

Jim Davidson. *Emperors in Lilliput: Clem Christesen of Meanjin and Stephen Murray-Smith of Overland*. Miegunyah Press, 2022. 468 pages. AU\$59.99 ISBN 9780522877403 (Hardback)

In 2023, *Meanjin* and *Overland* are known as two of Australia's preeminent and oldest literary magazines. Both are quarterly print publications that also publish new material online through their respective websites. Their output ranges across poetry, short stories and essays (including personal essays, cultural commentary and other forms of creative nonfiction), as well as a sprinkling of visual art. If you are an Australian writer working on anything shorter than a book, *Meanjin* and *Overland* are probably near the top of your list of places to submit, and then as the rejections roll in, you work your way down that list. How writers choose between these two literary magazines is largely arbitrary, or perhaps informed by personal relationships, though one important distinction seems to be that *Overland* is known to be more "political" or "radical" in its publishing strategy. Another distinction is that *Meanjin* tends to pay writers a little bit more. But otherwise they occupy very similar territory in the cultural imagination of Australia.

Therefore, it is only appropriate that the founding editors of these two literary magazines have been brought together in Jim Davidson's dual biography *Emperors in Lilliput: Clem Christesen of Meanjin and Stephen Murray-Smith of Overland*. One of the key takeaways from this book, however, is the very different journeys followed by these two editors and their publications in order to arrive at the same destination. For example, *Meanjin* was founded in Brisbane in 1940 with a limited scope: poetry from Queensland. The contents of and contributors to this first issue do not betray the magazine's future greatness; Paul L. Grano is perhaps its best-known contributor, while the other poets prominently featured are Brian Vrepon and James Picot. However, it eventually expanded its interests beyond Queensland and poetry, and in 1945, *Meanjin* relocated to Melbourne at the invitation of the University of Melbourne.

In the same city and around the same time, the Melbourne Realist Writers Group was established to build a working-class literary culture. To complement this mission statement, they founded a magazine titled *Realist Writer* in 1952, initially under the editorship of Bill Wannan. By its third issue (in September 1952), Stephen Murray-Smith assumed the helm of the magazine. *Realist Writer* was eventually subsumed into the launch of *Overland* in 1954—14 years after *Meanjin* was founded. The contributors to this first issue of *Overland* were much more auspicious, including A. D. Hope, Nettie Palmer and Katharine Susannah Prichard. However, *Overland* would remain resolutely independent from the institutional affiliations (such as universities) commonly associated with literary magazines, perhaps because its earliest and strongest association was with the Communist Party of Australia.

The marketing materials for *Emperors of Lilliput* describe the book as "at once captivating biography and rich social history," which is an apt description. Readers will learn almost as much about the role of the Communist Party in the Australian literary scene, for example, as they do about Christesen and Murray-Smith. Indeed, the social, cultural and political background, as well as the supporting characters, is roundly sketched in this diligently researched volume. Unfortunately, this sometimes comes at the expense of the main characters. The book is organised chronologically for the most part, but it contains many scenes and portraits that stray from this chronology. For example, when readers are introduced to a key thinker or writer from the period, they are often treated to this individual's backstory before situating him or her in the lives of Christesen and Murray-Smith. This has the effect of enriching and enlivening the social history aspects of the *Emperors of Lilliput*, but not so much its biographical aspects. Consequently, some key biographical details are either omitted or

introduced at unexpected moments. For example, readers do not learn about Murray-Smith's three children until the book's final chapter.

Choices like this raise questions about who this book was written for—scholars or general readers? Does it aim for a readership comprising people interested in the world of Australian books and writing from the 1940s to the 1980s, or is it more for those specifically interested in the lives of two literary giants from the period? For my part, I must confess that I approached this book as a scholar of Australian print culture. I was more interested in the histories of *Meanjin* and *Overland* than I was in the histories of their founders. I assumed I would get the former, especially considering the biographer is Jim Davidson, who edited *Meanjin* from 1974 to 1982; I thought his overriding interest would be in the magazines themselves, but this did not prove to be the case. Many of the details that I found most interesting were removed from the chronology of Christesen's and Murray-Smith's lives and confined instead to Chapter 6, entitled "The Little Magazine Nexus." This is where readers are treated to details about budgets and payments to writers, print runs and sales figures, and systems of patronage and grants. For my taste, this information could have been improved by situating it within appropriate moments in the chronology.

Nonetheless, there is much to commend this book, including Davidson's sensitive treatment of the rocky transition of power between Christesen and himself as *Meanjin*'s first and second editors. Furthermore, Davidson judiciously applies a modern sensibility when writing about the conduct of his two biographical subjects, especially with regard to their treatment of women writers. *Emperors in Lilliput* is also not shy about critiquing Christesen's and Murray-Smith's editorial decision-making in the latter part of their careers, when they were arguably losing touch with a younger generation of writing talent.

Christesen was editor of *Meanjin* for 34 years (until 1974), while Murray-Smith was editor of *Overland* for exactly the same amount of time (until 1988, when he passed away). Since their departure, the longest tenure of any editor at either magazine has been eight years—a record shared by Jim Davidson at *Meanjin* (1974–82) and Jeff Sparrow at *Overland* (2007–15). Most other editors have held the post for only three or four years. Considering what Davidson has written about the declining years of Christesen's and Murray-Smith's editorial careers, it is perhaps for the best. Nonetheless, Davidson clearly demonstrates how these two formidable but flawed men have made an indelible contribution to Australia's twentieth-century literary culture, and *Emperors in Lilliput* is a fitting tribute.

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