

Peter Love review of Carolyn Rasmussen, *The Blackburns: Private Lives, Public Ambition*

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The logo of Maurice Blackburn Lawyers declares 'We Fight for Fair'. It might also have been a good family motto for the firm's founder Maurice Blackburn and his activist wife Doris. They formed a particularly interesting idealist political partnership.

One of the more striking themes in this biography is its intimacy, between Maurice and Doris and Rasmussen and her subjects. Although there is not much personal testimony in the picture of the pair's respective family backgrounds, they come alive in the adept use of public records as a context for the hard times that fell on both families. Those difficulties were common to many middle-class families who relied on precarious incomes, particularly as the 1880s boom burst and destroyed the housing market for Doris's Horden family. They were cast upon the flimsy resources of the extended family, but not, unfortunately, the Sydney Hordens who had done well in retailing. Maurice's mother was widowed when his bank manager father died at a relatively early age leaving her to eke out a very modest income through her music and other incidental sources. At this stage we have a well-defined account of the downward mobility of the 2 families that circumscribed the lives of Doris and Maurice as they were educated and grew to maturity.

As Rasmussen focuses her biographical lens more sharply on them to explore their respective progression through school and, in Maurice's case, university, we get a clear sense of how they negotiated their paths. Doris was a lively child and was quick to defend herself and her friends, which led to a movement from one school to another but did not seem to hamper her ability. She did not seek university enrolment, largely because her family could not afford the fees. She took governess and teaching positions that she found unfulfilling and eventually became a librarian/bookseller at the Book Lovers' Library. Along the way, inspired by one of her teachers, she joined the Women's Political Association (WPA), the leading first wave feminist group in Melbourne, for which she sold and occasionally wrote for the *Woman Voter*. Maurice, through a family connection, was able to attend Melbourne Grammar and then the University of Melbourne where he completed Arts/Law while supporting himself and his studies by working in law firms, private tutoring, and school teaching, which he enjoyed. Towards the end of his studies, he began to question the conservative values that his education had espoused and moved progressively towards the Victorian Socialist Party and, later, the Political Labour

Council. The trajectory of each 'political apprenticeship' converged when Doris noticed Maurice at a debating club, where she learned of his interest in advancing the position of women under the law, and he saw her, the 'little, self-possessed, severely serene creature', at the WPA Tea Rooms. Before long they were in love and embarked on a courtship that entwined 'politics and passion'.

At this point we see their intimacy in their letters to each other but also the understanding that Rasmussen brings to her command of the material so that we can imagine their passion for each other. She has had an association with the Blackburns for many years, researching and writing about them and their political homeland around Coburg and other inner-metropolitan suburbs of Melbourne. She was also encouraged by members of the family and Blackburn Lawyers. The depth of the research that supports her closeness to the couple is apparent in the range of material cited, from the private letters to the more general works on the civic and political culture of Melbourne. The bibliography and endnotes comprise 66 pages. This long-term immersion in the affairs of the Blackburn family has allowed her to exercise that most desirable characteristic of good biography—critical empathy. Rasmussen's command of the sources not only informs a thorough, analytical approach to the course and consequences of their lives, but it also allows her to exercise an emotional intelligence to explore and infer something of the intimacy of their emotional lives. This biography, in following the entwined lives of a couple with shared political as well as personal passions, has a vitality that is absent in the more mundane works that more resemble autopsies than recorded lives.

In following the adventures of such Melbourne families in the early years of the twentieth century there are incidental insights into housing, transport, suburban life and, more prominently, civic and political culture. As clever and engaged citizens they touched several of the places that expressed a lively intellectual culture. These included the more obvious WPA, the Book Lovers' Library, the Free Religious Fellowship, the Melbourne Debating Club, the Victorian Socialist Party and eventually, for Maurice, the Australian Labor Party (ALP). These were merely some of the numerous sites of a lively intellectual culture, so long a feature of Melbourne life, that engaged and enriched the public sphere for Doris and Maurice.

One of the most interesting issues is the question of women's equality and the way that Maurice and Doris navigated the tensions that arose in the context of Maurice's response to the WPA's supposed turn towards 'sex antagonism'. He drifted away from the WPA as his advocacy for the rights of women seemed less important than the wrongs that men do as a central focus of their campaigning. In their correspondence on this, Doris worked her way to a view of how gender equality might work in a loving married relationship. Rasmussen has done well to show us how they negotiated this as one of the foundations of their personal and political partnership.

Gender equity was one of the issues on which they came to a principled stand. The Blackburns did not drink, and, as a matter of public policy, based on the harm that abuse of drink had done to so many families, Maurice took a stance in favour of limiting licensed premises and the 'local option'. This brought him into conflict with elements of the 'Wren machine', but he stood his ground and prevailed against efforts to defeat him.

When he entered the Victorian Legislative Assembly as a Labor member in 1914, his resolute opposition to World War I and Hughes's conscription plebiscites saw him defeated at the 1917 election. Doris, meanwhile, had intensified her peace activism but the times were hard for the family. Maurice was not covering his costs in his legal firm and had to rely on other income such as editing for *Labor Call* and lecturing at the Victorian Labour College. His principled stance on the war and conscription had nonetheless raised his profile in the Victorian Labor Party and he was elected to senior roles, including president in 1919 and conference delegate. In the 'red dawn' period after the war, Maurice was optimistic about the future of the first 'socialist' government in Russia and as a result became more directly involved with union cases. When the divisive 'socialisation objective' was debated at the 1921 Federal Conference, his interpretation took the radical teeth out of it and effectively allowed the ALP to be potentially electable. By the time Blackburn re-entered the Victorian Parliament in 1925, the law firm was better established with an expanding industrial relations cliental, although it was not as profitable as it might have been because of Maurice's indifferent management. In exploring this period in the Blackburns' lives, Rasmussen plays a deft counterpoint between the public political activism, the private business affairs and the personal family circumstances. This is one of the great strengths of this book. As it modulates from a major to a minor key and changes pace from allegro to moderato, it holds and rewards the attention of its readers. It persuades the careful reader that what they are seeing, matters.

Despite some constructive parliamentary work, especially on women's rights and other important matters, Blackburn's Victorian parliamentary career up to 1933 was largely routine until the end of the 1920s when existing high employment in his own electorate became a more national issue after the 1929 stock market crash. He worked through an unstable political environment, including the two Hogan minority governments that eventually languished in the deepening slump of the Depression. The disintegration of the Scullin Government was the final political indignity of the period. For the Blackburn family it was worse. Several relatives died and they lost their youngest daughter to a congenital heart defect. Doris was devastated and completely discombobulated by little Margaret's death. Rasmussen surveys all this with a clear and compassionate eye, without any hint of mawkish sentimentality.

Blackburn ended his years in the Victorian Parliament as Speaker as he began to eye a federal seat and turn his attention to the threat of Fascism and the likelihood of another war. In this turn he returned to an interest that he and Doris had long shared. It also placed him in close association with Communist Party members who were leading anti-fascist campaigners. The inevitable rupture between Blackburn's resolute stance and the ALP's anti-communist and isolationist policy ended in his expulsion. After he contrived a return to the Labor Party, he won a narrow preselection vote for Bourke and was elected with a thumping majority at the 1934 federal election.

As war became closer with every Nazi advance, the Blackburns intensified their campaigning against war and all that it threatened to civil liberties, free speech and the prospect of a return of conscription as a real threat. As events ended in war Blackburn became less potent in his influence, especially as the Japanese threat became desperate. He had become so insistent in his opposition to the war policy of both major parties that, on the day that the Curtin government was appointed, he was expelled for the last time. As events overtook his principles, he slowly became irrelevant and finally lost Bourke at the 1943 election, which was a significant win for the Curtin Government. Maurice died soon after. Rasmussen surveys the tributes, weighing the authors' emphases with their relations to Maurice. She assesses Curtin's views judiciously, avoiding the temptation that a sympathetic biographer might have to score a posthumous point.

Doris planned a long-term strategy to contest Bourke at the 1946 election and won with significant Liberal preferences. Standing as a candidate for Independent Labor, she advocated many ALP policies but was very active in advancing Aboriginal welfare issues, peace in a chilling Cold War climate and matters affecting women in the Public Service. She also made a point of challenging the White Australia Policy. While she had some friends in the parliament, not many were from the ALP. She worked doggedly for her cause but by 1949 there had been a redistribution; she stood for the new seat of Wills and lost, receiving less than 20 per cent of the vote.

After leaving parliament, she concentrated her remarkable energies on a range of causes she had shared with Maurice, and several others of her own. Her work in Australia and internationally for the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom preoccupied her for some time before she became heavily engaged as a founding member of the Aboriginal Advancement League. In her latter years she travelled to be with her family until on 12 December 1970 she died, aged 81.

Rasmussen has given us the remarkable story of an idealist political family that worked tirelessly for peace, freedom and justice for many who had few champions. They suffered many reverses in their fights for justice, but subsequent political history

has shown them to be on the side of the angels. I am personally delighted to learn so much about Doris and her remarkable qualities as an activist reformer. I thank Rasmussen for bringing her further forward for us all to admire and applaud.

Finally, a word about the physical volume. Rasmussen has been fortunate in her publisher. They have, at no bargain price, given us a beautifully made book. The stock, the print, the binding and the way it comes to hand and eye are a credit to their craft and a worthy memorial to the Blackburns.

In light of the recent changes to the focus and management at Melbourne University Publishing Ltd, *The Blackburns* may well be a work that exemplifies the best in its long catalogue of academic publishing and maintains its preference for writers who can engage readers' interest to the end of the text.

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