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A dig into, not a dig at Burke and Wills

DIG: The Forgotten History of Burke and Wills. By Craig Cormick. Ginninderra Press. 66pp. \$16 plus postage.
Reviewer: ALLAN WEATHERSTONE.

ROBERT O'HARA BURKE's greatest wish before he died was to be remembered. At the front of *Dig* is Burke's bold claim proving this: "I have only one ambition, which is to do some deed before I die that shall entitle me to have my name honourably inscribed on the page of history."

With an expedition to explore Australia costing a fortune, achieving almost nothing and ending in tragedy, it's no surprise that Burke and Wills have been immortalised in

history. As ACT Book of the Year, *Unwritten Histories*, proved, Craig Cormick has a flair for animating the past. Any gaps that are left in history's page have been filled with colourful characters and intriguing subplots.

What drove Burke on when all seemed lost? How was such a farcical expedition ever assembled in the first place? The answers are all here. But is any of it true? Of course, this doesn't matter. The basic story is underpinned by truth, the plot being based upon actual events.

The finished picture is a piece of history that is both highly entertaining and quietly moving. There is a sense of sad foreboding in scenes like the introduction of Wills' father. "You will look after young Will, won't you?" he gently pleads with Burke. There

are also instances of laugh-aloud humour, such as every time we drop in on The Victorian Exploration Expedition Committee of the Royal Society of Victoria (or VEECRSV for short). The novella format, scarcely used in Australia, suits the satirical tone. The humour never wanes or becomes repetitive, making the piece an enjoyable read.

The close mix of humour and tragedy creates a sense of the surreal, something strangely familiar yet impossible to place. L. P. Hartley's quote, "the past is a foreign country; they do things differently there", that also adorns the book's opening pages, aptly sets the style to come. Burke's blank statement of "very disappointed to find no-one here" in the face of certain death brilliantly captures the surrealist edge Cormick

has created. But while it is entertaining, it is also informative. Just as *Unwritten Histories* revealed much about Aboriginal life, *Dig* tells all about the expedition, the politics the hopes and the dreams that accompanied it.

The comically hopeless expedition committee and the wryly amusing determination of Burke against all odds is deftly matched with each character's hopes and dreams. This history isn't just dates and facts. It's people and emotions, and it's infinitely more satisfying to read as a result.

A simple sign met Burke and Wills when they returned from their treacherous trek: "DIG. 3FT N.W. APR 21 1861." While their dig into the earth kept them alive a few more days, Cormick's dig into their history will keep them going for a great deal longer.

Eight timely ruminations on the nature of time

CT 20/3/99

IN ANTICIPATION of a Canberra Word Festival with sessions on *Killing Time*, *Once Upon a Time* and *A Time to Remember*, Ginninderra Press has published eight ruminations on the nature of time.

Writers are usually not grouped together by subject or theme, at least not outside the confines of *The Oxford Book of Whatever*. It is always refreshing to be reminded of the diversity and spirit of local talent, even if many of these writers

are already known through the pages of *Muse* or *Blast*.

It is also incongruously charming to find a book about time that is so small it can be stapled together, by contrast to the interminable, exquisite *Remembrance of Things Past* at the other end of the literary food chain.

In a way, every story ever published deals with permutations of time — its passing, its relentlessness, its speed, its cruelty — just as every narrative touches on varieties

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TIME PIECES. Edited by Craig Cormick and Sarah St Vincent Welch. Ginninderra Press. 53pp. \$12.50.

Reviewer: MARK THOMAS.
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ies of love. These eight stories adjust their pace and perspective to suit their divergent notions of time. One worries about how to live a life at her own speed (Julia Smith's), while another (Kathleen

Bleakley's) thoughtfully fractures and punctuates the chronology of her tale, and a third (Catherine Harris's) collapses an entire life (a genuine life of quiet desperation) into a telephone call to a psychic. The unifying feature is less the plot device of time than the shared sadness and melancholy which informs the stories.

Two gems stand out. One is K. L. Iffland's wonderfully gruesome account of revisiting an old lover, only to find each of the senses affront-

ed by his presence. The second is a compellingly imagined reminiscence by Camille Claudel (rendered by Jennifer Dickson), where "there is honey in the air and bread that rises intense and golden like one's first passion". We are spoiled here to live among such plenty.

Time Pieces will be launched tomorrow at 4.30pm at the Word Festival Canberra, Manning Clark Centre, ANU, by Anne-Maree Britton, director of the ACT Writers Centre.