, the 4th McCaughey Professor of French, says in the Foreword, the book '... brings to life the man we knew but it at the same time shows us how little we each individually knew of him. It pulls together the fragments—some so familiar but others quite unsuspected—to build a coherent picture. It enables us to comprehend the contradictions that may have once led us to assumptions that now prove so wrong'.

This is a very important book, about a man whose enormous

rôle in Australian language teaching has never been fully acknowledged. Boombana have done a beautiful job of the printing and binding. Buy it or steal it. But do not lend it. Chain it to the lectern, for you will not otherwise get it back. An Alpha Plus for Ken Dutton, even if his pages are not pinned together in the top left-hand corner.