



Jack Lindsay

JACK LINDSAY 1900-1990

Jack Lindsay was one of the great creative minds of the 20th century. His output was phenomenal, more than 150 books of poetry, fiction, biography, history and cultural criticism.

He was born in Melbourne in 1900, the eldest child of Norman Lindsay's first marriage to Katie Parkinson. When the marriage broke up, Jack and his brothers Phillip and Ray went with their mother to Brisbane. In the first volume of his autobiographical trilogy, *Life Rarely Tells*, Lindsay evokes those early Brisbane years – his mother's struggle to cope, his early discoveries of poetry and sexuality, the sub-tropical growth, the smell of the stockyards.

He took first class honours in classics at the University of Queensland and studies of classical Greek and Roman culture were to be a substantial part of his literary production. But he was determined to be a writer, and set off to Sydney in pursuit of his father.

Jack Lindsay's early work was very much part of Norman Lindsay's vitalist, Nietzschean project. Jack edited *Vision*, a literary magazine that promulgated Norman's anti-modernism and included Kenneth Slessor and R.D. Fitzgerald amongst its contributors.

His bohemian milieu is lovingly evoked in *The Roaring Twenties*: the cafes, parties, romances, betrayals, evictions, the midnight flits and the eager and earnest discussions of art and society. It was a world haunted by living legends – Brennan like a 'defeated eagle', Lawson with 'yearning melancholy eyes', deaf and inaudible.

In 1926 he went to England where he set up the Fanfrolico Press, begun with Kirtley in Sydney and now continued with the help of P.R. Stephenson. The press specialised in hand-printed, limited editions of titles that would appeal to the 'curiosa' market. Jack translated *The Satyricon*, *The Golden Ass* and the poems of Catullus, and Norman provided illustrations.

In the 1930s he began to write a series of novels on Roman life – *Cressida's First Lover*, *Rome for Sale* and *Last Days with Cleopatra* among them. His deepening understanding of historical and social processes and his perception of the world crisis led to a decisive break with Norman and a disciplined focus for the great release of his creative energies that ensued.

His study of John Bunyan (1937) was one of the first works to issue from his new vision. It is a landmark in English Marxist criticism, one of the first sustained Marxist readings of a major literary figure, and it was followed by studies of Charles Dickens and George Meredith.

Jack had always seen himself as a poet, and his first published work was a volume of poems, *Fauns and Ladies*. His new sense of participation with the progressive elements of human society led to his innovative and strikingly successful activist, public poetry, the mass exclamations *Who are the English?* and *On Guard For Spain*.

Lindsay's work is not represented in any of the anthologies of Australian poetry available, yet his work at this point was a major breakthrough for 20th-century public poetry.

His later elegy, *Last Words with Dylan Thomas*, is one of the great elegies of all time. Throughout his life he continued to write poetry, making a point of writing a poem to go along with the dedication in each of his books.

He worked on documentary and propaganda script during World War II, but with the onset of the Cold War he became the subject of vilification and suppression. Yet he completed his series of novels on revolutionary moments in English history, begun with the Civil War novels *Sue Verney and 1649*, and culminating with *Men of Forty-Eight* and *Fires in Smithfield*. And he began a new series of novels on contemporary Britain, notably *Betrayed Spring*, *The Rising Tide*, and his one novel that was filmed, *All on the Never-Never*.

Two publishers stood by him: Nicholson at The Bodley Head, and Tony Adams, who encouraged him to write the biographies of artists that, in his 60s established yet another reputation for Lindsay. His study of Turner was critically acclaimed and he followed it with volumes on Cézanne, Courbet, Hogarth, Gainsborough and two figures whose work, like Lindsay's cannot be confined to any single area, William Morris and William Blake.

Lindsay never returned to Australia. He was always too busy fulfilling book contracts he said, and could not afford to take time off from writing. He lived by his writing, producing this immense scholarly and creative body of work unsupported by salary, grant or research assistants.

Yet he maintained his Australian connections. His novel about the World War I anti-conscription campaign in Brisbane, *The Blood Vote*, was written in 1937 but was not published until 1985, and he also wrote a children's novel about the Eureka stockade, *Rebels of the Goldfields*.

While C.B. Christesen edited *Meanjin*, Jack contributed a series of articles on Australian writing that had more to say than most of the rest of Australian literary criticism put together.

I remember visiting Jack in the late 1970s. He lived in the Essex village of Castle Hadingham in a house whose every wall, every nook, every cranny was lined with books. Yet there was nothing oppressive about this sheer volume of volumes.

And Jack's conversation was as voluminous and expansive. He was already talking when he opened the door to me at midday, and he was as fresh and ready for new topics when I finally went to bed at two in the morning.

The ancient world, local history, nuclear physics, political hope, memories of contemporaries like Dylan Thomas and Edith Sitwell – he ranged through all these topics. His interest, his knowledge, his energies were huge and expansive. Always accessible, approachable, he was extraordinarily generous with his time, both in conversation and correspondence.

What was the secret of his achievement? Like two other prolific and long-lived writers, George Bernard Shaw and Isaac Bashevis Singer, he

was a vegetarian. But that was only a part of his basic humanitarianism, his living commitment to achieving a better world.

He refused to surrender his commitment to cynicism, despair or defeat. He saw clearsightedly the cultural and social crisis, yet he was always capable even in the darkest times of seeking out and identifying the positive impulses in individual and social life. His life and work provide an enduring inspiration.

Michael Wilding