

## **Book Review, by Allen Mawer**

*Persons of Interest: an Intimate Account of Cecily and John Burton*

Canberra, ANU Press, 2022

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At first sight the story of this couple should have little to do with Canberra history, but that only goes to prove that you cannot judge a book by its title. As permanent head of the Department of External Affairs John Burton was a significant figure in the development of Australia as a presence on the world stage. His vision was of an independent nation respectfully engaged with a post-colonial Asia, which was a better fit with Evatt's internationalism than with the conservatives' courting of great and powerful friends. It led John to nail his personal colours to the Labor mast. Political patronage raised him up and political ambition brought him down. Among the casualties along the way was his marriage, as much because of his domestic insensitivity as the vicissitudes of electoral fortune.

The drama was played out against the background of Canberra in the 1940's, a surreal time and place where the affairs of a nation were being conducted in the middle of a sheet paddock, Roland Wilson drove a home-made electric car, Paul Hasluck rode his horse to work and John Burton personally delivered cream from his farm to the Hotel Kurrajong for Ben Chifley's breakfast.

The downfall of John Burton was preached as a cautionary tale to young graduates entering the public service in the 1960s. It was pointed out that engagement in politics would most likely damage individual career prospects when the wheel turned and, more importantly, undermine governments' confidence that the service would expertly and dispassionately advise them. To that extent, Burton's was a self-inflicted wound, but it was aggravated by what became the Cold War orthodoxy that whoever was not a partisan for the West must be a fellow traveller or perhaps something worse. Suspicion prompted surveillance, and the family came under notice. Superficially the Burtons adapted but it must have been an additional strain on a marriage already in trouble because of the uncertainty generated by John's unsettling life choices. What Cecily particularly resented was having little or no say in them, or much else. It eroded their relationship and her self-esteem.

The episode that followed was also Canberra-surreal, In the superheated atmosphere of an impending federal election, the Albert Hall, the only available public building large enough to host proceedings, became the venue for the Petrov Royal Commission. John, who was not a suspect, volunteered as a witness to counter misconceptions about security in External Affairs during his time there. His evidence did nothing to dispel the cloud of suspicion and it was as well for him that he was no longer in the public service; Ric Throssell, a former colleague, likewise had not substantive finding against him but he was ever afterwards denied security clearance and it blighted his career.

John Burton went to Britain and forged a new career as an academic in international relations, becoming a trail blazer in conflict analysis and resolution. Cecily remained in Canberra and qualified as a professional counsellor, trying to address her own issues while helping others with theirs. Both remarried and John eventually returned to the town where he had been elevated and rejected half a century earlier. In 2006 he was attacked by John Howard who, assuming that he was safely dead, condemned him for having been a 'philo-communist' of Chinese sympathies. The intended free kick became and own goal: the *Canberra Times* published Burton's rebuttal as an opinion piece headed 'History wars: No, old China, I was there – you weren't'.

The Burton sisters have painted their parents as figures in a landscape. Their portrait reveals much about mid-century Canberra, relations amongst its intelligentsia (both in and out of academe) and how the tremors of a changing world were felt on the Limestone Plains. There are too few books that can be read with satisfaction on a number of levels. This is one of them.