



THE BLOWFLY THE WAVE - AND US

The man who didn't want to be Sheridan

WHEN Richard Brinsley Sheridan went to his grave in Westminster Abbey, his coffin was followed by a multitude of admirers from royal dukes down to the actors of Drury Lane Theatre.



SHERIDAN... preferred the Commons to Drury Lane.

Fittingly, it would seem to us as admirers of his plays, he was buried in Poet's Corner.

But many of his most powerful friends, and Sheridan himself, thought he would have been more appropriately interred with the political greats of England — next to Charles Fox, if Sheridan had had his way.

For the author of "The Rivals" and "School for Scandal", which have delighted so very many people for nearly 200 years, was as famed as a politician in his day as he was as a dramatist, an actor and a theatrical producer.

Now he rests near the great Garrick with whom he worked so closely, for, in the end, he had been what he most determined not to be, a writer and a player.

He devoted only five of his tempestuous years to the theatre, and more than 30 to politics.

And it is the "whole" Sheridan — the penniless Irishman, brilliant wit, romantic, orator, duellist, lover, playwright, Parliamentarian, adviser to the Prince Regent, opponent of the magnificent Burke, and deathbed pauper — of whom Madeleine Bingham writes in "Sheridan, the

Track Of A Comet" George Allen & Unwin—\$18.70.

From his birth in 1751 until his death in 1816, Sheridan lived not one life but several, and into each of them he threw himself with an enormous and usually indiscreet gusto which made him the delight of his enemies and the despair of his friends.

His theatrical triumphs were no less great in the House of Commons than they were on the stage of Drury Lane.

Leading the motion of impeachment, Sheridan said of the disgraced Warren Hastings, Viceroy of India:

"The system which Mr Hastings followed in his government of India may be termed a series of unparalleled cruelty, oppression and plunder. . .

"We see nothing solid or penetrating, nothing noble

REVIEW BY BILL ORD

or magnanimous, nothing open, direct, liberal, manly or superior in his measures or his mind. All is dark, insidious, sordid and insincere . . . He is all shuffling, twisting, cold and little . . .

"His crimes are the only great thing about him, and these are contrasted by the littleness of his motives. He is at once a tyrant, a trickster, a visionary, and a deceiver."

The effect of the attack, says Mrs Bingham, was such that one of Hastings' principal defenders, listening in the House, said after the first hour of Sheridan's speech: "All this is declaration without proof."

At the second hour, he said: "Mr Hastings has acted most unjustifiably.

At the fourth hour, he burst out: "Mr Hastings is a most atrocious criminal."

And finally, at the end of Sheridan's more than five hours of oratorical brilliance, Hastings would-be defender cried: "Of all the monsters of iniquity the most enormous is Warren Hastings."

Afterwards, when the House voted to impeach Hastings and Burke, Fox and Sheridan were appointed managers of the trial, the Earl of Chatham wrote:

"Everybody is full of Sheridan's speech of Mr Hastings' business. I really think it, without any exception, one of the most wonderful performances I have ever heard and almost the greatest imaginable exertion of the human mind."

Poor Sheridan. He dazzled the House with many such performances in his 30 years of Parliament, but too often it was from the Opposition benches.

Too often when he was in Government — as Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs, as Secretary to the Treasury, as Treasurer of the Navy, and as a Privy Councillor — his words outran his capabilities, his discretion and his political nous.

With his wit and words, he won friends in high places, preferment and honour.

But from the same mind and mouth came words which time and again estranged his friends, earned him enemies and cast him down.

If only he had had money and family influence, he could have survived his downs.

He had neither. He lived by his pen and his wits. They were almost but not quite enough to allow him to survive in one of the most brilliant, cruel and desperately fought battlegrounds of British political history.

In the end he was crushed, only to become an immortal through a creative gift which in his lifetime he put second to his political ambitions.

Had he coupled the demonic energy he devoted to politics with his true talents for the theatre, there is no knowing what even greater heights of playwriting he would have achieved, what material wealth he and his numerous family would have enjoyed, and how much greater the honour he would have enjoyed, not merely after his death but in his lifetime.

"Sheridan" is magnificently researched, sturdily and yet perceptively written, and a considerable contribution to scholarship.

What a great pity it is that its price — \$18.70 — will probably but it beyond the pocket of many who would otherwise enjoy it.

Handsomely illustrated as it is, excellently printed and bound as it may be, "Sheridan" still falls short of 400 pages and is no more than a workmanlike printing production.

Like Sheridan's own words on occasion, the glitter is not really worth the gold.

EVER HEARD of the Baldwin Spencer Society — a group formed for the preservation and appreciation of the Australian blowfly?

What about the "Great Australian Wave?"

Would you believe that the Government now has special classes to teach visitors how to use the "Wave" to keep flies away from the face?

Sounds like nonsense? Well, it is; but there's no flies on author Robin Boyd, who uses the bizarre Blowey episode in an inspired flight of fantasy in his latest book.

Titled, "The Great Great Australian Dream" (Pergamon, \$5.95), Boyd's posthumous publication (the world-famous architect and critic died last year) takes a withering look at current Australian manners and more.

His jocular joust at the fictitious "Baldwin Spencer Society" seems to be a veiled attack on our current pre-occupation with our flora and fauna.

The society, he insists, was named after the English-born anthropologist, Sir Walter Baldwin Spencer, who said during a pre-war trip to Australia: "You treat flies as domestic pets, not pests."

At its inaugural meeting — attended by about 30 "fly-enthusiasts" and a similar number of Bloweys — the society decided to stop the destruction of the Australian blowfly.

The society's first president, the redoubtable "Colonel Reneally," described the campaign for the ubiquitous Blowey soon after in a national television link-up.

He said: "Flies are germane, essential to the Australian experience. If you talk on terms of killing-off you may as well talk of burning-off all the remaining gum trees."

"The Blowey, as the queen of the flies, has a special position in our psyche. She is the very mirror of the human Australian in her sun-worshipping hedonism.

"She has proved she can mix with the human Australian in urban society. She is present at every official and semi-official ceremony.

"The Baldwin Spencer Society will not rest until she participates with equal enjoyment at all indoor ceremonies."

Continuing such inspired idiosyncrasy, author Robin Boyd, then tells of the growth of the BSS during the 1980s and 1990s.

He tells of the famous symphony, "Summerfly," composed for the Adelaide Festival — which the composer said was inspired by the blowfly buzz at his country weekend.

The BSS prepared pamphlets and brochures, many of which were used (according to "Colonel Reneally") to lure Wealthy US tourists to investigate Australia's "blowfly potential."

Then there was the development of the "Australian Wave" — flashed around the world by television satellite — and the famous "30-second meal."

Robin Boyd seems intent on extracting the last ounce of ridicule out of the well-known wave.

Review by CHRIS ANDERSON

His "Colonel Reneally" explains: "Not enough attention is paid by the average Australian to the technique of the wave."

"Most just do a casual, limp-wristed sweep across from the elbow, moving only the forearm."

"In fact it can be a more graceful movement with the index finger extended as the main operative digit and the others half-bent but open to allow the air to pass through."

"We recommend four seconds for each cycle."

The 30-second meal — a dinner that can be devoured in 30-seconds before the flies arrive — comes in for similar searching attention.

Nobody could explain it better than "Colonel Reneally." To say: "We have classes in the 30-second meal, but one of the biggest problems is getting people to attend."

"They seem content to take the lazy way out; eat everything through a straw."

Yet Robin Boyd's book doesn't only concentrate on lampooning the idiocies of the fictitious Baldwin Spencer Society.

As a conventional critic of contemporary Australia, the book also slams the mindless mediocrity of our affluent society.

But Boyd isn't content merely to swipe at the traditional beer-swilling image of Australia's cultural wasteland.

Some of his most bitter comments and sketches are reserved for our plethora of phony interior decorators, jumped-up furniture shop owners and inane television "personalities."

Perhaps Boyd's most biting parody is about the trendy Melbourne architect who was employed to design the world's first "treehouse" — naturally enough a home designed around a tree.

When somebody cut down the tree half-way through the construction, the architect decided to turn it into a "floating house," with an artificial lake.

However, during the gala opening one of the rooms — connected by bridges — sunk and the wealthy client was drowned.

Another bitter sketch involves a fictitious French Ambassador to Australia who pretends he wants to negotiate a loan, but is really interested in signing a cultural agreement with Australia.

The Ambassador hopes

to ship out a lot of unwanted old paintings from the Louvre in return for some Australian Old Masters, such as "Le Dobbell, Le Drysdale and Le Nolan."

The Germans are also fighting for music scholarships at conservatoires in Bendigo and Townsville and 300 Italians are clamouring to be enrolled in the Swinburne Institute of Technology, to study Interior Decoration.

That, says Robin Boyd, is the day the Dream came true.

Boyd also bemoans the increasing murder of creativity in Australia.

He argues that although we have never nurtured a true genius, we are convinced we have achieved a "sort of greatness."

This, he says, was adroitly argued by the English entertainer, Clement Freud, who commenting on the appalling service in Australian hotels and restaurants, said: "Australians suffer delusions of competence."

Boyd says this is a frightening guideline to "Australianism."

Service is bad in many overseas hotels and restaurants, but at least there it is often realised.

The inefficient Australian thinks he is quite efficient; our streets and buildings are not uniquely ugly in the world, but "Australianism" counts them as praiseworthy symbols of our way of life.

Robin Boyd, whose book, "The Australian Ugliness," caused a storm when it was published in 1969, also takes a swipe at the beleaguered Australian accent.

He writes: "Any Australian-born Australian, including a Geelong Grammarian, who, on arrival in London for the first time, does not feel like a cripple, is either being so insensitive as to be of sub-human intelligence or deaf."

"It is not a matter of grammar, it is a matter of vocal communication."

He adds: "The problem of the world-conscious Australian is not to search for Australia's identity."

"An identity is all too real and apparent to him: it comes at him with a protruding beer belly and a receding brain."

"His problem is how to escape it, to scrape it off — as if it were something unpleasant which he once stood on as a child, traces of which still cling to his shoe."

"Australia's identity is a prematurely urbanised philistinism."



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Page 5 this week in The National Times