

Nicholas Hasluck: *Dismissal. Leaks, Half-Truths and False Denials*. Sydney: Fourth Estate, 2011. 978 0 7322 9301. 359 pp., AUD 29.95. Also available as an e-book on Kindle via Amazon at \$14.96. **Reviewed by Adi Wimmer,** University of Klagenfurt

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Ralph Waldo Emerson once chided his fellow American writers with the words "We dare not chaunt our time and social circumstance" (1844). He referred to the new tradition at the end of the 19th century to investigate the individual soul, which Schnitzler later was to call *Das weite Land*. What these writers were neglecting to write, so Emerson's criticism, was to engage contemporary social and political conditions. In other words, what was missing was the political novel.

Nicholas Hasluck is a man of many talents: apart from his legal career which culminated in his appointment as a Judge of the Western Australian Supreme Court he is also an essayist, a poet, and a fiction writer. In his role of the latter he has given us political novels before. Probably his best known is *Our Man K* (1999), which Andrew Riemer typically characterized as "an evocation of and a lament for the passing of the Habsburg world" (1999:13). Others saw it primarily as a fictional treatment of Australia's most embarrassing immigration blunder, the case of the famous and notorious German-speaking Jewish Czech journalist Egon Erwin Kisch, "der rasende Reporter" as he was nicknamed in Europe. In 1934, possibly fleeing from Hitler's thugs, Kisch sailed to Australia to attend an anti-fascist conference, but was denied permission to land first in Fremantle then Melbourne. He jumped onto the Melbourne harbour quay, breaking his leg in the process, but this action brought out the whole Australian Left in his support. In the novel, Hasluck tries to establish that Kisch was indeed a Komintern agent as the Australian government has

suspected, and imaginatively connects him to some of the leading German and Russian Marxists of the time, such as Willi Münzenberg.

Why the title *Dismissal*? Who dismissed whom? Answer: John Kerr in his role as Governor General dismissed Gough Whitlam. The time was November 1975; Whitlam had just started his second term in office after a narrow electoral victory over the Liberal Party under the leadership of Malcolm Fraser. However, the Liberal Party then used their Senate majority to block a further escalation of government spending, at which point the Governor General intervened. The Australian Left was outraged at this precedent; leading figures such as Nobel Prize winner Patrick White protested against John Kerr, whom Whitlam had dubbed, not very wittily, "the cur." Patrick White even returned his "Order of Australia" that Whitlam had awarded him. Malcolm Fraser as caretaker PM then dissolved both houses and called for a general election to be held Dec 13th 1975, which he, to the great disappointment of the Australian Left, won hands down. Gough Whitlam had become history, but to this day he is revered as a charismatic leader who made decisive policy changes.

To engage with the spectacular crisis of 1975, Hasluck invents the character of Roy Temple QC and presents the story through his side. Roy has a curious past: born at around the end of WWI, he grows up in a leftist household and is under the influence of an older sister (Alison) with an admiration for Stalin. Fortunately he escapes her influence by winning a scholarship that takes him to Oxford. He serves in WWII and then joins the staff of Evatt's *Ministry for Foreign Relations*, together with an equally brilliant, enigmatic woman named Freya. In 1951 they both accompany Evatt to an international conference in San Francisco, where the future of the *United Nations Organization* is to be decided.²² There

²² We Europeans pay scarce attention to the fact following WWII, Australian diplomats such as Herbert Evatt played a major role in the creation of UNO; indeed Evatt was the President of its General Assembly from 1948-49. He and his staff wrote the Universal Declaration of Human Rights passed in Dec 1948.

they meet the US diplomat Alger Hiss, who was soon to be exposed and jailed as a Soviet spy. Their more or less accidental meeting of Hiss later drags them before the *Royal Commission on Espionage*, which had been established in 1954 by PM Menzies. Menzies alleged that documents which the KGB agent Vladimir Petrov had provided to ASIO in exchange for political asylum in Australia²³ showed that two of Evatt's staffers were Soviet spies. It is clear from parallels such as these that Hasluck has a great interest in authenticating his narrative by interweaving them with real events.

Fast forward to 1975 and Roy, having been edged out of his government job (and *kept out* by almost two decades of Liberal Party government) is a successful QC and lawyer in Sydney. But now it is the Seventies and the new Labor government hires him as legal advisor. His plan to raise fresh money for Whitlam from Arab investors is bungled by the incompetence of a Labor financier. The plan would have saved Whitlam from the "blocking" tactics of his Liberal opponents in the Senate. But not the Labor bungler is blamed, it is Roy. At this stage old innuendos surface: wasn't he investigated by ASIO twenty years ago? Enter another one of his old false friends, Simon, whose passionate interest it is to save East Timor from an Indonesian annexation. There were two camps in the Whitlam government at the time: those favouring an appeasement of Indonesia's dictator Suharto, and those who wanted an Australian military intervention to stop a blood bath.²⁴ In his eagerness to stop an Indonesian invasion of East Timor, Simon lies about Roy's politics to a leading Labor

²³ After Stalin's death in 1953, Petrov's boss Lavrentija Beria, the head of the Soviet Secret police, was shot dead by Nikita Khrushchev's henchmen. When Petrov was ordered back to Moscow he obviously feared the same fate and decided to defect.

²⁴ Which as we know then did happen: the "Dili massacre" of 1991 remains one of the most infamous chapters of Suharto's dictatorial regime. And as it was connived at by Australia, that chapter is also a bespattered page of Australia's history. The Australian intervention also happened, late in the day, from 1999-2000, resulting in East Timorese independence in 2002.

Senator, because he (wrongly) sees Roy as one of the appeasers. And so the Senator rejects Roy's advice on how to save the day even after Whitlam's dismissal. The denouement of the novel brings one more final revelation about who was one of Petrov's agents.

Curiously missing from Hasluck's rendition of these turbulent hours of Nov 11th is Gough Whitlam. Roy and other Labor figures are never seen talking to him and thus the sacked PM appears as a lifeless puppet. Nor do we hear anything about reactions of the media. It is almost as if the dismissal had primarily affected a motley group of Labor advisors rather than the PM and his nation. And yet, whatever approach you take in writing a political novel around the historical events, Whitlam must be the key figure. Hasluck has himself argued in a similar vein: "The dictates of drama suggest that the pull of a story, the awe we feel while in the grip of a compelling tale, are felt most strongly when a figure we have seen at close quarters, once high and mighty but now in peril, is overthrown" (2011:28).

Which is not to say that the novel is somehow misplaced or irrelevant. The genre of the political novel is indeed underrepresented in Australia's literary scene, which seems to be dominated by "domesticity or rusticity or, of late, colonial ventriloquism and historical fiction" (Slattery cited in Hasluck, 2002). Hasluck was particularly well qualified to write it: the son of Sir Paul Hasluck, who had been the Governor General before John Kerr during the first two years of Whitlam's office, he had often met the PM at Government House. He also knew the 'feel' of the places in which the drama took place: King's Hall in Canberra, Admiralty House in Sydney, the old Parliament House.

There is one agonizing question which Hasluck does not pose and to which – this was by private correspondence – he does not know the answer. What if Whitlam had smelled a rat before being summoned to Sir John Kerr's residence? What if he had called a press conference at Parliament House in the morning of that

fateful day November 11th and dismissed the Governor General before Kerr got a chance to dismiss *him*?

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