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## **Roden Cutler, V.C. – The Biography<sup>1</sup>**

by  
Colleen McCullough<sup>2</sup>

In this her first attempt at nonfiction, Colleen McCullough has excelled. Not only does she tell the life story of a great Australian, but she also explores the question - what makes the man? Is it family values, education, soldiering, life tragedies, politics, diplomacy or sheer heroism? For this man, she leaves us a little up in the air with the question only half answered.

The book is divided into nine sections including maps and black and white photographs. The middle seven sections deal with a chronological account of Roden Cutler's life from humble beginnings in suburban Manly to Governor of New South Wales and whose achievements and popularity challenge the endeavours of Arthur Philip and Lachlan Macquarie.

In the first section, she attempts to define heroism by interviewing other Victoria Cross survivors and exploring some of the myths surrounding modern celluloid heroes. She concludes that heroes are people who tend to put the needs of others before themselves. She uses this section as a kind of a preface to provide a background and also to give a clue as to the general theme of the biography. The final section of the book asks the question - can such a man really exist? Again she returns to the original theme of heroism.

The biographical details, especially in the middle section of book, are heavily supplemented with an extremely well explained political history of Australia. In particular she details how the paradoxes of party politics including such people as Evatt, young Menzies and a garrulous McMahon were all to have a significant influence on Cutler and provide him with the steps to build his diplomatic career. I found the explanation of the Suez crisis a very simplistic account of what was a very complex affair.

McCullough also provides the reader with a detailed geographical description of places in Australia, implying that she is aiming for an international readership. I found this refreshing from an Australian author as many assume the reader would be well aware of the location of places well known to many Australians, but the reader needs to consult an atlas - not so in this book.

Her style is extremely readable and like all good books is hard to put down, though I must confess I am a student of Australian history and a bit of a hero worshipper. McCullough also uses an oral history obtained from interviews with Cutler, which adds depth to the narrative. She disperses his comments throughout the text to give a personal insight into events that would be otherwise rather descriptive.

We do not find out a lot about Cutler's personal habits, particularly his likes and dislikes, except his love of Rudyard Kipling. The author uses this fact quite cleverly when Cutler is posted to Pakistan - Kipling Country. Indeed, she uses the line from Kipling's famous poem 'If' to provide a motto for Cutler - 'if you can walk with Kings - nor lose the common touch!' Maybe this is her subtle way of enticing the reader to explore the whole poem and discover other criteria postulated by Kipling to support his hypothesis - 'but what is more you'll be a man my son'. This poem may well give us an insight into answering the question - what makes this man?

Cutler has his fair share of life tragedies which include the early and untimely death of his father. The loss of his own leg smashed by bullets from a Vichy French machine gun, his fight for survival with horrific post-operative

complications and the tragic and sudden death of his wife in the prime of middle age, off of which the author uses to illustrate the depth of his resolve.

In conclusion, McCullough suggests the reader may find all this too hard to believe. How can someone like this really exist? A man with all the innate qualities of heroism, willpower, uncanny knowledge, good humour, fidelity and most importantly humility. What was the driving force? What was his motivation? McCullough does not really give us an answer but rather quotes the myth of Sir Galahad "That heroism endures as long as the soul remains untainted". She, therefore, comes full circle finishing on the note of heroism as an explanation for Cutler's outstanding qualities.

I wonder however, whether she has missed an important point. Indeed she gives us a clue as to what is behind this great man. Could it be his mother? A consistent theme throughout the whole biography is the way Cutler worshipped his mother and is always attempting to support her needs. It may be that great men are nurtured by love and devotion to the powerful woman in their life. It may be that these maternal qualities and characteristics are reflected in men who are great achievers providing them with ambition and motivation.

Why not read the book and work it out yourself- you will not be disappointed!