

**Michael Sharkey. *Apollo in George Street: The Life of David McKee Wright*.  
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Michael Sharkey has done a fine job of exhuming and revivifying the unjustly forgotten corpse of David McKee Wright, a remarkable literary figure in Australia's early twentieth century history. One can walk along the shelves of Sydney University's Fisher Library stacks (even after its gutting in mid-2012) and see tens of metres of space devoted to cases similar to McKee-Wright's: poets such as Victor Daley, memoirists such as Herbert Moran, novelists such as Eleanor Dark: all substantial figures of our literary history, and all largely unread outside of the academy. Dame Leonie Kramer says in her recently published memoir *Broomstick* (Australian Scholarly Publishing):

Even writers who have gained a reputation in their lifetime can be victims of fashion, and no longer enjoy a wide circle of readers. Young people are particularly disadvantaged because they don't encounter the works of such writers in part, or still less as a whole, during their years at school or university'.  
(12)

From that era Lawson and Paterson, also Christopher Brennan, maybe Mary Gilmore and a few others, are still above ground and breathing; but Sharkey reminds us what a rich and productive time it was. Scratch the surface just a little, and a whole ecosystem of notable artists is revealed. Peter Kirkpatrick in his *The Sea Coast of Bohemia* (1992) has portrayed the 1920s in a similarly vivid way; and *Apollo in George Street* is essentially an extensively researched and wisely written elaboration of Kirkpatrick's conclusion that Wright is 'a figure to whom the judgements of history have been neither kind nor just.'

Born in Northern Ireland into a Presbyterian family, Wright was a prolific author of poetry, fiction and non-fiction in New Zealand and then Australia, and a highly influential editor in the latter, where he arrived in 1910 following his second financial disaster across the ditch. Hopelessness in business affairs is not a prerequisite for being a fine poet, but there would seem to be a statistically significant association. This and several other traits make Wright a sympathetic and appealing character. He possessed a genuine enthusiasm for literature, exhibiting a Swinburnesque prolificity from an early age, and a similar appetite for wide reading and memorisation (Sharkey records Wright's son David's observation that 'His knowledge of English literature was staggering ... he could recite every word that Tennyson wrote' [112]). He inspired affection, possessing 'the kindest of hearts and a generosity that was princely' (*The Bulletin*: 350).

David *filis*'s encomium that his father possessed 'the most beautiful mind I ever knew' (111) should carry some weight. This accords with the eulogies that came after his death in 1928, aged 58, such as Hilary Lofting's 'His mind was so attuned to the balance and cadence of music in words' (353). And yet this son could also confess, with regard to his father's departure from New Zealand, his lifelong distress at losing him, never to see him again (135). Wright in fact raised three separate families, the two in Australia, of whom he was consistently supportive, being with the literary figures Beatrice Osborn ('Margaret Fane') and then Zora Cross. Sharkey acknowledges Wright's complexity. The reasons for his differing treatments of his trans-Tasman families may lie in the affection he retained for Beatrice, as he never had for his first wife Elizabeth; in the concern that his New Zealand family might be a

financial burden; or in the primacy to him of his aesthetic life. Beatrice and Zora at least understood and admired him as a writer, as Elizabeth never did. By Sharkey's account, this last was a toxic relationship.

A contemporary Australian parallel comes to mind. Like Clive James, Wright was artistically a traditionalist; his first love was poetry, yet he produced a vast amount of work in different genres; much of his work was ephemeral, by way of earning his living with the pen; he was indefatigably productive (in nineteen years with *The Bulletin* he produced some 1600 poems, the majority of them topical); he possessed genuine wit and a gift for satire; and he was popular and admired in the Australia of his day. James' early work was of the kind to be expected from a talented and energetic writer-in-embryo, and it deserves to be read; yet his finest poetry, and enduring legacy, has come later in life, with unsparingly self-searching poems such as 'Son of a Soldier'. The lack of self-knowledge in James's early and mid-period works demanded to be addressed. Sharkey well describes Wright's similar trajectory:

When the poem ['For Queen and Country'] first appeared, it might have been an acceptable, if hyperbolic, contribution to a peacetime celebration, but in 1900, it resembled a jingo's rodomontade. Henceforth, Wright's verse reflects a split personality. He would spin out acceptable 'public' eulogies and hymns while at the same time producing intense lyrics of more personal doubt, guilt or despair, beside satires and amusing topicals. (102)

Sharkey brings a poet's insight to the question of Wright's verse. The poem he has chosen for the biography's epigraph, the conclusion (given below) of which he justly describes as 'magisterial' (288), might stand for Wright at his best. 'Memory' appeared on 9 December 1926:

I would ask this  
Of some new year that cares,  
When my steps miss  
The brasses on the stairs,  
And others, fondling life's incredible fable,  
Shall freely use the inkwell at my table  
That when the grey streets ache with noise  
And the lean men have outworn their toys,  
Memory shall find a quiet of great trees  
Beyond the dahlias and the gardeners' fretting—  
And far beyond the books upon the shelf—  
To know me as I never knew myself...  
Remembering... while I shall lie forgetting...

This recalls Arthur Symons's reflection on his life as 'an existence, indeed, so inexplicable even to myself, that I cannot fathom it'.<sup>1</sup> Self-knowledge indeed might not come easily, but the search for it can produce memorable results. In respect of Wright, Sharkey quotes with approval Sir Ifor Evans' remarks on the Scots journalist and light-verse writer Andrew Lang:

[H]is versatility has been punished too severely. Engaged in incessant prose work, he had not the disciplined leisure that sustained poetic composition demands. Nor in his life of preoccupied diurnality would those moments of quickened sensation come so easily... Much of his verse belongs to the trivial,

but when more worthy poems are collected their number is considerable, and a few... show that he had a kinship with the creations of pure imagination. (362)

A remarkable dimension of Wright's life, which is not to be found in James', was his influence as an editor on the literary output of his era. Sharkey remarks that 'he was effectively to dominate the choice and shape of poetry issuing from the country's leading publisher [*The Bulletin*] for the next the years [from 1918]' (227). However, his influence began well before the war. Wright had by current standards a meteoric rise through the ranks of the Sydney publishing scene. By September 1910, just six months after his arrival, he had achieved his first publication in the renowned Red Page of *The Bulletin*; in November 1911 J. F. Archibald presented him with an inscribed silver cigarette case for an article which Archibald considered 'the finest ever written in Australia'; and Sharkey notes that at this time, 'Wright was not merely coming along in Sydney journalism; in the opinion of many, he was close to its peak' (161). Wright's duties on *The Bulletin* staff would come to include contributing theatre reviews, editorial articles, and advice on poetry publication for the Red Page.

Sharkey justly dwells on Wright's editing of (or interference with) the poetry of Henry Lawson. Angus & Robertson were planning a revised and selected deluxe edition of Lawson's works in 1918. Wright's involvement was invited by Lawson, who had said, 'He is the only editor who could touch a line of mine and throw something of his own softened Irish charm along it without making me jumping mad and abusive towards my women folk' (228). Colin Roderick comments on the 'maze of emendations, crosses, deletions and substitutions' in some of Wright's editorial sheets of already well-known and loved poems (229). George Robertson understandably was alarmed, and went through the emendations with Lawson before publication.

Wright got it right in his impassioned defence of Zora Cross's first volume *Songs of Love and Life* against some critical comments of Christopher Brennan's. This helped secure its publication in 1917, and from that time on Cross's reputation was assured (212-3). However, his judgement was less than infallible in 1923 in the case of Father P. J. Hartigan ('John O'Brien'), whose *Around the Boree Log* was then on the desk of George Robertson. Wright, in his reader's report, noted that Hartigan's work was 'very imitative of Lawson and Paterson, but has none of Paterson's humour and little of Lawson's force ... [it will make] little contribution to Australian literature' (268). Wright edited it heavily in parts, and neither Robertson nor Hartigan were impressed, with Robertson clandestinely engaging C. J. Dennis to give it a favourable review in *The Bulletin*. The first edition of 5,000 copies sold out in a month. For the new edition, Hartigan requested that one poem be restored to its original state. *Around the Boree Log* became a bestseller. This is to say no more than that Wright, as a publisher's reader, a notoriously subjective role, was human.

Sharkey clearly has modernist sympathies, but he is admirably even-handed in his treatment of Wright's traditionalist foibles:

Intrinsic with his conception of poetry was the belief that certain themes, subjects and modes of expression were inherently 'poetical' ... His attitude limited poetry's capacity to speak to contemporary readers in the language of everyday speech ... [He] was in step with conservative contemporaries who found much modern art ugly or wrong-headed. (269)

Wright became a *bête-noire* of progressive modernists in the Twenties. His politics, like much else about him, are not easy to pin down: pro-prohibition (in New Zealand), then emphatically anti-prohibition (in Australia); pro-conscription, then anti-conscription; contributing politically conservative columns to *The Bulletin*, and at the same time, under a pseudonym (one of several he employed), radical columns to *The Worker*. One of the notable features of *Apollo in George Street* is its subtle and informed charting of the currents of political opinion in Australia in the second and third decades of the twentieth century.

Other delights of *Apollo in George Street* include its sensitive portraits of other artists of the time, including the artist Mick Paul, Zora Cross, Beatrice Osborn, Hilary Lofting and Hugh McRae; the recollections of Wright's sons Ullin and Barry (by Osborn), which correct some misconceptions of the received lore of the period; and Sharkey's lusty skewering of Jack Lindsay ('It was disconcerting to find that he [Lindsay] might after all be in agreement with someone [Wright] who did not worship at Norman's shrine' [296]), with whom Wright had a long-running altercation in the Red Page of *The Bulletin* from 1922 to 1924. Sharkey has a fine sense of justice, based on thorough research, and his defence of Mick Paul against charges of dissolution and mediocrity in particular is admirable.

I am grateful to Sharkey for disabusing me of the notion that Wright was little more than a minor functionary, all but invisible in the dazzling radiances of Lawson and his kind. *Apollo in George Street* points forward to further studies of the best of his work. As a publisher in another life I may perhaps be allowed to comment on the book's high production values, which make it easy and a pleasure to read. You would think that academic publishing would actually have the reader in mind when choosing paper, colours, font types and sizes and so on, but, alas, this is often not the case.

Let Sharkey have the last word:

confused, ambitious, proud, reckless, dogmatic, anguished, private, loveable, generous, evasive: there are as many attitudes [to Wright] as the astonishing output itself. Wright would be less a poet, and more the creature of earlier critical opinions, if he were less complex as a man. His verse occasionally rose to something bordering on greatness, but he was misled in his view that formalism was the paramount guarantee of a place in what he conceived as the great tradition of English writing ... The topical verse and philosophical poetry of Slessor and the 1920s generation of Australian poets owes more than has been attributed to the matrix that Wright's *Bulletin* first provided... (363-4)

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Beckson, Karl, *Arthur Symons: A Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 332.