

Jenny Hocking. *Frank Hardy: Politics Literature Life*. South Melbourne: Lothian, 2005, 310pp.

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We have waited more than a decade after the death of Frank Hardy for a full-scale treatment of the life of Australia's most famous communist whose novel, *Power without Glory*, was central to Australia's Cold War. Hardy's own autobiographical writings cannot substitute for an external appraisal of his life; they are themselves part of his life. Nor can Paul Adams's literary biography of Hardy, restricted to the years before 1975, do justice to the scale of Hardy's rebel life. Now, Jenny Hocking has filled the gap. Her comprehensive overview is written with the skill of a storyteller who can match Hardy himself. Her research is polished into narrative scenes, but without simplification or distortion. (It must be noted that the text is marred by several misspellings and the serious error of confusing Lance Sharkey with Cecil Sharply.) She can evoke the drama of a courtroom battle with the pace of a screenwriter or expose an infidelity with the honesty of a tragedian. As Hardy did in *The Hard Way*, she even flirts with a mystery sub-plot to the story behind *Power without Glory*.

As an appraiser of Hardy's life, Hocking has the necessary political sympathy with her controversial subject and the necessary separation from him. When quoting his own words, especially his autobiographical opinions, she does not let Hardy's view of his own life dictate hers. Nevertheless, she does follow up on themes that Hardy identified about himself. She shows that he was a man who examined his life as thoroughly as any ethicist (or cleric, or Cold War warrior) might wish; and he could express eloquently and truthfully what he found.

Now that there are two biographies of Hardy, their views can be compared. Adams's Hardy is shaped by the contradiction between modernism and communitarianism. For Hocking, the shaping force was psychological: Hardy feared ostracism, and so courted it pre-emptively. Each view sheds light on the same person: the rural boy who became the famous/infamous man. An anxiety about being outcast certainly helps explain Hardy's desires and feelings, such as his emotion upon receiving some belated respect from sections of Australian literary academia. Another example, previously untold, is his catastrophic pursuit of a friendship with James Mason, the very English actor, and his wife. Important personal relationships cannot be ignored by

a biographer as they can by the literary historian, and Hocking's analysis of Hardy's anxieties help her to approach the facts of his marriage. Rosslyn Hardy emerges, in Hardy's own reported words and in Hocking's view, as a woman with her own strong personality who held together a family despite her husband's irresponsibility and unfaithfulness. Hocking offers some explanation, but not justification, of Hardy's emotional failures.

Whatever shaped Frank Hardy, it made him a writer and a revolutionary. Hocking's book, true to its subtitle, treats his life as enmeshed with politics and literature. The portrait of Hardy by Andrew Sibley on the book's dust jacket illustrates this unity: an aged Hardy stands behind a desk with books and papers. He confronts the viewer as an orator or a comrade, looking out of the painting, into reality to find the subject matter and the readers for his writing. But the pages on the desk light up Hardy's face and body as if the written words create, rather than record, his reality.

Sibley's painting also includes a racehorse motif as a background pattern. If the cruelty of poverty creates many socialists, it creates more gamblers. Hocking sums up what Hardy, himself, discovered about his boyhood collusion in his father's gambling:

Frank loved the mix of hope and desperation, the possibilities, taking on the world—and then, the strange elation of yielding to despair . . . the hopeless gambler's silent humiliation. Frank Hardy felt the rush of anticipation, hoped for his father's salvation and understood the desire.

By the time he left Bacchus Marsh, Frank Hardy was a gambler too. (20-21)

Hocking propels her story to its first climax, the creation of *Power without Glory*, but she establishes its context by retelling the story of the visit to Australia of Czech writer, Egon Kisch. She makes an effort to explain the twists in Soviet policy and their effect on Australian communists and writers. Meanwhile, the young Hardy is shown using the scant opportunities afforded by the army to make himself into the writer and communist who could write *Power without Glory*. The novel made Hardy a human lightning rod in an ideological storm, and the personal strain was enormous. So pivotal was the affair, the remainder of his life was a struggle with its legacy. The Communist Party of Australia (CPA), which was in the throes of a brief and cynical left turn, supported the novel because it attacked the mainstream labour party. It builds urban legends about a real person, Wren, into a tale of a corrupt capitalist, West, who manipulates the Australian Labor Party and drives his wife to adultery and a secret child. Regardless of the CPA's interests in

Power without Glory, writing the book helped Hardy to form his own, more longstanding political ideas about a democratic class identity.

Hocking gives special attention to the lingering guilt Hardy felt about his presentation of Wren's wife. This offence was the pretext for the libel charge brought against Hardy, yet the accusation struck home, says Hocking. Hardy had worried about involving an innocent woman and, if his information was correct, her illegitimate child. But, more disturbingly, he wondered if the act of writing about West had drawn him into hidden manoeuvres of people around Wren. This prospect is alarming, not to mention deflating of Hardy's role as the writer in control of his subject matter.

After *Power without Glory*, the post-war Cold War rolled on to more suppression of communists and to Khrushchev's revelations about Stalin's crimes. But Hocking shows that Hardy came to terms with the discrediting of his Party and he supported its attempts to reform itself. In the process, his chaotic, often self-destructive life was packed with improbable adventures. In Hocking's account, Hardy pulled himself away from desperate and despairing times by grasping any straws. After Clem Semmler invited him in 1965 to speak at a seminar at the University of New England, more doors opened to him in Australian cultural institutions, a growing acceptance that eventually led to the ABC television production of *Power without Glory*. In the mid-1960s, Hardy's international reputation led him to organise and participate in a tour of Australia by Russian poet, Yevgeny Yevtushenko. Hocking brings this little known cultural event to life hilariously. Later, Yevtushenko and Hardy both made similar decisions to denounce the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia and Hardy helped Yevtushenko to smuggle his words to the West.

The most important opportunity that Hardy grasped began with an invitation by Cecil Holmes, ex-Realist filmmaker, to the Northern Territory. Hardy began the journey like a pilgrim, hitchhiking and broke, trusting to chance and wits. But this was not a gamble so much as a search for people to write for. Hardy found the Gurindji and their momentous struggle for ownership of Wave Hill station, the struggle that made Australian law face the existence of native title. Hocking sees how well a writer who has internalised a long "tradition of politically informed realism" (170) served the Gurindji cause, and thus fulfilled his own purpose. Hardy rediscovered the literary challenges of participant reportage and advocacy, and he stayed open to this avenue of expression, using it as the spur for his comic novel, *Up the Garbos*. He could even use his skill as a yarn spinner to keep his career ticking over without selling out. Eventually, he also won enough time and development money to write another serious work, *But the Dead are Many*.

Towards the end of his life, Hardy suffered the loss of his sister, Mary. Hocking's account of Mary's life and death is a gripping tale, especially for readers outside Victoria, where both Frank's and Mary's media careers are little known. Hardy's response to Mary's tragedy is shown in sensitive detail. His relationships with most members of his family suffered throughout his life, because of his absorption in his politics and literary work and because of the intrinsically divisive nature of his politics. However, Hardy seems to have felt closer to Mary, whose talents, commitments and anxieties (and even her experience of fame) resembled his own.

Of most value is Hocking's conclusion about Hardy's literary goals and achievements: her insistence that he did not abandon or dishonour a "tradition of politically informed realism". After 1956, the base for his writing—the literary wing of a revolutionary class struggle—was shattered, yet his commitment to his own writing and that of other left-wing writers neither flagged nor stagnated. Hardy is proof that the collapse of Stalinism did not mean the end of revolutionary expression. This is why his life merits attention—and not only in the form of biography. As I have argued in my "Frank Hardy and Communist Cultural Institutions" (*Frank Hardy and the Literature of Commitment*, eds. Christopher Lee and Paul Adams, 2003), what is at stake is more than the reputation of one writer. Hardy's example is central to understanding how a committed socialist cultural project could be conceived and carried out.

This is an inconvenient question for academia and for commercial book publishing, but it is the question that Hardy's story invites. Unfortunately, even Hocking fails to question the received account of the role of the CPA and the Party's literary group. She sees Hardy's work after the late 1960s as taking a new direction, divorced from a Party line and more personal. Yet, from her own account, it is clear that Hardy's "new direction" could be alternatively interpreted as the fulfilment of the old direction. It is also clear that the support of a political party actually *helped* Hardy and many of his fellow left-wing writers (even though the flaws of his particular Party were very evident). Although it makes a neat and respectable myth, it is not the case that writers were faced with a melodramatic choice between "the socialist realist formula" and an opposing, correct liberal creativity. Rather, Stalinism was one bump in a long road for the diverse tradition of socialist literature.

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