

NATIONAL BOOK COUNCIL

EIGHTH ANNUAL LITERARY DINNER

SYDNEY, FRIDAY 9 OCTOBER 1981

PRESIDENT'S SPEECH

The Hon. Mr. Justice M.D. Kirby
Chairman of the Australian Law Reform Commission

President of the National Book Council

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WELCOME TO PARTICIPANTS

My first task is to welcome you all to the Eighth Annual Literary Dinner of the National Book Council. You would get a shock if I simply said 'welcome' and sat down. There are certain ceremonial functions to be performed in the judiciary. Six years of dinners like this and 1,722 chicken legs later, I am aware that brevity will simply not do.

The last time I attended a Literary Dinner of the National Book Council was in 1978. On that occasion I sat in Geoffrey Blainey's position. The President of the NBC in that year was Professor Manning Clark, that most distinguished Australian, whose new book The People Write Laws was launched yesterday. I chose as my theme 'The Law and Literature'. You may be surprised to know that the speech was not a brief one. Certainly there are some who would question the capacity of lawyers to write with felicity, elegance and brevity.

We have in our midst tonight people who undoubtedly have those gifts. Above all, our Guest of Honour, Professor Geoffrey Blainey, is one such person. I will introduce him later. At this stage, I say no more than 'welcome'.

Nancy Keesing, Chairman of the NSW Committee of the National Book Council, is unfortunately not with us. As you would all know, she has not been well. If she had only been here tonight, this occasion would have seen the first gathering of all of the Chairmen of the Literature Board, since its establishment: Blainey, Keesing, Brissenden and Stonier. It is appropriate that I should specifically welcome the new Chairman of the Literature Board, Brian Stonier, the former Acting Chairman, Andrew Taylor, the past Chairman, Dr. Bob Brissenden and the Director of the Literature Board, Dr. Michael Cosstigan, who is here with Mrs. Cosstigan.

The work of the Literature Board and specifically its support for the awards for Australian literature, deserve the approbation of all civilised Australians.

I also want to welcome Dr. Timothy Pascoe, the first full-time Chairman of the Australia Council. He is here with Mrs. Pascoe and we are glad to have him in our midst.

The judges who laboured over the task of selecting the 1981 awards are welcome. They sit at the top table as living proof that there is no such thing as a free meal.

Mr. Evan Williams is here with Mrs. Williams, representing the Premier of New South Wales. Mr. Wran's personal interest in the arts and the initiative he took with the Premier's Prize for Literature in New South Wales, attracts the commendation of us all. In Victoria, the Victorian Government has supported an initiative of the National Book Council to establish Book House in Melbourne. It is an elegant house. It is well sited. It will become a focus of the activities of those who love books. There is no Book House in Sydney, in the Premier State. In all frankness, I feel I ought to warn Mr. Williams about free meals, Greeks bearing gifts and that life for the senior bureaucrat was not meant to be ...

Obviously, I cannot list every distinguished guest. But to all of you, I say you are most welcome. We have gathered in this room a wonderful collection of literate Australians. Our numbers are legion and as our country matures, they are increasing.

I now have much pleasure in calling on Dr. Stephen Murray-Smith, Chairman of the National Book Council, to present the Michael Zifcak Medal for 1981. I am sure that in welcoming Stephen Murray-Smith you will wish to join with me in extending to him congratulations upon the recognition of his public service in the award conferred on him earlier this year when he was made a Member of the Order of Australia.

INTRODUCTION OF PROFESSOR GEOFFREY BLAINY

How does one introduce to this audience especially a person of Geoffrey Blainey's distinction? We have been co-performers on a previous occasion at the Leonda Restaurant in Melbourne. We were invited by an organisation to deliver an after-dinner speech. It is difficult to say who was more astonished that we both accepted: the organisers or the speakers. In the manner of Melbourne dinners, Geoffrey Blainey was not called upon to speak until a quarter before midnight. My pearls of wisdom had to be cast before an audience a little glazy-eyed when I started and snoring by the time I finished.

I promise that tonight things will move with greater speed.

Geoffrey Blainey has been Earnest Scott Professor of History in the University of Melbourne since 1977. He was educated at the Ballarat High School and at Melbourne University. He has held numerous public offices, attending to the cultural affairs of our country. These have ranged from membership of a Committee of Inquiry on Museums, Chairmanship of the Literature Board, Chairmanship of the Australia Council and membership of the Advisory Board of the Commonwealth Literary Fund.

For his many publications on the history of Australia, he has been awarded honours and the acclaim of his peers. The title of his book, 'The Tyranny of Distance', has passed into the language. In 1975 he was made an Officer of the Order of Australia. With a slightly malicious touch, he notes his recreation as 'chopping wood'. I now invite him to speak to us and then to present the National Book Council's Awards for Australian Literature for 1981.

REPORT OF THE JUDGES

Being a judge is a fairly thankless task. But being a judge of Australian literature may have rewards that exceed the fondest expectations of the judge in the criminal trial.

To introduce Eric Rolls, who will present the report of the judges for the 1981 Awards, I invite Dr. Stephen Murray-Smith.

VOTE OF THANKS

The vote of thanks tonight was to have been delivered by Nancy Keesing. I am sure all of you would want me to send to her good wishes for a full recovery.

Our special appreciation must go to Geoffrey Blainey. He is always a delight to hear. The beauty of books is that the ephemeral message does not disappear but is stored and treasured up to be experienced as often as the pages are turned. Geoffrey Blainey is one of the most distinguished of Australian bookmen. There could surely be few more appropriate speakers than him and we are in his debt for his speech and for gracing this occasion.

I must also thank the Literature Board for their unstinting support for the Awards for Australian Literature. The increase in the funding this year to \$10,000 is handsome. In an age of austerity this is remarkable and it gives us encouragement that the flickering candle of the arts in Australia still burns in the era of razor gangs, budget cuts, staff ceilings and, dare I say, sales tax impositions.

The Literature Board is a most distinguished Australian institution. On behalf of the National Book Council, I express appreciation of its work and thanks for its support.

To the publishers who have participated in the 1981 Awards, I also say 'thank you'. As you may know, four copies of every entry must be supplied. Three go to the judges and one finds its way into the Library of the National Book Council. In this way a library of distinguished Australian literature is being built up. Future generations will be grateful. This generation should express gratitude and encouragement.

To the judges, who have had the onerous task of assessing the contributions, and who are living proof, perhaps, that Sado Masochism is not dead, I extend thanks. Eric Rolls, Helen Frizell and Elizabeth Harrower, among their busy duties, found time to read, reflect, estimate and judge the entries. We are all grateful to them.

I should also thank the New South Wales Committee of the National Book Council for the special efforts it has put into making this Literary Dinner a success. Wilda Moxham and her assistant Sue Wrattan deserve special mention.

Finally, let me commend publicly the work of Stewart Edwards, Director of the National Book Council. In a matter of days, Stewart will be winging his way to the Frankfurt Book Fair. That Fair covers 189 acres in Frankfurt, West Germany. It is mouth-watering to think of such a wide space occupied by books. Stewart Edwards is the first Australian to be invited to attend the Frankfurt Book Fair as a guest of the organisers. It is his first visit overseas for two decades. It is an honour to Stewart, to the National Book Council and to Australia that he and Mrs. Edwards have been asked to attend. To them we say 'Gute Reise'. Like a latter-day Paul, spread the message amongst the Germans that the love of literature is alive and well in the Antipodes and that in Sydney in October a group of Australians, who love the written word, gathered together to do honour to superlative writers amongst their fellow countrymen.

The formal proceedings of this evening are now closed.