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**Bruce Mansfield. *Summer is Almost Over: A Memoir*. Canberra: Barton Books, 2012. pp. 200.**

Bruce Mansfield (b. 1926) is best known to the world of scholarship as the historian of the Dutch Christian humanist Desiderius Erasmus (1466-1536)—or, more precisely, for the three-volume study on Erasmus's reputation down the centuries. Mansfield was foundation Professor of History and head of the School of History, Philosophy and Politics at Macquarie University in Sydney; he then diverted into university administration, becoming Deputy Vice-Chancellor. Clio eventually reclaimed her wayward son and in retirement Mansfield continued his work on Erasmus. This and other projects, including a jointly authored commissioned history of Macquarie University, resulted in Mansfield's post-retirement productivity exceeding his considerable pre-retirement output.

His autobiography, *Summer Is Almost Over*, commences not with family background and upbringing but with a pivotal and formative episode—his participation in the second World Conference of Christian Youth, in Oslo in 1947; he was the delegate of the New South Wales Presbyterian Church. The experience refined Mansfield's religious beliefs and shaped his attitudes to life and affairs. The principles and sentiments that derive from the animating role of Reformed Protestantism resonate throughout *Summer Is Almost Over*. The conference in Oslo was held in July and Mansfield was in his early-twenties, hence the book's title. It derives from a phrase by Erasmus himself: "The summer is almost over, and I have a long journey to make."

Mansfield was thirty-nine years old when he arrived at Macquarie University at the beginning of 1966. He had recently co-founded the *Journal of Religious History*, his first book *Australian Democrat* (a substantial biography of the NSW politician E.W. O'Sullivan) had just been published, and he was on his first study

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leave (at Yale) when news of the appointment came through. To that point Mansfield had spent his entire university career at the University of Sydney, commencing as an undergraduate student but punctuated by a year as a non-degree student at the London School of Economics. One of the virtues of *Summer Is Almost Over* is to help rescue the Sydney department from the shadow of its Melbourne counterpart, which was widely regarded as the finest in the land by far in the 1950s. At no point does Mansfield draw comparisons but he does sustain his case that by 1960 the Sydney department, although still underestimated, was “a gathering of talents.”(57) From this secure base he transferred to Macquarie University on Sydney’s North Shore.

What *Summer is Almost Over* does particularly well is to recount the excitement of being part of starting up a new university—by definition, an unrepeatable experience because the structures, once established, preclude any chance of making it new all over again. There is the adrenalin rush and sense of satisfaction and accomplishment in building an institution from the ground up—hiring faculty, often having a say in the design of buildings, deciding on the broader curriculum, and having a say in establishing the structures for governance. Macquarie abandoned the conventional departmental structure in favour of interdisciplinary Schools, and the groupings within the schools were known as “disciplines.” Actually, they were de facto “departments” and interdisciplinarity prevailed only in the sense that students could construct their (often unstructured) degrees from “unconventional combinations of subjects.”(84)

The problem is always that new universities quickly lose that first fine rapture and experience growing pains, especially when these coincide with funding cuts. When I arrived at Macquarie University as a graduate student in 1974, the place was going through the terrible teens. This sea change is also brought out by Mansfield. As he explains, the sense of buoyancy, expansiveness and optimism was eroded by episodes that created distrust, chief among which was the 1971 controversy over the ancient history segment of the History dis-

cipline getting resources to teach Greek and Latin at the very time when funding was contracting. “It was a catastrophe,” says Mansfield, “in that it ended an era of good relations among us and dissipated the mood, optimistic, if not idyllic, which had persisted from the beginning.”(98) Particularly galling was a breakdown in dialogue as some colleagues became less open and failed to consult. As Mansfield says,

social relations among the historians became surreal: people not mentioning what was most on their minds, what in fact was burning them up. There is, I came to see, a law of escalation about academic controversies. They feed on themselves from day to day. The original issue fades; what matters, what fuels the politicking and caucusing and canvassing is what he said to her yesterday or what the person in authority had just ruled. So it was in this case from the beginning....(98)

A courteous and considerate man, it distressed Mansfield that “Abrasive-ness in personal relations ... became more troubled and turbulent, and even calculated bad manners became common, if not general.”(100) It was the end of the golden weather.

I knew none of this when I arrived at Macquarie less than three years later and only found out when reading *Summer Is Almost Over*. I soon became aware of undercurrents of antagonism but saw no point in getting involved. In any case, I was having difficulties enough with my first supervisor, and she with me. Some of my perceptions of Macquarie differ from Mansfield’s, as indeed they must, given that our vantage points and lines of vision were so different. From my worm’s eye view I could see something about the History discipline that Mansfield does not mention. The Discipline had its own peculiar make-up. It was not simply trifurcated between the ancient historians and the modern historians, with the latter containing a small grouping of economic historians. What in other universities would have been three separate departments made the Macquarie History discipline one of the biggest, if not the biggest, in the country

at the time. To compound the situation, there were further divisions comprising a social trifurcation between the trendies, the ockers (Australian slang for a rough, uncultured person) and the religos. Both Mansfield and Edwin Judge, the head of ancient history, were deeply religious and History contained a goodly proportion of fellow believers—not through nepotism but because the presence of the two professors attracted so many high-quality applicants of similar persuasion. It is no surprise that such a cross-cutting academic and social concoction would result in tensions, a situation not helped by the personalities of several members of faculty. There was no chance of the History discipline functioning in the spirit of togetherness or under an umbrella of fellowship, but rather a fragmentation of small but overlapping coteries. I increasingly took refuge as a sessional tutor in the more congenial Politics discipline under the leadership of Don Aitkin, who was a wonderful boss.

All this is to say that Mansfield's Macquarie and my Macquarie were, in a sense, not the same places. We came on different errands, we occupied different niches, and we moved in different circles. If I were to write of my time at Macquarie, it follows that my account would differ from Mansfield's not only in emphases but in the details recounted. As another historian-memoirist remarked,

The author of an autobiography ... rapidly learns that he or she cannot put everything in, yet leaving things out alters the shape of the reality being recorded. It is not that autobiographies are false, but they must be untrue to the dimensions of life left out.<sup>1</sup>

The chapter on Macquarie University in Don Aitkin's unpublished autobiographical account likewise presents a different picture of Macquarie, as well it might since Aitkin concentrates on his life in

<sup>1</sup> Keith Sinclair, *Halfway Round the Harbour: An Autobiography* (Auckland: Penguin, 1993), 51.

the world of research.<sup>2</sup> Inevitably, anyone else who lived through those same years at Macquarie will point to oversights and perceived misapprehensions in either account—and Mansfield is well aware that he had to make decisions about inclusions and exclusions.(1) Whatever his feelings, once Mansfield is ensconced in university administration he ceases to comment on the History discipline (and the School) he once headed. He combines honesty and discretion, often with an emphasis on the latter. Those hoping for an unexpurgated version of subsequent goings on will have to wait another day.

The passages already quoted from *Summer Is Almost Over* reveal Mansfield as decent person who chooses his words carefully. I chiefly remember Mansfield as someone who exuded self-confidence, quiet authority, and a sense of propriety. Only later was I to find out that he is quite a shy person. Decently and in order was his *modus operandi*. Not for him the hard-drinking and combative indecorousness that is paraded in the very readable autobiography of his contemporary Ken Buckley, an economic historian at the University of Sydney.<sup>3</sup> Mansfield describes himself as cautious and essentially conservative.(63) As well, it is abundantly evident that Mansfield remains imbued with the liberal humanist ideal of the university and that he cherishes his friendships. Although not above the occasional sarcastic aside in his diary—as when describing a pesky member of faculty being “dazzled by his own enlightenment” (148)—in my experience he was very fair in his dealings with others. It transpires that most students thought likewise, as well they might.(122)

These qualities, and more, emerge in the chapters where Mansfield recounts his time in university administration. In 1975, he applied for the Vice-Chancellorship of Macquarie but was passed over in favour of Edwin Webb (whom some of the students nicknamed Spider Webb). Mansfield became Deputy Vice Chancellor

<sup>2</sup> Don Aitkin, “Critical Mass: Politics, Research and Higher Education in Australia,” (1993) – copy kindly provided by the author.

<sup>3</sup> Ken Buckley, *Buckleys! Ken Buckley; Historian, Author and Civil Libertarian: An Autobiography* (Sydney: A&A Publishing, 2008).

(Academic) and the two were in daily contact. They had a polite working relationship, but Webb's "stubborn side" caused difficulties and Mansfield must have struggled to contain his frustrations at the time and to write about them later in measured prose.(125-27, 146) Most frustrating of all, however, was a debilitating and internecine dispute within the Law School that spread to other parts of the university and went on for years. Again Mansfield writes in an understated way, but his disgust is unmistakable.(149-52) The troubles at the Law School and the impact of the federal government's restructuring of the Australian tertiary education system were such that Mansfield writes, "It would be a fair criticism of our administration at Macquarie in the mid-1980s that crisis management so absorbed us that creative planning for the future faltered."(157) The disenchantments took their toll, and Mansfield sadly admits that his wife "felt deeply that this showed, that my countenance had darkened, that as she put it Macquarie was swallowing me up."(160) He decided to take early retirement in 1986 rather than to once again contest the Vice-Chancellorship. One push factor was unfinished business on the research front; the Erasmus project was less than half completed.

Mansfield recounts his academic formation, which involved more than Erasmus. He started out researching pre-Labor politics in NSW and produced important publications. But European history was where the teaching emphasis of the Sydney department lay and Mansfield was soon drawn into the early modern period. His renowned lectures at Sydney on the Reformation were still talked about when I was at Macquarie. I never discovered exactly what made his lectures on the Reformation so memorable, and Mansfield himself provides few clues.(56) So I'll enlist a former Mansfield student to explain:

His lectures were one of those "experiences" that universities are by legend supposed to provide.... As to the special qualities of the Mansfield lecture, responses are personal and individual.... [T]here were no theatricals, no props; involvement flowed from the teacher's commitment to the

subject, the drama of the narrative, the intellectual rigour of the analysis. There was diffidence in the presentation, diffidence that sprang not so much from the personality of the teacher as from his empathy and respect for the protagonists in his drama.<sup>4</sup>

Diffidence and drama sound an odd combination; each threatens to cancel the other out. I rather suspect that something else came into play, namely Mansfield's sense of fairness—to people, to situations and to the evidence. Another former student places more stress on pedagogy and physical presence:

Mansfield built the narrative and discussion in his lectures around extracts from the writings of Luther, Erasmus, Calvin and other protagonists, cyclostyled copies of which were issued to every student at the first lecture. The documents were read out with understanding and sympathy, placed in context, and then woven into the argument of the lecture. Mansfield himself was a commanding figure, dark with piercing black eyes, six feet tall, immaculately clad in suit and gown. He spoke in soft, well-modulated tones expertly pitched to the microphone so that his voice filled the vast expanse of the Wallace Theatre. This was heady stuff to students who in the 1950s secondary system were often discouraged from reading too widely.<sup>5</sup>

Whereas the source materials for nineteenth century NSW political history were on Mansfield's doorstep, those for early modern European history were virtually non-existent in Sydney. As it was, Mansfield's Erasmus project began with a conference paper in 1961.<sup>(76)</sup> Lack of access to manuscript sources ruled out a conventional biography or an intellectual biography. Rather, Mansfield embarked on a study of the ways Erasmus has been interpreted down the centuries—in much the style of Pieter Geyl's *Napoleon: For and*

<sup>4</sup> Ros Pesman Cooper, "Bruce Mansfield and Early Modern European History in Sydney," *Journal of Religious History*, 15:4 (1989), 386-87.

<sup>5</sup> Neil McDonald, "The Last of the Humanists," *Quadrant* (Sydney), 57:3 (March 2013), 105.

*Against*. The three volumes on Erasmus appeared between 1979 and 2003 and comprise almost 1,200 pages. Mansfield provides intermittent commentary on the progress and the reception of the individual volumes. The difficulties arising out of obtaining a subsidy almost shipwrecked the final volume.(175-76) What stands out as much as authorial endurance is the absolute need for a supportive publisher—in this case the University of Toronto Press—during the life cycle of a multi-volume project.

It is sad to relate that Mansfield is insufficiently recognised in Australia for his learning and publications. He does enjoy the esteem of an international community of religious historians, but he is not a Fellow of either the Australian Academy of the Humanities or the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia. Probably this is a function of being insufficiently self-assertive. A similar modesty has resulted in Mansfield omitting to mention that he and his wife made a substantial personal donation when the *Journal of Religious History* ran into financial difficulties, thus securing the journal's future.

A paradox of *Summer Is Almost Over* is that it was written at the repeated behest of Mansfield's family who then barely appear in its pages. There is an occasional aside about children and family life. (63, 77, 105, 188, 194) He mentions his wife's justifiable resentment that her "deliberate choice" to be a homemaker was criticised by others.(64) And there is Mansfield's equally justified pride that her eventual MA thesis obtained a first-class Honours.(134) How much to include about family life in an autobiography is always tricky, but the contradiction remains that Mansfield attaches great importance to family yet concentrates so heavily on his academic and professional life. At least it prevents the book from growing exponentially, especially if a publisher demands brevity. As it is, some of the episodes receive pinched treatment and Mansfield does say that parts of *Summer Is Almost Over* should be read in conjunction with his co-authored history of Macquarie University.(84n) This is correct: for example, a better understanding of the problems of the Law School



will emerge from the university history.<sup>6</sup> It is wretched that Mansfield was entrusted with writing the university history because he is so fair-minded, yet at the last moment the incumbent Vice-Chancellor withdrew her permission to publish the book, and it required considerable persuasion to get her to relent. She objected to a single sentence concerning the Law School problems, although “the evidence was simply against what she wanted.”(187)

Mansfield has made extensive use of his diaries in writing his autobiography and these provide safeguards against memory being filtered through subsequent experience. Mansfield started keeping diaries when he arrived at Macquarie, correctly sensing that an unrepeatable experience was in the offing. His later diaries are more sporadic but to have these documents as an aide-mémoire adds authority to Mansfield’s reminiscences, at least in the sense that people and events do not become muddled and an accurate chronology can be established. But Mansfield warns that diaries are neither neutral nor uncontrived and warns that his

tense diary entries for the years after 1980 .... are a fragile source. They are biased towards the negative or darker shades. The subject is letting off steam or weighing up the worst, the most intractable or the least manageable, elements in a situation. They cannot be read as balanced, considered views.(146)

Nonetheless Mansfield is at pains to mediate between diary entry and present memory, and to adopt what he calls “a bifocal vision.” In other words “the record calls up the original emotion which remains, overlaid but unalloyed.”(198) This leads him back “to the ‘worlds we have lost’, whose recovery was an original impulse to the writing of

<sup>6</sup> Bruce Mansfield and Mark Hutchinson, *Liberalism of Opportunity: A History of Macquarie University, 1964-1989* (Sydney: Macquarie University in association with Hale & Iremonger, 1992), 276-84. It is also worthwhile to read Hutchinson’s interview of Mansfield, “Professing History”, August 7, 1990, for additional material: <http://webjournals.ac.edu.au/journals/Lucas/no9-april-1990/03-professing-history-i-bruce-mansfield/>

[*Summer Is Almost Over*]...”(198) There is an elegiac tone to the concluding chapter which Mansfield insists is not merely nostalgic, but he does speak with deeply-felt conviction and commitment to the liberal humanist ideal and the notion of collegiality, not least with respect to their application in a university setting—and this despite some painful disappointments. Although poignantly sad in places, *Summer Is Almost Over* is ultimately a statement of “hope,” in a Christian sense. Mansfield wanted to do something with his life. That included being of service to others, and he persisted in the face of adversity and unwarranted provocation. It will be evident why I have warm regard for this beautifully crafted autobiography and retain such affection for its author.

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