

Brenda Niall, *Life Class: the Education of a Biographer*. Melbourne: Melbourne UP, 2007, 290pp.

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Brenda Niall is among the most prominent and prolific of the “new wave” of Australian biographers who emerged from the late 1970s on. Her literary biographies, of Mary Grant Bruce and Ethel Turner in *Seven Little Billabongs* (1979) and Martin Boyd (1988), were followed by biographies of artists: the Victorian portraitist, diarist, and pioneering matriarch Georgina McCrae in 1994, the multi-talented Boyd family in 2002, and portraitist Judy Cassab in 2005.

In this artful and engagingly written disquisition on biography and the relationships between the lives of its creators and those of its subjects, Niall understandably resents a widespread, if ignorant, disregard for biography as an art. For an example close to home, she points out that her name appears in *The Oxford Companion to Australian Literature* only within the entries for her subjects; Axel Clark’s only within the entries for his. Yet both she and Clark won literary prizes. “What,” she asks, “were we writing if not literature?”

Reviews of biographies in even our “quality” broadsheets are almost invariably shamelessly cribbed summaries of the narratives provided by the biographers. And that’s the best of the usual lot. The worst are by those with some personal acquaintance with the biographical subject who seize the opportunity to indulge their memories and views of same. In either case, the biographers’ artfulness, or not, in presenting their subjects’ life stories is scantily considered, if indeed the biographers are mentioned at all.

In a palpably cruel twist to this usual screwing of biographers, the reviews in the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Weekend Australian* of Niall’s account of becoming a biographer, and of the challenges and pleasures that entailed, damned it viciously for being too reticent, too stitched-up for it to be satisfactory as an autobiography. Palpably they felt cheated at not being able to glean from the text some sensational tabloid-style revelations about its author. As one of the numerous admirers of Niall’s work I could not wait to get hold of a copy to check out how justified were these reviewers’ dismayingly low estimations of *Life Class*.

When I did, I found that the reviewers’ disappointed expectations were based on that already too familiar disregard for, or ignorance of, what in fact they

were reviewing. If Niall's subtitle is not sufficient indication to readers of her intended focus, her preface elaborates it. In it, and subsequently, Richard Holmes is among the prominent contemporary biographers she refers to, and his *Footsteps: Adventures of a Romantic Biographer* and *Sidetracks: Exploration of a Romantic Biographer* are well-known precedents for the kind of literary-career autobiography she will present as she engages with "the relationship between self and subject" in her work.

Unconvincingly, the preface protests that "This will not be an autobiography, scarcely even a memoir"; that it will simply present four glimpses of her early life, followed by four case studies, and then an ending "which marks a new beginning". This is undeniably how *Life Class* is structured, as outlined in the table of contents, but an author as conscious of form as Niall has been with her biographies is not going to present a scattering of disconnected memories and opinions. All are interrelated and the "new beginning" she refers to in the last chapter is at the same time a return to the ambience of her childhood presented in the opening chapter.

This is the ambience of Melbourne's upper-class Irish-Catholic establishment centred on "Vatican Hill" in Kew where Archbishop Mannix's (but also the low-life John Wren's) mansion was surrounded by prestigious private Catholic schools. Young Brenda (photograph provided) attended one of these, Genazzano Convent, and her account of what was considered a suitable education for young ladies destined for marriage (or failing that, the veil?) is told amusingly, with gentle irony. But entailed in this personal account of a world in which she grew up are interesting observations on class differences and social identity.

If most stereotypes, especially literary stereotypes, of growing up Irish-Catholic Australian, are formed from working-class male experience of those who attended Christian Brothers schools (the antipodean equivalents of Mr Dedalus's Paddy Stink and Mickey Mud), hers was the experience of an altogether other world, an Irish-Catholic Australian Ascendancy. The young Brenda felt very secure in this "totally enclosed" environment. Was it a ghetto? In *Cutting Green Hay* Vincent Buckley, himself from a deprived rural background (though also educated in one of Melbourne's prestigious Catholic school) rails against the very notion; but her summation—"From Catholic obstetrician to undertaker we needed no alien hands"—suggests otherwise.

What, if anything, could this have to do with the education of a biographer? Well, having grown up in this "enclosure" the biographer-to-be found herself

ensnared in another during the ALP-DLP split while she was working for Santamaria's National Civic Council and researching his projected biography of Daniel Mannix. The acrimonious divisiveness generated by "the Split" gave her an acute awareness of opposed points of view. Later, as an academic on sabbatical at Yale, reading Edith Wharton's papers following the appearance R. W. B. Lewis's biography, she discovers both the pleasures of exploring primary sources and that no biography can be definitive, that other interpretations and emphases are possible. As well, with Wharton she finds herself empathising with a potential subject who similarly emerged from a constrained social background.

In the chapter on the writing of *Seven Little Billabongs* she presents it as her prentice piece which gave her the confidence to write for a general readership as well as "the pleasures of shaping ideas, making connections, seeing how each part related to the whole". She communicates these pleasures—as well as those of her explorations in the footsteps of her subjects at home and abroad—in the chapters on each of her four major biographies. These are the "case studies" the preface refers to and they address with vivid particularity what are seemingly most of those otherwise big abstract questions that biography can raise for its practitioners and, eventually, for its readers.

In an appreciative review in *Quadrant* (May 2007) Peter Ryan, who had been Director of Melbourne University Press when it became her publisher, insightfully summed up these general questions or issues as: how to assemble all the various sources for the *Life* and, having done so, how much to reveal?

The decision of how much to reveal does not only rest with the biographer, but often with the copyright holder; it can be a legal rather than an ethical issue, as the discovery of the convict ancestor in the Boyd family closet illustrates. Niall explains how, and plausibly suggests why, she was allowed to reveal this whereas earlier Geoffrey Dutton had been denied permission. With Georgiana McCrae a potential difficulty was posed by the discovery that a Duke of Gordon had fathered the (illegitimate) subject. The real difficulty, however, turned out to be that the well-known published version of Georgiana's journal, as edited by her descendant Hugh McCrae, was found to have been severely tampered with. With Judy Cassab, while Niall was well aware of potential difficulties of working with a living subject, she was unprepared for finding herself being written into her major biographical source: that subject's diary.

Such accounts that take us behind the scenes and show us the making of the biographies also raise another question beyond how to assemble the sources

and what one can reveal: how to present the Life or Lives? *Seven Little Billabongs* required finding the right tone for the then not academically quite respectable children's literature; *The Boyds* needed an organising principle (which houses provided) to bring such diverse and diffused lives within the same compass. *Life Studies* itself is perfectly pitched and shaped to engage Niall's wide readership in the story of the relationships she has had over many years with her varied subjects; additionally, it would serve well as a guide for students, and aspiring practitioners, of the art of biography. All round, a most elegant performance, an elegance reflected in MUP's attractive small format production.

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