

DOUGLAS STEWART PRIZE FOR NON-FICTION - JUDGES COMMENTS

THE WATER DREAMERS: THE REMARKABLE HISTORY OF OUR DRY CONTINENT

Michael Cathcart

Michael Cathcart's *The Water Dreamers* is a fascinating cultural history of our ceaseless quest for water. The title sums up his theme: that water dominates whitefella dreaming in this mostly arid country, just as it has always dominated Aboriginal dreaming.

The search for water was the first task for the First Fleet. The local Aborigines directed the newcomers to the Cadigal, the stream that had supplied them with water for thousands of years; within a decade, the 'Tank Stream' was a sewer. As settlers and explorers moved inland, dreaming of an inland river system, they found instead dry riverbeds, dry lakebeds, desert, and 'howling silence'. But the dream of abundant water continued to inspire politicians, pastoralists and farmers, poets and novelists, to become a patriotic truth. Hopes were invested in great water schemes: irrigation and dams would transform the 'dead heart' of Australia. When in the 1920s the geographer Griffith Taylor declared that rainfall determined the viable limits of settlement, he was demonised.

More than two centuries later, anxiety about water still lies at the heart of national environmental debates. A cultural historian well versed in our literature and historical geography, Michael Cathcart offers us an imaginative understanding of ourselves as *The Water Dreamers*.

CHURCHILL AND AUSTRALIA

Graham Freudenberg

Thousands of books have been written about Winston Churchill, indisputably one of the world's most important political leaders of the twentieth century. Yet, in *Churchill and Australia*, Graham Freudenberg breaks new ground. Drawing upon contemporary documents collated by the Australian Government's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, as well as Churchill's own writings and a vast array of secondary sources, he presents a blow-by-blow account of Churchill's ambivalent, tempestuous relationship with Australia between 1907 and 1955.

In Freudenberg's words, 'Churchill's conflicts with Australia were about his concept of the Empire and Australia's role in it'. The book's focus, inevitably, is upon the two World Wars, most notably the fiery disputes in and after 1942 between Churchill and the Australian prime minister, John Curtin. The

calamitous Gallipoli campaign of 1915 (which was, of course, Churchill's brainchild) is also covered at length.

Written in the elegant prose for which Freudenberg is renowned, and frequently enlivened with turns of dry, subtle wit, Churchill and Australia draws upon Freudenberg's deep personal knowledge of history and politics, both British and Australian. In the judges' view, Freudenberg is more thorough and convincing - and more original - when analysing World War Two than World War One. Overall, however, this is a distinguished contribution to Churchillian scholarship in a superbly erudite and readable form.

PIANO LESSONS

Anna Goldsworthy

Anna Goldsworthy's engaging memoir *Piano Lessons* is her first book, and it reveals her to be as talented a writer as she is a musician. The story of her childhood and adolescence in Adelaide, *Piano Lessons* is also a tribute to the Russian pianist Eleonora Sivan, whom she had the good fortune to have as her teacher from the age of nine until she realised her ambition to be a concert pianist.

'Mrs Sivan ...is on the Liszt list ...Liszt taught the teacher of her teacher's teacher', Anna's grandfather tells her. In her fractured English, Mrs Sivan transmits her fierce love and understanding of music, of the great composers - their names roll out in the chapter titles - and their compositions. As she lays her hands on young Anna's, we intuit that the 'Liszt list' is a living heritage. A precociously gifted child, Anna has to learn to harness her ambition to the obsessive discipline of long hours of daily practice. Her parents are tactfully supportive and generous: for seven years her father (the writer Peter Goldsworthy) attends all her lessons and takes notes, finding in Mrs Sivan inspiration for his novel *Maestro*. When Anna is in her mid-teens, they buy her a grand piano. Throughout, Mrs Sivan's elliptical insights help her to mature both as a person and as a musician.

Piano Lessons seems destined to become a classic 'coming-of-age' memoir. It is also a captivating introduction to classical music.

THE WOLF: HOW ONE GERMAN RAIDER TERRORIZED AUSTRALIA AND THE SOUTHERN OCEANS IN THE FIRST WORLD

Richard Guillatt and Peter Hohnen

Drawing on eyewitness accounts, declassified government documents and unpublished diaries and letters, Richard Guillatt and Peter Hohnen's *The Wolf* uncovers one of the great untold stories of World War One.

SMS Wolf was a German merchant steamship converted into a heavily armed, cunningly disguised raider that wreaked havoc upon Allied shipping across the South Atlantic, Indian and Pacific Oceans between November 1916 and February 1918. Over 444 days, Captain Karl August Nerger and his crew mined, or captured and scuttled, some thirty Allied ships, without once putting into port: The Wolf depended upon fuel and rations seized from captured vessels. Also taken on board were some 400 captured passengers - men, women and children, many of them Australians - who were held as prisoners-of-war in the iron hull of The Wolf.

Guilliatt and Hohnen paint an extraordinary portrait of the German captain and his code of honour, and of the unlikely respect and friendship - even, in a few cases, romance - that developed between the crew and their captives, as they sailed the world in their strange and dangerous isolation. The authors also cast a new light on Australian policies and attitudes during World War One, particularly the virulent anti-German sentiment encouraged by the Government led by Prime Minister Billy Hughes.

The Wolf is that rare treat: a ripping yarn that is also an important contribution to World War One history.

KILL KHALID: MOSSAD'S FAILED HIT ... AND THE RISE OF HAMAS
Paul McGeough

The veteran foreign correspondent Paul McGeough's *Kill Khalid* is an outstanding contribution to contemporary Middle East history. It is a thrilling yet sobering account of the life of the Hamas leader Khalid Mishal and the rise of Hamas itself. The survivor of an audacious Israeli assassination attempt in 1997, Mishal is today a US-designated foreign terrorist shunned by the Israelis, and a Palestinian nationalist leader courted by Western statesmen who consider him a potential key player in any peace settlement. Based on lengthy interviews with many of the protagonists, including Mishal and his family, and extensive use of secondary sources, *Kill Khalid* is a singularly authoritative work.

McGeough has pieced together a minute-by-minute account of the assassination attempt, which Mishal survived thanks largely to the efforts of the Lebanese journalist Randa Habib and King Hussein of Jordan. King Hussein (backed by President Clinton) helped to secure the antidote for the poison administered to Mishal, and also the release from gaol of Sheikh Yassin and other Palestinian prisoners in Gaza in exchange for the Mossad assassins. Thirteen years later the Israelis still have good reasons for regarding Mishal (now based in Damascus) as their enemy. His oratory, McGeough tells us, 'is rich in the rhetoric of jihad' and he steadfastly refuses to renounce the Hamas Charter, which calls for the

destruction of Israel.

Given the magnitude of the moral and geopolitical issues raised by his subject-matter, the judges had some reservations about McGeough's scrupulous objectivity; we would have welcomed some of the good investigative journalist's reflective analysis. What we unreservedly respect is McGeough's determination to pursue this story, regardless of personal risk, and to report it forensically and in depth.

UP FROM THE MISSION: SELECTED WRITINGS

Noel Pearson

Up from the Mission is Noel Pearson's first book. A collection of essays, columns, speeches and occasional writings dating back to 1997, it is the essential primer on the Cape York lawyer and activist who established ownership of the Aboriginal agenda a decade ago with an electrifying essay entitled 'Our Right to Take Responsibility'. In it, Noel Pearson attacked the welfare dependency that besets so many Aboriginal communities today, challenging the conventional wisdom that colonialism and racism are exclusively to blame. Instead, he urged his people to embrace accountability and self-determination.

Most of these pieces are similarly combative, tackling urgent issues of the day. Their importance lies in the insights they offer into Noel Pearson's formative experiences and the intellectual foundations of his convictions. He writes of growing up in the tight-knit community of Hope Valley Lutheran Mission on the eastern Cape York Peninsula, fluent in two Aboriginal languages, as well as the Bible and the writings of Luther; of learning a third language from its last speaker when he returned to research an oral history of the community. A man whose blunt opinions are sought by Australian political leaders, Pearson comes to each of his causes well read in the heavy hitters on the subject, from Immanuel Kant and Adam Smith to Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois. *Up From the Mission* is an exhilarating example of a political activist producing masterly writing from plain speaking.