

John - bear with - Steuber

NORMAN LINDSAY: A COMPLEXITY OF TALENT

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What of course must first be said about this exhibition is that it is a magnificent conspectus of the output of Norman Lindsay in the area of black-and-white drawing and of etching. Some will be sorry that there are no oils; I am sorry, as will later appear, that there is not much here that is representative of Norman Lindsay the cartoonist, caricaturist and cock-snooter. Yet we have a great deal here to be thankful for. First of all, of course, in the existence of this gallery, and in our good fortune in having Alan McCulloch as its guiding spirit, with his colleagues; but more especially today in having the opportunity to assess a brilliant selection of the most highly-regarded work of possibly one of the greatest, and certainly one of the most extraordinary, Australians.

I find it especially fascinating here to be able to trace Norman Lindsay's life (I was going to say his artistic life, but with Lindsay there was no distinction between the two) from the first step he made on the stage until his later years. Born in 1879 in Creswick, at sixteen years of age he joined his brother Lionel in a studio in Melbourne. He started earning money by drawing texts for Sunday schools at half a crown a time. (St. Paul wore a bell-topper, the prophet Abraham check trousers.) He then worked on an 1890s version of Truth, and about 1900 was 'discovered' by the great A.G. Stephens of the Bulletin and moved to Sydney. Shortly after he published his illustrations to Boccaccio - the title page is here - and was immediately recognized as being in the front rank of black and white artists, not only in Australia but further afield. It is interesting, incidentally, to note that A.G. Stephens said of the Boccaccio drawings that:

For the workmanship of them, his best drawings are beautiful. The way in which he realises the texture of stuffs, the rotundity of flesh, the contour and poise of bodies seen nude or under a robe, is a delight to the eye. Where several figures enter his picture, as a rule he groups them admirably against a background no less admirable. He seems to have steeped himself in the lore of Boccaccio's time. He succeeds least in his faces, which are usually too poised, too stiff, too monotonous in expression; and in his total results, which does not seem to disengage sufficient spirit, sufficient life. With rare exceptions, his brilliant technique has not an equal illustrative value.¹

During this period Lindsay walked the streets of Sydney with his friend (and later brother-in-law) Will Dyson, taking notes of likely types to draw and

jotting down their characteristics. Lindsay said that he took the joke drawing "as a serious contribution to art". Vane Lindesay has said of him that "Wit and character were blended into faultless figure grouping by his craftsmanship with the pen ... His beautifully-relaxed pen strokes, drawn with a skill rarely seen today, were the result of constant practice. In fact, Lindsay acquired a unique and most remarkable facility in that he could use a pen at arm's length, and control it by direct, unsupported contact with the paper".²

In looking at this exhibition perhaps you will share my view that the interest of Lindsay lies in the man in relation to his art rather than in his art itself. Despite great technical achievements Lindsay was in many respects a self-taught artist, and there is always a problem with the self-taught intellectual: he acquires not only conviction but dogma, and he has few facilities to mount a criticism of his own failings. "In leaping over obstacles", A.G. Stephens said of the young Norman Lindsay, he "has acquired mannerisms which are not good manners."

When King Thakombau's Fijians frizzed their hair into an ultra-fashionable mop, took off their mats, and danced in cheerful nudity before their monarch, the spectacle might have been called coarse, but it was not vulgar. When the Rev. Thomas Williams [Norman Lindsay's grandfather] dressed the women in petticoats and the men in trousers, and they played holy games before the Lord, the spectacle was vulgar.³

I do not agree with A.G. Stephens that because Lindsay had a message in his pictures (in this case a "personal protest against parsons and their ways and beliefs") this necessarily denotes vulgar art, but I do admire his way of suggesting so!

Lindsay was in fact a highly conservative painter, a Buckmaster at heart, even if he preferred female mammary glands to willows dipping into country streams. I would suggest that Lindsay had no artistic rebellion in him, and perhaps most important of all no rebellion against himself. But he did help, as I have already suggested, to create an important step forward in an area he probably thought (as later generations have thought) the least of his accomplishments: the area of pen and ink drawing, caricature and cartooning. It is here that his authentic genius lies, and it is here that his achievements will carry his name forward and with honor, not only in the history of Australian art but in the history of Australian culture, if you'll pardon my using a word that is an uneasy fellow traveller in the English language. It was in this demotic area of caricature and cartooning

that Lindsay displayed, not only superb technical mastery (though let us not forget Phil May, David Low and others) but also a kind of inspired insight into the society around him: that interesting Australian society just moving into the twentieth century, just uncovering its own identity, just starting to feel its oats.

In reading last night an article by Katharine Whitehorn in the London Observer (9 September) on Sir Osbert Lancaster, I was strongly reminded of Norman Lindsay:

... he will never make a visual gaffe. The hems are always the right length; the boots the right shape; and there are whole episode's of history which seem captioned by Maudie Littlehampton's comments on them: her outraged stare at the American in the next deck chair as she reads the Kinsey Report, for example, or her comment on Harold Wilson: 'I have a feeling that that may turn out to be the most misleading pipe since Baldwin's.'

Stephens remarked of Lindsay at this period that he had "a natural genius for art and craft, and an invincible ardour of industry". Norman Lindsay's imp of mischief and rebellion had not yet been overtaken by his sententious vision of himself as a defender of conservative social and artistic values.

In looking at Lindsay in the early 1900s, in what I think of as his golden period, we have to remember that this extraordinary man almost seems to have found it as easy to toss off a novel as to sketch a dinkus for the Bulletin or the Lone Hand. Lindsay would have an assured place in Australian history if he had never approached an easel. Apart from the early black and white drawings, I see Saturdee and The Magic Pudding as the highest peaks of Lindsay's original and inspired artistic vision. Saturdee, of course, is that remarkably unselfconscious, affectionate, honest and uproarious account of growing up in Creswick, written in the form of a series of picaresque sketches - it is indisputably the best book on boys that this country has seen - note that I do not say for boys. It was commenced in 1908, in, as I have said, Lindsay's best period. The Magic Pudding was written during the Great War to escape from the contradiction Lindsay has forced himself into. He believed, in terms of his 'vitalist' philosophy, that war was 'life-enhancing', and he was certainly not the only person in his time who felt that way. But as the war went on it became surprisingly apparent that you couldn't have a good war without a lot of good people dying. Lindsay escaped by writing The Magic Pudding. The one thing that most decisively sets apart Lindsay from the great creative artists is that

he was unable to judge his own strengths, as he was unable to understand his weaknesses, and it is typical of this that he should have called The Magic Pudding a "little bundle of piffle".

Lindsay wanted - we are reminded by this catalogue - to celebrate "the gay Olympus of Bawdy", and in his etchings and paintings he set out to put on record his fantasies, fantasies which for the most part I see as immature, schoolboyish, static and repetitive. However technically impressive these may be Lindsay was of course a puritan, despite his reputation, and his romantic roisterers too often reminded me of a stageful of bit players carrying out their appointed roles towards the end of a long run. Yet, whatever we think of the total result, the immense pains and technical skills that went into them have to be honored, as witness Rose Lindsay's accounts and the following:

He tested the methods evolved by his forerunners and, having studied the results, kept whatever seemed of value, then invented and applied refinements and variants of his own. His technique of using dots instead of fine lines for delicate tones of grey was his most revolutionary innovation. It was also the thing that more than anything else made etching, for him, a test of endurance. In seven or eight hours intensive work, sitting over the plate in a cramped posture and using a powerful magnifying glass, he could barely cover a square inch with dots; sometimes he worked on a single plate for as long as two or three months. The effort played hell with his eyes and worse hell with his gastric functions. After a day of it he had to soak his right hand in hot water to unbind the muscles.⁴

We might also take a moment or two to reflect that no-one, I hope, would suggest only some grave personal liability in Lindsay himself for the shortcomings in his vision of life. It is interesting that all the Lindsays, certainly Lionel, Norman and Daryl, were conservative and academic in both personal and artistic sentiment, and we would like to know more about the family well-springs here. Both Daryl and Lionel were, I think, in some important respects better artists than Norman; and Daryl in particular, seems to me to have been conspicuously a more liberal, enlightened and pleasant man than his brothers. So far as I know, for instance, he was relatively free of the disgusting, even if fashionable, anti-semitism which twisted and distorted Lionel's and Norman's view of life and art. But I for one would wish to look more closely to account for the family failings, as I see them, at the times when these young men came to fruition: the period - deterministic and tragic - the place - a country town on the decline - and perhaps we should look too at the father and more particularly the mother.

We might also reflect, I think, that Norman Lindsay did have an important cause to fight, the fight, even if on a narrow front, for personal, sexual and artistic liberation. "He is a grandson of the Rev. Thomas Williams," remarked A.G. Stephens, and he "has worked for the conversion of the New South Wales Art Society and the public as conscientiously as his father worked for the conversion of King Thakombau."⁵ The fact that, by restricting his criticisms of the status quo simply to more areas where the status quo affected his own personal whims, by remaining in many important respects a wowsler himself, despite his image as the great wowsler-battler - these things should not blind us to the fact that the fight Norman Lindsay waged was a progressive fight, and that in a sense his obsession with this fight caused him to sacrifice his art while, in the long run, the fight itself helped the cause of maturity and artistic freedom. Or may even be that simply because Norman Lindsay was a conservative painter and thinker, if you can call him a thinker, that his fight for the right to paint and exhibit rather terrifying naked ladies was more likely to succeed than if he had been regarded as an anti-establishment ratbag on the political as well as the artistic front.

I think it must also be said in Lindsay's defence that he bewitched, to an uncommon extent, those who came in touch with him and with whom there was a spark of sympathy. Perhaps I can allow myself to be a little more cynical here and say that there had to be more than this: there had to be something of a genuflection before Lindsay really warmed to a new friend. But it is certainly true that a whole line of intelligent and generally sane men - although I think few if any women - were conquered by Lindsay: Leon Gellert, Douglas Stewart, John Hetherington, to name but three. This is evidence, not perhaps of Lindsay's stature as an artist, which as I have made clear I regard as ambivalent, but that he did have in large measure that whole creative determination, that ruthless drive towards expression, that capacity to see all the world's phenomena as relating to his world view, and not the other way around, which one does find in many great artists as well as in many great dictators - and in a certain sense there is little difference between the artist and the dictator, except that the artist normally (but not always) lacks the concentration camps to send his critics to. In other words it is evident that Lindsay had the capacity to persuade others to see him as an artist, and it is in the aftermath of that great achievement that we have to judge for ourselves the historical validity of the stance.

For myself I do not hold against Lindsay his naturalism, for I am sure that we do not witness a steady trend away from naturalism in art, but rather a series of advances and returns from what is called 'naturalism', and which as a datum point in itself is never static. (However I do see some point in A.G. Stephens's remark in 1924 that "he has been ruined by his technical facility", and that "instead of vitality he offers violence."⁶) I do not particularly hold against Lindsay his political and artistic dogmatism, for a man has a right to his views, even if they were as repulsive as Lindsay's sometimes were; I regret them, of course, because I think Lindsay's sense of fun, of fantasy and of grievance could have made of him a really great artist in the realist tradition, had he not been hamstrung by a vitalist bush philosophy which led him up a creek with only a paintbrush to paddle with. What I think I regret most about Lindsay is that his pseudo-revolt against the Establishment tended to obscure the fact that his art was in essence Establishment art, and I think this has confused and held back public taste.

Norman Lindsay was a complex character and a complex artist. Whatever we may think of as character and artist, we were lucky to have him. If we can continue to breed women and men with his passion, his faith, his determination and his individualism, we will be doing well. Much in his work continues to appeal to the Australian people, fifty, sixty, seventy, eighty years after it was first put on paper. In fact Lindsay is almost unique, in that he has never really gone out of fashion. There are a great many artists and writers in Australia today who would consider doing a little bit of business with the Devil if only he could guarantee as much.

FOOTNOTES

1. Leon Cantrell (ed.): A.G. Stephens: Selected Writings (Sydney, 1978), p.359.
2. Overland, no. 30, September 1964, p.36.
3. Cantrell, op. cit., p.355.
4. John Hetherington: Norman Lindsay: The embattled Olympian (Melbourne, 1973), p.129.
5. Cantrell, op. cit., p.353.
6. Ibid., p.360.