

**Jane Grant. *Kylie Tennant: a Life*. An Australian Life Series. Canberra: National Library of Australia, 2006, 156pp.**

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In notes for her autobiography, *The Missing Heir* (1986), Kylie Tennant remarks with a curious mix of the emotional and the phlegmatic: “All my life I have tried to tell the truth in the form of fiction. Now I am expected to strip the very flesh off my ribs and sell it in the market place. Straight truth has never been my metier because facts don’t say anything. They are misleading.” The quote comes in the last pages of Jane Grant’s biography of Tennant, of which she observes,

Tennant might be accused of “misleading” her readers with *The Missing Heir*. In effect, *The Missing Heir* asserts and defends the self-protective myth of the humorous but tough-minded maverick that she spent a lifetime constructing, and which continues to encase her memory. The tone of this passage, however, is entirely out of keeping with the evasive tone of the published work. The butchered and prostituted self-image is the violent expression of a very angry woman. (128)

The words “butchered”, “prostituted”, “violent” and “very angry” seem too overwrought for a woman whose life as it is revealed in the many forms of her writing, is always at a remove from herself and from the reader. This is not only because the act of writing necessarily distances “the life” from the turbulence of living, but because the living of that life as revealed in both the autobiography and this biography, is one in which the disruptive passions are not so much quieted or evaded as channelled into constructive action. Tennant’s life is one guided by a kind of pragmatism that does not allow either sympathy for the plight of others or pity for herself to become consuming or debilitating. She keeps moving, she keeps moving on.

As a young woman, she walks 600 miles from Sydney to Coonabarabran, ostensibly to visit her friend and future life-partner, Lewis Rodd; but more, Grant suggests, because she wanted to know, wanted to experience, wanted to write “the truth” of the life of the unemployed and destitute “on the track”. The following year, 1933, Tennant would walk another 600 miles, this time from Coonabarabran to Brisbane. This is a woman who pushes herself to the limit of endurance—why? What drives her? Grant claims that “[w]riting was Tennant’s form of testimony. In order to write about the unemployed, she believed she needed to know first-hand what it was like to tramp the roads

that led between towns and the next dole payment” (23). Time on the track provided much of the material for her first novel, *Tiburón* (1935); but truth at what price? It seems excessive. Grant also alludes on a number of occasions to what she sees as Tennant’s delight in performance. Even so, it would seem to me that a writer’s truthful representation might be based on less experience and more imagination—and still speak the truth.

Her second novel, *Foveaux* (1939), would again be based on lived experience. From mid 1936-7 Tennant rented rooms in the poorest areas of inner Sydney. “It has been slavishly hard work writing *Foveaux*,” she told the *Sydney Morning Herald*, “because of the physical illness it brought me. Although I became hardened to the squalor there were still occasions when I would come across some new hovel which with its uncouthness would literally make me sick” (35). This would seem to reveal not so much the dedication of a writer, but commitment to a faith. Although secular in nature, it is religious in spirit. Must one suffer too, in order to bear witness?

In 1938 Tennant set out once more in search of the truth—this time she travelled southwest from Sydney, through Goulburn, Yass, Young, Cootamundra and Leeton with horse, cart and female companion. She wore out her shoes, sent home to Rodd for a new pair, and only returned to Sydney with the accidental death of her horse. This trip would again provide valuable “copy”, this time for *The Battlers* (1941). She wrote to Rodd at Yass: “This camp is full of copy. If I never moved out of here I’d have that book” (40). Told by her fellow travellers she looked more like 40 than 26, Tennant endured physical and psychological trauma that tested her to the limit. Suffering from malnutrition, exhaustion, depression and bouts of anxiety, the reader is driven to ask why? Copy is one thing, but this is evidence of a human being driven to extreme measures, and no explanation is given that seems sufficient. Grant attempts an answer, suggesting that:

Although her writing was politically and socially motivated, it was also a form of psychological release and escape into other lives and, by implication, a mechanism through which she could avoid examining her own life too closely. The extreme lengths to which Tennant would go in her search to live other lives might be understood as another manifestation of the same anxiety. (44)

Yet it remains unclear what was the nature of that anxiety, and what it was she needed release and escape from—desire perhaps to escape a middle-class upbringing and a middle-class life as wife of a school teacher, later headmaster? In her autobiography Tennant declares an irritation that “throughout my life I no sooner escape from whoever owns me than some other proprietor pops

up to tell me what to do”, but denies that she takes any notice: “Not that I take any notice; but my life has this background of admonition, criticism (often affectionate), orders (disregarded) and helpful suggestions for my improvement” (*Missing Heir* 63). This is typical Kylie—her grudge doesn’t appear of sufficient weight to produce such extreme reaction. This not only leads to a sense of frustration that underlies much of Grant’s biography, it also appears to have hindered the development of sympathetic relationship between the author and her subject.

Except in the rare instance of authorial emotion highlighted at the beginning of this review, Grant’s biography gives a balanced, unimpassioned view of Kylie Tennant—the writer and the woman. Grant’s prose is measured and detached. This is both a result of a careful marshalling of the evidence such that Tennant is seen from all sides with impartiality, and the result of a declared paucity of intimate material that might have revealed something more of Tennant’s emotional life. Grant comments a number of times throughout her biography on the constructed nature of Tennant’s public persona that relied heavily on the comic to mask emotion or deflect intrusion into her private life, her “distrust of emotion” as exemplified in an “avoidance of entering too deeply into the emotional lives of her fictional characters” (15), and the memoir as an unreliable record of Tennant’s emotional responses (21). But she doesn’t consider the degree to which Tennant’s irony or light comic touch might be a deliberate ploy not so much to hide herself, but to manipulate her reader through a literary technique (something similar perhaps to “the charm” that Virginia Woolf so despised but employed to such effective end). Reflecting on her decision to prefer fiction over journalism Tennant writes:

I came later to despise the standard of journalism and discard the idea that a small female person could do much by writing articles of fact. Female journalists were relegated to the Woman’s Page and any investigative journalism was a deep shade of yellow. I built up, as others did elsewhere, a technique of using fact as a foundation for a broadly comic fiction which people would read drowsily for entertainment without realising that my stories were penetrating the subsoil of their minds and presenting a picture of their society. (*Missing Heir* 65)

Tennant’s actions and reactions are often puzzling, and the reflection on a life offered by her autobiography tends to complicate rather than clarify them. Reading the biography and autobiography in tandem can lead to some curious mismatches. The sensuous profile of a dark-eyed beauty on the cover of *a Life* for example, seems an odd fit with the subject of Grant’s biography; but perhaps the woman of warmth and generosity, the woman who had such great capacity for friendship, is glimpsed more often in the autobiography

than the biography. Contrary to the depth of sympathy and admiration I felt for Tennant on completion of *The Missing Heir*, finishing Jane Grant's *Life* left me curiously emotionless. I had a fuller sense of Kylie Tennant's place in the development of Australian literature than that gained in reading her autobiography—her circle of literary friends, her journalism, reviews, criticism and committee work; I had a sense of her struggle as a woman to do justice both to her family and her writing. Grant notes that:

The conflict Tennant acknowledges in her memoir between writing and children suggests that her decision not to have children in the early 1930s was partly motivated by her ambition to write. Her decision provides an important insight into the very real conflicts that she faced between writing and child rearing. It is no accident that in the first 14 and childless years of her marriage, Tennant was able to produce seven novels. (21)

I had also gained a more rounded, if less intimate, picture of Lewis Rodd. But I realised that what I didn't know was how Jane Grant felt about Kylie Tennant. Does she feel admiration? Sympathy? Antagonism? I also came to realise that I want and expect partisanship from a biographer.

What is clear is the measure of frustration Grant suffered in her attempt to find a woman who would perhaps rather not be found: a woman who avoided or deflected discovery in the construction of a public face and a public life. Testimony is not confession. "If her memoir seems at times contrived," writes Grant, "it is also unsatisfying. Although she records the surface events of her life, she deliberately frustrates insight into her interior life" (127). But ultimately, for me, the autobiography reveals more of the woman and the writer than the biography; for although Tennant's use of the comic might act as a guard against trespass into the life she wished to keep private, careful reading of the comic barometer, and attention to what is left unsaid, reveals more than Grant would give credit. The personal suffering exposed in the last quarter of *The Missing Heir* for example, does not particularly benefit from translation through a third party. Tennant's anguish is terrible. Of Roddy's last attempt to end his life by throwing himself under a train Tennant observes with gallows humour that doesn't entirely mask the anguish or her anger: "He recovered with a fractured skull, the loss of an arm and a foot. 'They'll be calling you Privet Hedge Rodd,' I told him when he was semi-conscious. 'You've certainly clipped yourself all around the edges.' He managed to smile" (144). She follows this up at the end of the chapter with a brief paragraph on Rodd's homecoming from hospital: "Throngs of friends came and saw they had no need to sympathise. We then resumed our literary industries and saw that the children had gaiety and warmth. 'I had a

wonderful childhood,' Bim [her son] once said when he too was trying to kill himself. 'Nobody had a better childhood than I did'" (145).

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