

Foreword

How is it possible that the Australian author of no fewer than 20 books, many critically acclaimed both at home and overseas, with sales many Australian writers today could only envy; that a man who not only rubbed shoulders with those in the literary limelight across the globe but counted some of them amongst his close friends and admirers, has now been almost totally forgotten? Even his widely read novel *No End to the Way*, a work that changed the lives of thousands of men in many countries through its outspoken approach to homosexuality, is almost unknown today. It is as if Gerald Glaskin lived out his tumultuous life as a writer on the far side of the moon. How can this have happened?

As John Burbidge explains in his illuminating biography, it is at least in part for reasons that a younger generation of Australians might find difficult to understand. Today Perth, where Glaskin was born and lived for much of his life, is the wealthy capital of a state riding high on the mining boom, a vibrant cultural as well as commercial hub. Wherever you are in the country or in Asia, you can be in Perth in just a few hours. Homosexuality is no longer illegal there and in most circles is no longer a source of shame. Yet when Glaskin was growing up before the Second World War, and even for several decades after the war, to live in Perth meant to live on the far-flung fringes of the most isolated continent on earth. Western Australia was the quintessence of everything that cultivated, sensitive and especially homosexual Australians detested about their country and often fled. Although a handful of Western Australian writers, including Dorothy Hewett, Elizabeth Jolley, Randolph Stow and Xavier Herbert did gain recognition, it was all too easy to be overlooked by the rest of the country and the rest of the world. A gay writer who was audacious enough to write unapologetically about homosexuality was all the more likely to find himself passed over.

It is a mark of John Burbidge's talent as a biographer that he has succeeded not only in bringing Gerald Glaskin – the *enfant terrible* of Western Australian letters, the master of both charm and vitriol – brilliantly to life in all his pugnacious and provocative flamboyance, but also in bringing to life the society in which he lived. As Burbidge discovered through meticulous research, Glaskin himself was one of a kind, richly and combatively unlike anyone else in our literary history. Yet, paradoxically, he also emerges as the very distillation of what it has meant until quite recently to be an artist in Australian society, or perhaps an Australian of any

sensitivity at all. Indeed, some might say that the frustrations Glaskin faced in his desire to live a civilised life in the country of his birth in the 1950s, 1960s and even later have not completely disappeared. Modern communications notwithstanding, the sense of living in exile from the true wellsprings of culture and civilised values somewhere 'over there' (usually in Europe or North America, but increasingly in Asia) still haunts many educated Australians. Our writers and artists still hunger for acclaim from abroad; the public arena still has little space for creative endeavour compared to sport, war, fashion and what Glaskin called 'the cult of the moron'. While attitudes to Asia and Asians have changed markedly for the better since the late 20th century, the lives of Aboriginal Australians (in whom Glaskin was vitally interested) have not. And although people are less likely to talk unashamedly about 'bloody poofters' than they were in Glaskin's day, and gay Australians can now find safe zones in which to live, work and socialise, precisely the same prejudices that made homosexuals' lives a misery in Glaskin's younger days are alive and taking their toll in cities and towns across Australia today.

The country of large families, chooks in the backyard, pianolas in the living room and days spent lying in the sun or sitting on the front verandah listening to the cricket on the radio may have vanished. But Burbidge leaves us wondering if, in its heart and (to use an old-fashioned word) soul, Australia has changed as much as we might have thought. In other words, although *Dare Me!* is the biography of a very singular man, it is also the portrait of a nation. It will, I am sure, lead many readers to reflect in fruitful ways on what it is about Australia that makes them feel, as Glaskin did, so deeply attached to it yet at the same time strangely beached there, with one eye perpetually on the lookout for sails billowing on the horizon, promising rescue or at least treasures from the wider world.

John Burbidge has written a biography that not only journeys into another's consciousness, revealing what has until now been hidden, but one that invites us to journey afresh into our own consciousness, unearthing and confronting what has been hidden there. It leaves us feeling bigger than when we began it. All good biographies should do this, but few do with quite the verve and lightness of spirit of *Dare Me!*

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