

**Book Review**

**Peter Kelly, *Buddha in a Bookshop*  
North Fitzroy: Ulysses Press, 2007, 176pp.**

**Review by Harry Oldmeadow published in *Sophia* (Melbourne), 2007**

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*Buddha in a Bookshop* straddles several genres—biography, memoir, social history, literary criticism, philosophical rumination—and this is both its charm and the source of its limitations. The book has three governing purposes: to furnish an account of the life and work of the neglected Australian poet, Harold Stewart; to trace the trajectory of a small circle of Melbourne writers and thinkers who, under Stewart's leadership, were influenced by the Traditionalist school associated with René Guénon, Ananda Coomaraswamy and Frithjof Schuon; and to provide an assessment of Traditionalism.

The bare bones of Stewart's life: born in Sydney, 1916, attended Fort Street High and, briefly, Sydney University; moved to Melbourne, worked in Army Intelligence in World War 2; developed an early interest in Oriental art and poetry, and the ideas of Carl Jung and René Guénon; published his first collection of poetry in 1948; moved to Japan in the early 60s, became a Shin Buddhist in Kyoto where he lived until his death in 1995. His most durable writings were *Orpheus and Other Poems* (1956), *A Net of Fireflies* (haiku translations) (1960), *By the Old Walls of Kyoto* (1981), a 460-page collection incorporating a cycle of twelve narrative poems and essays on Japanese culture, and the unpublished *Autumn Landscape Roll*, a 5000-line verse epic which Stewart regarded as his *magnum opus*.

With fellow anti-modernist James McAuley, Stewart is best remembered as the perpetrator of the Ern Malley hoax of 1944, which created quite a brouhaha but is now consigned to a footnote in our literary history. Kelly argues the case for Stewart as a major poet, especially in his Japanese years, and an orientalist of some distinction. He also provides glimpses into the personality of Stewart with whom Kelly maintained a close friendship for half a century. But Stewart was a reclusive man, in part because of his gayness, and Kelly is able to tell us less about the person than the poet.

Readers of this journal will perhaps be more interested in Kelly's account of the coterie which grew up around Stewart in Melbourne in the 1950s. They met regularly in Robb's Bookshop in Little Collins St, primarily to discuss the ideas of Traditionalist authors. Amongst this group of colourful eccentrics were George Pollard, Peter Hillebrand and Kelly himself and, later, Adrian Snodgrass, Rod Timmins, Cliff Hocking and Graeme Vanderstoel. The story is told in lively detail against the backdrop of Melbourne's social history and its changing intellectual and literary fashions.

*Buddha in a Bookshop* derives its title from the fact that Stewart's group were amongst the first in Australia (along with the Theosophists, who make a fleeting appearance) to take a sustained interest in both the philosophy and the arts of the East—and this largely under the influence of Guénon's magisterial expositions of Advaita Vedanta (*Introduction to the Study of Hindu Doctrines*, 1921; *Man and His Becoming According to the Vedanta*, 1925) and Coomaraswamy's trail-breaking works on the traditional arts and crafts of Asia, and his

exegesis of their metaphysical underpinnings (*Christian and Oriental Philosophy of Art*, 1939, was one of the seminal works).

Kelly provides an even-handed and accessible introduction to some of the key themes of the Traditionalist school — the affirmation of the *philosophia perennis* which lies at the heart of the world's manifold religious and sapiential traditions, the explication of the universal language of myths and symbols, the counter-evolutionary view of time, the uncompromising repudiation of modernity, especially its shibboleths of 'science', 'democracy' and 'progress'. Kelly brings these ideas to life and captures their mesmeric effect on Stewart and the Bookshop group.

In later years both Stewart and Kelly tempered their enthusiasm for Traditionalist ideas and values. In his last chapter Kelly offers his considered assessment of Traditionalism as a whole. Insofar as Kelly is recounting his own spiritual and intellectual journey, culminating in his commitment to Tibetan Buddhism, his reflections about Traditionalism are quite unobjectionable. However, when he attempts to present a coherent and more objective critique of Traditionalism then, it must be said, he often comes up short. While many of his observations are insightful, and some criticisms well-founded, his critique is vitiated by several factors: an apparently uncritical acceptance of Mark Sedgwick's so-called 'definitive' account of Traditionalism in *Against the Modern World* —actually a lop-sided, highly misleading and sometimes scurrilous book; an implicit animus against Islam (to which most of the Traditionalists were formally committed); a naïve allegiance to various modernistic ideas and values which preclude any deep understanding of the Traditionalist position — one might adduce, by way of an example, their defence of the Indian caste system to which Kelly presents the Pavlovian response of the modern intellectual (everybody knows it's a Bad Thing); an inability to understand some of the more arcane aspects of traditional cosmology and metaphysics, particularly as espoused by Guénon in *The Reign of Quantity* (1945) a work quite beyond Kelly's reach (and consequently dismissed, in part, as 'science fiction'). Nonetheless, readers wanting an avenue into Traditionalism, as well as those interested in Stewart and his circle, will find much of interest in Kelly's amiable and highly readable narrative.

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