

Clem Christesen (1911–2003)

C. B. Christesen, or Clem as he was usually known, will be remembered as the dedicated, influential and creative editor from 1940–1974 of one of Australia's most important literary journals, *Meanjin Papers* (later *Meanjin Quarterly*), perhaps the most important journal during the middle to later years of the twentieth century. Next to *Southerly* (1939) it is also the longest lived, its survival a testimony to the foundations Christesen laid down, and to his skillful and dedicated editorship as he steered it through difficult times and succeeded in maintaining its high quality.

Christesen was born and raised in Townsville, the son of an Irish mother, Susan Byrne, and a Danish–Irish father. The family moved to Brisbane when he was six. Educated at the University of Queensland, he worked as a journalist of the *Brisbane Courier Mail* and the *Telegraph*. During the depression he worked as a publicity officer for the Queensland government.

As fellow Queenslanders and promoters of Australian culture, Vance and Nettie Palmer, had done before him, he travelled overseas in 1939, returning at the beginning of the war, having worked briefly for the *London* and the *New York Times*. This trip stimulated him to devote his energies to fostering Australian culture.

In 1940, along with Brisbane poets, James Picot, Brian Vrepon and Paul Grano, he published the first issue of an eight page literary journal, *Meanjin Papers*, said to have been called after an Aboriginal place name in Brisbane. It was welcomed by writers interstate, including the Palmers. In 1945 Christesen moved the journal to Melbourne, seeking security for it through an association with the University of Melbourne which was to prove long–lasting but uneasy.

Christesen married his German teacher, Nina Maximov, who was later to become professor of Russian at the University of Melbourne. Theirs was an enduring and mutually supportive relationship. They settled in Eltham at 'Stanhope', a house and garden that was to become a hospitable centre of Melbourne intellectual life. Other intellectuals and academics, such as W. Macmahon Ball, lived in the locality.

A writer himself, of short stories and poetry, Christesen as editor built up the support and trust of the leading writers of the time who became contributors to *Meanjin*. While publishing Melbourne writers — Alan Marshall, John Morrison, Judah Waten, Furnley Maurice come to mind — he opened his columns to writers from other centres, including Judith

Wright, Peter Cowan, Frank Dalby Davison, Gavin Casey, Xavier Herbert and Barnard Eldershaw. Christesen also encouraged cultural commentary, literary criticism and debate by leading authors, and academics/writers, such as A D Hope, Vincent Buckley and Manning Clark and extra-mural critics, such as the influential A A Phillips.

Over the years Christesen gave support to established writers during difficult times for them. He also welcomed younger ones, such as Chris Wallace-Crabbe, Harry Heseltine and Laurie Clancy. His papers, deposited at the Baillieu Library at the University of Melbourne, and known as the Meanjin archive, testify to Christesen's wide range of contacts and his encouraging role as editor. His papers are an essential resource for researchers. Christesen also wisely enlisted the support of Geoffrey Serle and other Melbourne colleagues who acted as advisers and gave him in turn the support he needed, for his was a saturnine rather than an optimistic temperament.

While Meanjin played a central role in the development of modern Australian literature from the 1940s, Christesen ensured that it never became narrowly national or cut off from international intellectual currents, and he attracted contributions from and about overseas authors. In turn, Meanjin became well known abroad. It was, for instance, the Australian literary magazine most widely held in Australian embassy libraries in Europe, a testament to both his editorial skills and entrepreneurial flair.

While the values of Meanjin were broadly liberal-humanist, it encouraged contributions from important writers of the left. Christesen thereby attracted discrimination during the years of the Petrov controversy and the Cold War. He was prone in conversation, however, to protest editorial difficulties. Meanjin's circulation was unequalled among its congeners, and its network of supporters extensive and influential.

Christesen's honours include: Order of the British Empire (OBE, 1962); Britannica-Australia award (1970); Order of Australia (OAM, 2000).

Christesen published poetry, short fiction and criticism, including 4 volumes of verse; an edition, *On Native Grounds* (1967), (a selection from the earlier years of Meanjin); and short fiction, *The Hand of Memory* (1970) and *The Troubled Eyes of Women* (1990).

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