

A controversial life

Ian Milner and New Zealand contemporary letters

Intersecting Lines. The Memoirs of Ian Milner, edited and introduced by Vincent O'Sullivan, Victoria University Press, 1993, 222 pp, \$29.95.

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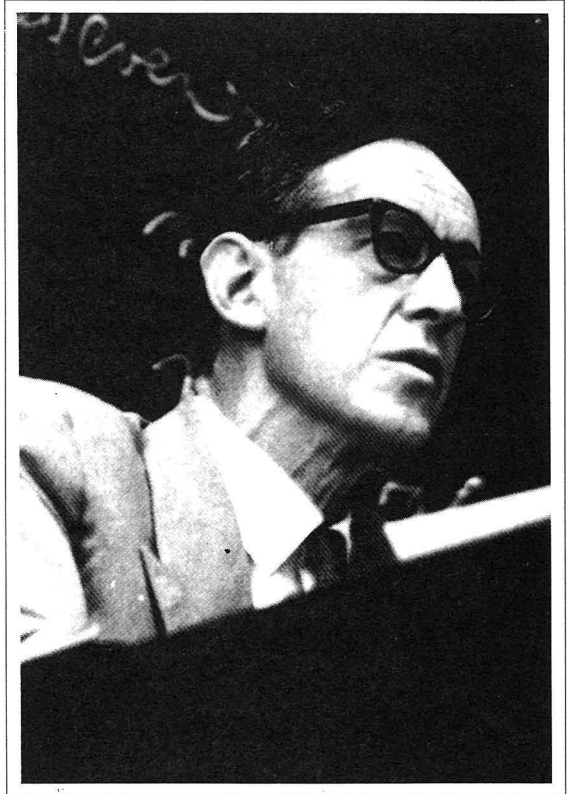
These memoirs are absorbing for the light they throw on the development of one who was from birth immersed in what must be accepted as a singular intellectual experience. They are also an attempt to recreate, partly from uncompleted drafts, a life story about which controversy persists.

This book has an unusual publishing history. The text was only completed as far as the end of the author's university days in New Zealand and Vincent O'Sullivan explains that from that point he was confronted by drafts in widely different states of completion. In many respects, this is frustrating for the reader seeking motivation for the career moves and personal experiences that shaped Milner's life. Vincent O'Sullivan has been scrupulous in marshalling the available text to serve the intentions of the author and, while we are often left unsatisfied, we have the best arrangement of Milner's recollections we are ever likely to get.

This is of primary importance in the account of contemporary letters in New Zealand. Although Milner had only peripheral influence in his native country he shared in an exceptional educational process on two counts. First, he was a fellow student at Waitaki Boys High School with Charles Brasch and James Bertram who were to have a compelling effect upon matters of the mind, aesthetics and conscience in New Zealand. Second, he was the son of Frank Milner - described on the cover of the book as 'New Zealand's most famous headmaster' - who gave to Waitaki a reputation second to none among New Zealand secondary schools.

In any intellectual history of New Zealand, analysis of the convictions and principles upon which Milnerian pedagogy was founded must be important. The son had a good eye and a full memory. It is also worth noting that material available to supplement his recollections is to be found in the publications of Bertram and Brasch.

Vincent O'Sullivan has made an important contribution in a biographical introduction that does much more than merely record Milner's movements after he left Canterbury



University. In effect, it sets out to account for Milner's progress as an administrator, his parallel development as a left-wing activist and thinker and the consequences for Milner of allegations that he was involved in espionage on behalf of the Soviet Union. This was in the chill days of the Cold War, exemplified most spectacularly in Australia by the revelations of the Soviet defectors, Vladimir and Eudokia Petrov. Milner had been working for the Australian Department of External Affairs and for the United Nations. He was named by the Petrovs as a Soviet contact. In 1950, he and his wife chose to take up residence in Prague and Milner secured a post as a lecturer in literature at Charles University.

For the cold war partisans this was taken as sure confirmation of treachery. The much more likely explanation is to be found in Milner's emotional life and O'Sullivan records that after Milner and his first wife were divorced in 1958 he married a Czechoslovakian citizen whom he had first met in New York, and who was the principal reason for his move to

Ian Milner lecturing. Alexander Turnbull Library

Prague. An appendix to the book records a Personal Statement made by Milner to refute allegations in the report of a Royal Commission on Espionage in Australia and to account for the decision to seek a university position in Prague.

Professor O'Sullivan's analysis and Ian Milner's Statement refute the charges of passing information to Russian sources. A wider and more important question remains unanswered. It is most improbable that Milner was a spy. It is undoubtedly true that he rejected the values offered to him by a man whose reputation as a propounder of ethical propositions was unsurpassed. Nothing testifies more clearly to Frank Milner's charismatic qualities than his nickname. As a one time involuntary resident of a boarding department in a state school, this reviewer looks with total scepticism on a headmaster who acquired the fawning title of 'the Man'. Milner stood for King and Empire, for democracy on the Parliamentary model, for the manly pursuits appropriate to boys raised on the spartan precedent and celebration of the natural world according to Wordsworthian principles. At this distance, the 'Man' seems almost unreal but there is no doubt that in his day he was a ubiquitous presence in ethical and educational debate. Yet his son rejected Frank Milner's values and records that, when he became an active member of the peace movement in the thirties, his father proposed to disown him. For Ian Milner this was 'the most exacting moral dilemma' he had faced. One also wonders whether he found his father's certainties impossible to accept in the face of the tragic mental illness that wrecked the lives of other members of his family. How far was Ian Milner's bent for supporting unpopular causes a response to the quiet desperation of this appalling personal experience?

But if the son is too modest, the father too remote, these memoirs do not lack for a hero. Jim Bertram, a golden schoolboy, became a sensitive scholar, a journalist of legendary enterprise, an enduring soldier and prisoner of war and a lonely protagonist of unpopular political causes. I suppose the true measure of human worth is to live according to one's convictions however inconvenient they may be. Ian Milner incorporates a poem by Charles Brasch entitled 'To J.B. at Forty':

But our true faith was in one another, the heart's
Election, and that remains when all else is gone
Though we are plainer, sadder, more wary,
perhaps more alone

Though we must go on playing our disenchanted parts
That first love lies too deep for us ever to disown.

The plain, sad fact is that we missed the best of a wary Milner and he missed the best of us. Still, while there is something to mourn, we can be grateful that Vincent O'Sullivan has rescued a text that might otherwise have slipped into limbo.

John Roberts, formerly Professor of Political Administration at Victoria University of Wellington, is a well-known commentator, and broadcaster of the monthly Roberts Report.

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