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THOMAS NELSON AUSTRALIA
THE INFLAMMABLE ADAMS BY PHILLIP ADAMS

FOREWORD

August, 1983

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Michael Kirby

Throughout this Foreword I shall refer to him simply as Adams. I elevate him to the mono-nominal ranks — for he is first in our peerage of letters : a dignity I suspect he would not deny, despite the withering descriptions of Vice-Regal vices that appear, hilariously, in this volume.

My first meeting with Adams was typical. We were both attending the inaugural function of a new Federal statutory body to which we had been appointed. There, whilst I was struggling with a cream bun, a cup of tea and my dignity, he thrust himself at my feet, protesting his undying admiration for my every word. 'Am I being sent up?' I dourly asked myself. Or is this doyen of Australia's literati really at my feet, going on like this?

Temperance, restraint and decorum are not the strong points of our author. Indeed, I doubt that these sterling, but boring, qualities are to be found in these pages at all. Whether your interests are:

- * the sexuality of male tigers
- * African chieftains in the Cameroons
- * Noel Coward's observations on television
- * the late Arthur Calwell's table manners
- * the gravestones of Kew
- * the Nizam of Hyderabad's huge car collection
- * Johnny Weismuller and the Hoyt's Children's Cinema Club
- * the invention of the guillotine, or
- * Patrick White's egalitarian plane travel

there is something here for everyone, however eccentric. A jumble of history, philosophy and whimsy. And the infuriating thing is that Adams offers the most telling commentary on our country, our world and our times, almost without our noticing it. So complete is Adams' command of the language that he can instruct us with humour, apparently irrelevant facts, an assortment of ideas. And the whole powerful mixture is utterly painless as it does its devilish work..

Why should he invite me to write this Foreword? I must be frank. I asked myself that question when the letter arrived with the thinly veiled suggestion that I should propose him for a Nobel Prize or two. There are only really two Australians who can write Forewords worthy of our author. The first is Dame Edna, another distinguished Melbournian who unaccountably seems to have escaped critical attention in this book.

The other Foreworder First Class is Gough Whitlam. He wrote the Foreword to Uncensored Adams with his usual grace and style -- even an allusion or two to Ancient History. Within days of writing that Foreword, the book sold out, the government changed and Mr Whitlam was appointed to an Ambassadorship in Paris, where he is now to be seen again in the corridors of power or basking in the praise of a coterie of admirers in the Rue de Passy. No such happy fate awaits me for this small effort. Indeed, as I write it, I am reflecting on the brothers Maugham. The one, a somewhat stuffy man, went on to become the embroidered Lord Chancellor of All England. The other, a distinctly naughty man, became W Somerset Maugham. Today, it is the man of letters who is remembered. Creative writing endures when politicians, judges and others have passed on.

In a thousand years or so, when some future civilisation uncovers the wreckage of the National Library, stumbles over the beautifully preserved underground chambers of Parliament House and unearths the ruins of lawyerly pretensions on the banks of Lake Burley Griffin (returned to pasture land) perhaps they will find this book. If they do, what will they make of us? I suspect that they will consider Australians more erudite and well read, self-critical and reflective than just about any other race on earth. If we must leave our history, let it be this.

And now, Phillip, we are all at your feet. And Here's to a Nobel Prize (or two) for the Inflammable Adams!