



Ken Myer's lasting legacy of power and philanthropy

BIOGRAPHY

THE MANY LIVES OF KENNETH MYER. *By Sue Ebury. Miegungyah Press. 621pp. \$59.99.*

Reviewer: **RICHARD THWAITES**

The opening of the National Portrait Gallery with its honour roll of donors reminds us that, even in egalitarian Australia, private philanthropy underwrites many of our prized cultural institutions.

Kenneth Baillieu Myer (1921-1992) had the example of his father Sidney (Baevski), founder of the Myer retail empire, who during the Depression of the 1930s had personally funded major construction works along Melbourne's Yarra Boulevard and Como Park to generate work for the unemployed.

Sidney died suddenly when Ken, the oldest of four children, was only 13. A heavy sense of obligation to the family and to the family business developed into a broad acceptance of noblesse oblige, fostered by teachers and mentors, including Dr James Darling, the influential headmaster of Geelong Grammar.

Ken Myer spent significant periods of his childhood in California. His parents' marriage had followed Sidney Myer's Reno divorce from a previous wife and was not legally recognised in Australia. Merlyn Myer travelled to San Francisco for the births of each of her four children so that they would have "legitimate" American birth certificates. Ken was unaware of this complicated family status well into adulthood.

He retained a life-long respect for American innovation and enterprise. Noting California's postwar car-driven suburban development boom, he championed the introduction to Australia of California-style freeways and the shopping mall surrounded by carparks, of which the first was Myer's Chadstone shopping centre.

Myer's contribution to public life began soon after his return from wartime naval service which had taken him to China and Japan, as well as formative experiences in the Pacific, the Atlantic and the Mediterranean. With his younger brother, Baillieu ("Bails"), he set up the Myer

Foundation (via a special Act of the Victorian Parliament) along the lines of philanthropic foundations he had observed in the United States, as a tax-effective vehicle for either public or anonymous support for worthy causes. The terms of Sidney Myer's will prevented the sale of the family's shareholding in the Myer businesses, but the brothers arranged for the substantial income on their shares to fund the foundation.

Myer supported a truly impressive range of institutions through the foundation, through personal donations, and through highly active

participation in boards and committees. His earliest involvements were with the ANU's John Curtin School of Medical Research and the development of Asian studies, which became his life-long special interest.

Later, he was instrumental in the founding of the Department of East Asian Studies at Melbourne University, and in securing the independence of the Howard Florey Institute for medical research, also in Melbourne.

The Myer family story is a major Melbourne story, now well into its fourth generation.

Kenneth Myer's personal legacy surrounds anyone crossing Princes Bridge to the South Bank precinct. It is obvious in the Myer Music Bowl in Alexandra Gardens, but few now would realise what an important role he played over three decades in development of the National Gallery of Victoria, the Victorian Arts Centre, and even (during his turbulent reign as chairman of the ABC) in the location of the ABC's Victorian headquarters at South Bank rather than in the suburban banishment planned by the government of the day.

In Canberra his major project was the construction of the National Library, whose council he served on for 20 years from 1960 and chaired for seven. He powerfully backed development of the computerised index system that now links most major libraries of Australia. In his final years, living in Sydney, he gave major financial support to the Asian art collections of the Art Gallery of NSW and the Powerhouse Museum. He had also played a supportive role in establishment of the National Film and Television School.

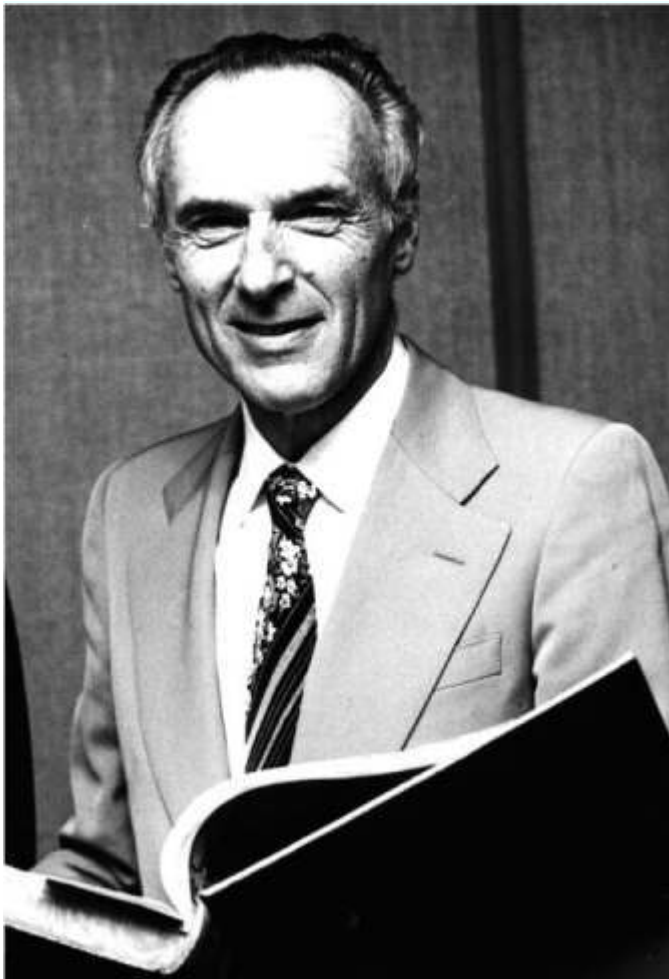
For a general reader this book provides many insights into the way big things can be done in Australia. Mostly it seems to be by maintaining the right networks and connections, and by seeding bold public initiatives with personal commitment of time and funds – what Ken Myer called "risk philanthropy".

Myer would often give significant financial support to causes and projects, but his major contributions came from his ability to bring





Ken Myer as newly appointed chairman of the ABC Board in 1983, second from left, with Wendy McCarthy, Bob Raymond, Jan Marsh, Veronica Brady, Neville Bonner and Richard Boyer; and, left, as chairman of the National Library in 1980



together the resources of government, experts, and private patrons for projects that he believed in. More than just a contributor, he was a catalyst. He was a forceful and usually effective chairman, leading by energetic example, and thirsty for knowledge. When criticised, it was usually for a narcissistic reluctance to accept objections, alternatives, or failure.

His major public failure was his resignation from chairmanship of the ABC Board. He had been unable to accept the inherently contentious culture of the ABC and its politically appointed board, which he had tried to run along the corporate lines familiar to him.

This biography was commissioned and supported by Myer's surviving family. He was often neglectful or insensitive with his family, but ultimately he was loved. The book is a vast and detailed memorial on which no expense has been spared. It has been many years in preparation and the author was funded to travel Australia and the globe tracking down hundreds of personal connections.

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With such a wide canvas, from Russian-Jewish antecedents to Myer's last years as an espoused Japanophile, the book's narrative occasionally flags. But even those sections tracing committee politics on this or that major institutional project will be a valuable resource to researchers in Australian commerce, government, and cultural institutions.

As a patrician of independent wealth and status, driven by substantial altruism, Myer could do things for Australia without the constraints of an elected politician or public servant. If Shane Warne is worth a musical, then Ken Myer is definitely worth 600 pages on the library shelf.

Richard Thwaites studied in the Myer-supported East Asian Studies Department at Melbourne University, and later was on ABC program staff during Ken Myer's chairmanship.