

*Walter Murdoch: A Biographical Memoir.* By John La Nauze. Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1977. 189 pp. Aust. price: \$14.80.

THIS is a warm, compact memoir of a man who became an Australian institution. For well over fifty years Walter Murdoch wrote informal essays for the magazine section of the daily papers. These essays, collected under various titles, sold consistently as La Nauze demonstrates, from the 1930s through to the 1960s. Despite his obvious success with the reading public, Murdoch never won critical acclaim. He did not write 'imaginative literature' as a literary critic would understand that term. Since his achievement belongs more to the sociology of literature, it is appropriate that an historian should explore his career, particularly at a time when the historical context of Australia's cultural life is receiving more attention.

The book has other justifications: it is a tribute from a former student to a respected university teacher and it rounds off La Nauze's exploration of the federationists and their *milieu*. The key figure in this wider study is Alfred Deakin who came to know the young Walter Murdoch well as an omnivorous reader and essayist. At this time Murdoch had moved from the country, where he had been a schoolmaster, to a lectureship in English at Melbourne University, a position he held from 1903 to 1911, crucial years for the emergent Commonwealth. Murdoch was avant-garde in his literary tastes by pre-war standards and an informed admirer of Deakin's liberalism. Murdoch's *Alfred Deakin: A Sketch* appeared several years after Deakin's death, a work that was later supplanted by La Nauze's more scholarly and ambitious two-volume biography of Deakin.

Walter Murdoch, then, was an articulate link with the cultural and political life of pre-war Melbourne, although his contact with Melbourne soon faded. When Deakin was about to resign from politics, Murdoch accepted a chair of English at the newly created University of Western Australia in Perth. The move was permanent. Almost sixty years later, in 1970, Murdoch died at his home in South Perth at the age of ninety-six.

In Perth, the essayist in Murdoch took over from the scholar, the academic administrator and, eventually, the teacher. La Nauze documents and discusses the change, arguing that the rigour, discipline and specialization which scholarly writing demanded were unsuited to Murdoch's gifts and temperament. As a 'son of the manse' Murdoch was an inveterate preacher, addressing himself to topical issues, but keen to avoid pomposity.

It might be supposed that Murdoch owed some of his success to the cultivation of an Australian subject matter. This is hardly the case. Murdoch did take an interest in Australian literature and he was involved in several promotional endeavours, but there is nothing notably Australian about his own essays. There is no reason for them to have been nationally distinctive, but the idea that they ought to have been died hard. Murdoch made his own views on the question clear and in elaborating upon them La Nauze underlines the resilience of the Anglo-Australian strand of our cultural and political inheritance. This mild, Scottish-Australian professor of English was by no means hounded into extinction by wild, post-colonial boys advocating a national literature.

For all his equanimity, Murdoch could be roused to protest, although not

always in ways approved by his biographer. Murdoch went overboard for social credit in the 1930s, an episode which did not reflect well on his grasp of economics. However, Murdoch was a better informed and more effective critic of Australia's heavy-handed censorship in the 1930s. Twenty years later he emerged as a major critic of Menzies' efforts to ban the Communist Party. Indeed, La Nauze maintains that Murdoch can take some of the credit for the narrow defeat of the 1951 referendum in which the government sought approval to ban the Communist Party.

While Murdoch's vitality is impressive, particularly the consistent productivity well into his nineties, he emerges as a man who peaked early, but who failed to develop. He was something of an intellectual bonsai; alive, graceful and often effective but not fully grown. While the validity of this type of comment lies outside the sphere of La Nauze's concern in this personal memoir, his crisp summation of Murdoch's career will nevertheless prove indispensable to a later generation of historians.

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*Muslims and Mongols. Essays on Medieval Asia.* By J.J. Saunders. Edited by G.W. Rice. Whitcoulls, for the University of Canterbury, 1977. 143 pp. N.Z. price: \$7.95.

THERE are very few historians in the world who know much about Asia in the Middle Ages and who can write with the urbane and elegant thoughtfulness of J.J. Saunders. New Zealand was very fortunate in having Saunders and very unfortunate in losing him through his untimely death in 1972. I had always hoped that he could eventually produce a large book of synthesis about the interaction of Asia and Europe during the Middle Ages but since this was not to be, we must welcome the care and wisdom with which Rice and the University of Canterbury have put this volume of fine essays together – a modest monument to a good scholar and much more modest than he deserved. The four essays cover the problems of Nomads as empire-builders, the defeat of the Mongols at the hand of the Egyptian Mamluks, the disappearance of Christianity from medieval Asia and the problem of Islamic decadence. Though fragments, they allow us a glimpse of the breadth and scope which Saunders could have achieved had he lived. European and American historians, especially that younger generation who imagine that cliometrics, the new urban history or the history of child-rearing habits in seventeenth-century France and similarly fascinating topics hold the clue to man's history, are blissfully unaware that the real antidote to Eurocentricity is a knowledge of Asia in general and of the spread and power of Islam in particular. With the exception of Runciman, Toynbee and Pirenne, and such specialists as Rodinson and Montgomery Watt, most of them have only been aroused by the modern oil crisis to realize that the clue to European history lies more deeply than is comfortable in the history of Asia. J.J. Saunders belonged to these exceptions and one can only hope that these very readable