

who participated in interracial relationships in New Zealand. Using imaginative and intensive research, Wanhalla takes these people from the shadows and illuminates their lives with empathy and accuracy.

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*An Imperial Affair: Portrait of an Australian Marriage.* By John Rickard. Monash University Publishing, Melbourne, 2013. 146pp. Australian price: AUD\$25.95. ISBN: 9781922235275.

Drawing upon an array of family memory, letters, diaries and archives, John Rickard's *An Imperial Affair* is both a history of Australian cultural identity, and an intimate and emotional biography of the author's parents told by one of Australia's leading cultural historians. John Rickard begins with the discovery of a shoebox of wartime letters written by his father (Philip) to his mother (Pearl) that, he recounts, acted as a prompt 'if only for my own sake, to unravel their story' (p.vii).

This story is told through six chapters, each marking a stage in the evolution of the relationship, and often tied to particular places, ranging from Sydney, Melbourne and London to Dubbo and finally post-war suburbia. Rickard follows a conventional biographical structure. He begins by introducing the family backgrounds of the two key protagonists and their courtship, before tracing the arc of their relationship chronologically. The book draws to a close with the author's own emotional and sexual discoveries.

We begin in Sydney, where Rickard introduces a particular set of constraints and difficulties that shaped their respective families, particularly in Pearl's case. Her early years are emotionally and psychologically imprinted by family secrets, notably her father's institutionalization for mental illness and Pearl's own struggles with depression. In Chapter Two we follow the couple and their young family to England and 'Home' in 1935, where Philip attends the RAF Staff College in Hampshire. Each kept a diary in England, allowing Rickard to pay attention to the cultural and social patterns of life, their friends, social networks, bonds and associations, at a college that was an 'imperial institution' where people from all parts of the British Empire congregated. By 1939 the family had returned to Australia. Melbourne is the setting for Chapter Three, where Philip has an affair, admitting to it on the eve of his departure for London in 1941. This moment of marital difficulty sets the scene for the following chapter. In London, Philip embarks upon an affair with Clare in 1942. The emotional transitions it inspires filter through his letters to Pearl and find expression in Philip's increasingly formulaic expressions of love to his wife. Emotional worlds undergoing change are explored here with nuance and sensitivity. Pearl's discovery of the affair takes place in Dubbo and her distress is reconstructed through John's childhood memories of a marriage close to dissolving. With John promising not to correspond with Clare, the couple stayed

together, but their emotional intimacy was strained. After Pearl's death we learn that Philip's relationship with Clare continued in secret through regular correspondence, and led to a proposal of marriage. Reflecting on the survival of letters after his mother's death, John Rickard concludes his father kept them 'because they were, in a sense, an exercise in deception, a record of what he was not telling her – his falling in love with Clare' (p.143).

Love, passion and emotional relationships provide the central themes of *An Imperial Affair*, but it is equally a reflection on childhood memory and the parent-child relationship. Although the story is concerned with a marriage, it is Philip that dominates, for it is his letters that remain and his words, emotions and narrative that demand the greater attention. It is Philip's affair that gives the book its title, and so it is Philip's emotional needs and desires that are central to John Rickard's narrative of family drama. In this way *An Imperial Affair* evokes Roger Porter's study of the nature and character of autobiographical writings concerned with childhood and memory in *Bureau of Missing Persons*. Porter argues that a central theme of these autobiographical writings is coming to terms with one's relationship with a father who is often characterized as living a secret, furtive or double life. At the heart of these narratives is the adult child's search to unearth these concealments, deceptions and secrets, as well as the effect of this search, and what is discovered, on personal identity.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Rickard acknowledges at the outset that *An Imperial Affair* is not only the story of his parents and their marriage, but also about his discovering them as individuals: 'It is the lot of sons and daughters not to know our parents when they are young. Here I shall try and imagine the story as they lived and experienced it' (p.3). It is, he writes, an 'adult mystery of love and betrayal' (p.3).

John Rickard has produced a beautifully written, nuanced and sensitive study of private lives undergoing emotional transitions, set against the background of wider political, social and cultural changes taking place in Australia and the British Empire. *An Imperial Affair* offers a fascinating insight into family and personal memory, but also demonstrates the value, significance and difficulties of historicizing emotions in history and for that reason should be widely read.

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#### NOTES

- 1 Roger Porter, *Bureau of Missing Persons: Writing the Secret Lives of Fathers*, Ithaca, 2011.