

Colin Milner review of:

Bruce Grant, *Subtle Moments: Scenes on a Life's Journey*

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Bruce Grant has been living a remarkable life. In our age of professional specialisation, information overload and widespread education, it is not really very easy or even feasible for anybody to become a genuine polymath in the old Renaissance sense of the *uomo universale*. But Grant—author, journalist, academic, arts administrator and diplomat—has made a good stab at it, even if that was not his actual intention on life's journey. He has, however, tasted and seen much of what the gift of life has to offer and his variegated career is of a type that is fairly unusual in Australian public life, as is the notable outcome that he has managed to achieve distinction in several different fields of endeavour. In particular, Grant has done so in several different genres of writing, having published novels, non-fiction books, essays, short stories and, now, memoir. A spirited attempt to travel the polymath's journey in the wider world may give a person a greater range of knowledge and experience than is often the norm, adding breadth, depth and nuance to judgements and conclusions, especially on issues in public life. This is especially what makes Grant's memoir *Subtle Moments: Scenes on a Life's Journey* so interesting and worthwhile a read.

Memoir—like biography in general—can be particularly engaging for the reader who likes to follow the hopes, fears, achievements, disappointments, failures and, sometimes, even the moments of transcendence and enlightenment that can be traced in one person's journey, either in full or in part, through life. And, if the memoirist subjects life experience to due reflection, wisdom may be the rewarding result. In its modern form, the genre has been around for several centuries, as evidenced by the famous *Mémoires*¹ of Marguerite de Valois, first published in the seventeenth century. In modern Australia, Henry Parkes was perhaps the earliest prominent figure in public life to publish a substantial memoir, at an advanced age, in *Fifty Years in the Making of Australian History*.² On the cultural side, one of the earliest Australian-born women to do so was Nellie Melba in her *Melodies and Memories*.³ Many an eminent memoirist has achieved distinction already in life, though this is not always the case—Henry David Thoreau's memoir *Walden or Life*

1 Marguerite de Valois, Queen of Navarre, *Memoirs* (London: J.C. Nimmo, 1892) in English translation.

2 Sir Henry Parkes, *Fifty Years in the Making of Australian History*, 2 vols (Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries Press, first published 1892, reprinted 1971).

3 Nellie Melba, *Melodies and Memories* (London: Thornton Butterworth, Ltd, 1925).

in the Woods,⁴ about his experiences living in a cabin by Walden Pond in nineteenth-century Massachusetts, would eventually make its author's reputation. But Thoreau was also engaged in a spiritual quest, one that helped to make his book a classic of the genre by creating something extraordinary out of the solitary circumstances of his daily life.

As a convinced secular humanist (though well aware of religious and spiritual dimensions in culture and society), Grant would probably not claim such an expansive aim for his effort. Now in his 90s, he has, nevertheless, written a book that benefits from the long and considered perspective of the years plus the advantage that the author really has nothing left that he has to prove and is thus freed to write about what he most wants to say. Grant writes feelingly in the Introduction.

Undertaking these memoirs has meant discovering the person who took the journey. Writing about yourself is harder than writing about others real or imaginary ... The challenge is not the famous blank sheet of paper but how to select from an overflowing basket.

There is always a choice to be made by a memoirist like Grant in how much focus should be placed on the subject's public as against personal life. While some may relish a more confessional approach—one, indeed, that the current *zeitgeist* seems often to demand—the balance Grant has chosen allows him to advocate strongly for his most cherished views on Australia's place in the world, without creating a doorstopper of forbidding length. Personal life is certainly not ignored, however; Grant's tale of his three marriages and his now blended family has its own complexities and interest and, at times, affecting poignancy. But, for this reviewer, it is Grant's story of how a lad from rural Western Australia made his way in the world, as a scholarship boy to Perth Modern School, establishing himself as a journalist, then as a student at the University of Melbourne, going on to become a foreign correspondent in London, Singapore and Washington, and then to undertake roles of cultural and diplomatic leadership, that best helps to explain the person who came to hold such distinctive and interesting views about Australian and world affairs.

The overall impression one gets from his memoir is that, at heart, Grant is a writer, a vocation that has sustained him and still serves to give him a voice in public life. Two of his books, in particular, had a formative influence on this reviewer—as a youthful Australian public servant and aspiring diplomat in the mid-1980s—in thinking about Australia's place in the world. One was *Gods & Politicians*,⁵ Grant's book about India, and in particular his time as Australia's High Commissioner in New Delhi during 1973–76, a period when both Australia and India experienced crises in their democratic political systems—namely, the declaration of an Emergency by the (Indira) Gandhi Government in India and the dismissal of the Whitlam

4 Henry David Thoreau, *Walden or Life in the Woods* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd, 1908 edition).

5 Bruce Grant, *Gods & Politicians* (London: Allen Lane, 1982).

Government in Australia. Following my own undergraduate studies in Asian history and politics, plus a visit to India and Nepal in 1979, as well as longer periods based in Singapore (where my parents were living at the time), reading Grant's book helped me as a young Australian to make sense of what had been rather an intense, youthful experience of Asia.

The other book was *The Australian Dilemma: A New Kind of Western Society*.⁶ Grant set out the Dilemma, as he saw it, in the first chapter, at pages 4–5:

Here is a double dilemma of Australian existence. The dilemma of Australian nationhood is the desire to be a nation, while lacking the will and the capacity to defend the national territory. The dilemma of Australian civilisation is that Australia is white, capitalist and Christian in a part of the world subject to ancient and powerful Asian influences. Cherishing western values, Australian have become intellectually and materially dependent on the power centres of the western world to protect them from Asia, thus inhibiting the growth of the Australian nation. While the situation is slowly changing, the double dilemma remains. Until Australians seek for themselves a new form of Western civilisation, their nationhood is crippled.

There are aspects of this characterisation that we might now, half a lifetime later, want to modify (as Grant above suggests—and no doubt hopes—might be required), but, at the time, the case made for it in this book impressed me, and no doubt many others, and it still rings true in important respects.

Grant has made a significant contribution over several decades to thinking on how Australia, as a nation still mainly Western in its institutions and culture, might become more comfortable and assured in its own part of the world—in a sense, reconciling its history and geography without having to make a disorientating choice between them. The task began when his work as a foreign correspondent informed Grant's first major publication *Indonesia*⁷ in 1964 and cross-cultural themes involving Australians and Asians imbued three novels published as recently as 2014–15. As co-author with then foreign minister Gareth Evans on *Australia's Foreign Relations in the World of the 1990s*,⁸ Grant also had a notably more direct role in helping to shape official and expert thinking on Australian foreign policy in the immediate post–Cold War era.

Grant's memoir tells the story behind these and his other major publications with a lifetime's awareness of the writing process. Its text derives from both personal memory and his writings, including fictionalised accounts of real events in his life. Grant explains in the Introduction:

6 Bruce Grant, *The Australian Dilemma: A New Kind of Western Society* (Rushcutters Bay, NSW: Macdonald Futura Australia, 1983).

7 Bruce Grant, *Indonesia* (Parkville, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 1964), new editions published in 1966 and 1996.

8 Gareth Evans and Bruce Grant, *Australia's Foreign Relations in the World of the 1990s* (Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 1991). A second edition was published in 1995.

One difficulty from having delayed writing these memoirs is that many of the people in them have died, so that I have not been able to check whether my recollection of encounters with them is accurate. I did not regularly keep a journal and my recollection is often dependent on memory, haphazard notes and what I was writing at the time or have written since.

On the cultural side, this reviewer particularly enjoyed reading about Grant's close involvement with the Melbourne Spoleto arts festival, which was established as the third in a series for each of which the eminent Italian-American composer and librettist Gian Carlo Menotti was artistic director. The first season took place in 1986. Having myself attended the second Spoleto festival in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1985, and being aware that Spoleto itself is a small Italian city, it had struck me that a city the size of Melbourne was perhaps an unusual choice for a festival model that appeared to thrive on easy accessibility and intimacy in its location. But Grant's account educated me on how the Melbourne version (which unfortunately I was never able to attend) developed thanks to the existing Italian arts festival based on the retailers of Lygon Street in the inner-city suburb of Carlton, which clearly helped to give it a real sense of community. Its eventual transformation into what is now known as the Melbourne International Arts Festival was, however, a sensible progression to make after several seasons. And the festival still honours its Spoleto origins.⁹

Subtle Moments is published by Monash University Publishing, which over the past decade or so has established a fine reputation as an important publishing house for the humanities and social sciences in Australia. Its advertised specialties include Asian studies, politics and the study of Australian history, culture and literature, making it a good fit for Grant's memoir.

This book stands comparison with another fine memoir by a distinguished Australian—*Prosper the Commonwealth*¹⁰ by Robert Randolph Garran, completed shortly before that author's death at the age of 89 years in 1957. Like Grant, Garran was a polymath, in fact a lawyer and public servant in his livelihood, but, again like Grant, basically a writer at heart. Garran too was devoted to the land of his birth but had cosmopolitan interests and was an early advocate of Australia's destiny in Asia in the 1930s. Both Grant and Garran have written for us memoirs that derive much of their value from the longevity of authors whose considered views on issues in our public life are fortified by experience but motivated essentially by a genuine love of their country. We need more like them.

9 'About', www.festival.melbourne/2019/about/.

10 Sir Robert Randolph Garran, *Prosper the Commonwealth* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1958).

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