

Michael Wilding. *Wild and Woolley: A Publishing Memoir.*

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Michael Wilding's 'publishing memoir' recounts the ideology and formation of publishing house Wild and Woolley, and details the influential literary figures and events which shaped the company from its inception in 1973 until Wilding resigned from his directorship in 1979. Wilding—accomplished author, critic and academic—tells of the optimism, idealism, and difficulties associated with the development of the publishing house. His critique of the literary scene, as well as anecdotes of the line of laudable writers who crossed paths with Wild and Woolley during these years of Wilding's involvement offers insight into the literary world during a period of cultural change; positioned in a very particular era, the memoir not only outlines the company's role in Australian small-press publishing, but also offers a critique of social issues such as the Vietnam War and Australia's stringent censorship standards.

Wilding met Pat Woolley 'at a performance event ... where the performers took off their upper garments and exchanged them with each other' in 1973 (1). Upon establishing that Wilding was 'the Wild to [Pat's] Woolley' (2), the publishing company was conceived, drawing on Wilding's editorial experience with *Tabloid Story*, and Woolley's experience with alternative publications, the *LA Free Press* and Tomato Press. Wild and Woolley purchased a rubber stamp to make some homemade business cards, and began distributing books published by the independent US bookshop-publisher, City Lights Books, whose list included writers such as Allen Ginsberg and Charles Bukowski. Wild and Woolley published Australian writers Robert Adamson and Vicki Viidikas in 1974, and *Wild and Woolley* then charts the publication of a number of other authors. These authors include novelists, poets, academics and critics. Woolley speaks of a particular demographic of experimental and burgeoning writers, including himself, who were of interest to Wild and Woolley:

We had broken through the first barriers and had got into print, had a reputation as 'new' writers; it was a small step, but it made the task of getting books into the shops easier. Known but not well-known.

Emergent. The beginnings of a movement. (48)

The optimistic attitude behind the small publishing house is shown to represent the idealism of Aust. Lit. in the '70s:

The point was not, for me, to make money. The point was to publish books that were worthwhile, and not to lose money. It is another way of doing it. An alternative to the commercial. There used to be a number of other possibilities than the commercial. (10)

Wilding goes on to evaluate the profit-driven perspectives more recently associated with the book industry, arguing that to publish in this way in more recent times is virtually impossible (88-89):

Large organisations, major commercial enterprises, can absorb the cost of quarterly reporting, auditing, health and safety, environmental and other

government requirements. But voluntary organisations, small presses, little magazines, and learned societies are gradually being squeezed out of existence. The amateur and the voluntary are being replaced by the professional, the global, the corporate. (89)

Indeed, in light of Wild and Woolley's utopian visions as espoused by Wilding, such a critique seems founded. The company's decision to publish books based on content rather than market value is significant, but, by Wilding's estimates, could not have succeeded in today's economic climate.

Wilding's accounts of the early stages of 'buffaroos' and boxes of books, as well as the provocative publications of *Abortion* and *All About Grass*, are entertaining for both the technicalities involved with editing, typesetting and printing by, as well as his detailed assessments of fellow writers. Wilding offers amusing, poignant, and occasionally acerbic anecdotes of the authors published by Wild and Woolley, as well as their writing. For example, there are glowing assessments of Vicki Viidikas' writing and personality (12-14), and Wilding's relationship with Christina Stead is portrayed in a manner which shows her great significance not only as a literary figure but as an influential friend (73-81). Some vignettes are less sympathetic, yet undoubtedly amusing. When discussing a watery adventure with Jon Silkin:

'What!' said Rudi in disgust, 'his book is called *The Principle of Water* and he cannot swim!'

'If Silkin drowns,' Pat said, 'it'll be great promotion for the book.'" (20)

The memoir predominantly consists of a number of vignettes of literary and cultural greats. Wilding's capacity to work such a number of influential figures into his memoir is impressive, and is a veritable list of who's-who of Australian literature in the 1970s. This does, however, become tedious, and at times appears more like gratuitous name-dropping. Wilding mentions, either in detail or in passing, a substantial proportion of important literary names of the 1970s and 1980s, creating a veritable bibliography of Australian writers. Of Elizabeth Jolley, for example:

We had taken on distributing Fremantle Arts Centre Press, and their rep called in, a rather scatty old lady, as she seemed to me, but that was partly her rather English manner. Pat seemed to relate to her, though I couldn't. It was Elizabeth Jolley, before the celebrity her novels achieved for her; though I could never relate to the novels, either. (109-10)

The relevance of such an inclusion is unclear; it offers minimal useful information, and acts merely as yet another celebrated name and increases Wilding's literary 'cred'.

Pat Woolley's importance to overall running the company, especially in terms of the more technical and financial aspects of the company, is clear throughout the memoir, and yet at times overridden by Wilding's focus on the artistic side of the publishing house. Woolley is regularly portrayed as the brash, business-minded partner to Wilding's idealistic aesthete:

...I discovered that Pat habitually rewrote the material she typeset. 'But you can't do that.'

‘Why not? I always do,’ she said. ‘Most of them can’t write. Or spell.’
 ...
 ‘This is literature,’ I protested.
 ‘This?’ she said, derisively. ‘Literature? So what, anyway?’ she might
 have added, and probably did.
 ‘You can’t just change things.’
 ‘They never notice,’ she said. She was right about that. (31)

Woolley’s involvement with the company appears to be less of a hobby than Wilding’s, and more of a career. As Wilding stated, ‘As for cash flow, finances, all those sorts of things, I can’t say I ever really thought about them. Making money had never been a preoccupation. I had a good job, anyway’ (60). In contrast, Wilding stated that Pat’s income from Wild and Woolley, with other typesetting, was ‘slightly over \$5000 per year’ (34). The discrepancy in each partner’s focus on the running and financial success of the company can perhaps be seen to reflect the difference between Wilding’s and Woolley’s immersion, bringing into question the extent to which Wilding’s memoir can be considered an accurate representation of the business. This is not to discount Wilding’s obvious passion for the publishing house, but certainly frames his perspectives in perhaps a more frivolous manner than Woolley, for whom the company was livelihood. Also, Pat Woolley ran the company for over three decades after Wilding’s involvement ceased. Wilding’s account of the company is problematic considering his limited involvement beyond its formative years. Thus, the extent to which Wilding’s account of the company can be considered representative is dubious. In Woolley’s response to this memoir, published in *Rochford Street Review*, she concludes,

Michael Wilding’s book with the misleading title is not a history of Wild & Woolley. It is his narrow view of some exciting times we shared in the seventies. A true and honest Wild & Woolley memoir should be written, but not by Michael. He just wasn’t there.

While Wilding comments on the impossibility of always being flattering in fiction or memoir ‘about other people. Especially poets’ (49-57), his failure to openly address conflicts integral to the company—namely, between Pat Woolley and himself—brings the validity of the memoir into question. Because of its subjective nature, the detail given of authors published by the company, and Wilding’s apparently limited input, his expertise appears to lie in the interactions he has with people, personally and professionally, and to avoid a more detailed account of his relationship to the company and Woolley after his decision to resign as director appears disingenuous. Wilding’s references to the breaking down of relationships are predominantly without bitterness or malice, though occasionally snide, and while this means that the memoir is positive and in no way petty, it is difficult to read the memoir as a reliable account of the publishing company when it is clear that important aspects were predominantly in the hands of Pat Woolley whose voice, for the most part, is noticeably absent.

Versions of public conflicts, too, appear throughout the memoir, yet without allusions to more recent developments: Wilding’s reference to his fight with formerly close friend Frank Moorhouse—wanting to avoid Moorhouse while both were sojourning in California, as well as speaking of ‘further simmering resentments’ (113-14)—fails to mention more recent issues between the pair. Considering Wilding’s penchant for alluding to his sexual exploits, the decision to avoid discussing Moorhouse’s claims about the nature of their relationship seems peculiar. While it could be argued that more recent developments are irrelevant within a

memoir of publishing company, the contemporaneous conflict was also not necessarily pertinent. Wilding's accounts are, however, predominantly gracious, and therefore an avoidance of more recent encounters is reasonable.

Wild and Woolley: A Publishing Memoir is a clear cultural snapshot of the 1970s—of the subversive artistic and literary scene of Sydney, and the 'alternative, anti-establishment, counter-cultural' (28) nature of the small press. There are a number of aspects of this relation that are problematic, considering Wilding's limited involvement in the company. It is a particularly subjective account; although this is a memoir, there appears to be an apparent reworking of events that positions the author in a very particular light. However, the work of Wild and Woolley as distributors and publishers of new fiction, poetry, and culturally-provocative books is laudable, and this account is compelling for both technical detail and literary gossip. Perhaps the memoir's most valuable aspect is its cultural critique, through which we are offered a glimpse of Australia's literary elite.

Works Cited

- Woolley, Pat. "The Long Haul: Pat Woolley responds to Michael Wilding's *A Publishing Memoir*". *Rochford Street Review: A Journal of Australian Cultural Reviews, News and Criticism*. January 2012. Web. Accessed 27 August 2012.
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