Epilogue

IN A FEW places in this book I have noted where my own life interests connected with Counihan's, but I did this only where it seemed absolutely necessary in order that his life be told. To introduce more of myself into the narrative would have been adventitious. The course of Counihan's life was not in any significant degree influenced by mine. Yet it should be helpful at this late stage to provide a brief outline of the ways in which our lives linked, if only to provide the reader with a better view of my own perspective upon his life.

I first made contact with Counihan by letter early in 1943. I was then living in Sydney helping to prepare the first issue of *Australian New Writing* and seeking his support. My idea of establishing the little magazine grew from fortnightly writers' evenings held in my flat at Potts Point during 1941–42 following my marriage the previous year. Those who came and read manuscripts from time to time included Elizabeth Lambert, who brought the American poet Karl Shapiro, Muir Holburn, Ken Levis, Lindsay Gordon, and many others. The magazine was modelled on John Lehmann's *New Writing* and directed towards a broadly left readership with avant-garde interests, but it also sought to attract a mass audience. Friends put me in touch with George Farwell who was thinking along similar lines. Together we succeeded in recruiting Katharine Susannah Prichard and Ken Levis to assist us as editors, and invited Roderick Shaw to act as art editor. Hume Dow agreed to be our unpaid and unofficial Melbourne correspondent.

Most of us were then members of the CPA and had no access to funding the journal other than through Current Book Distributors, the party's publishing house. This meant pressure, not at that time from any central executive of the party, but from various more or less influential members of the party with strong cultural interests. They all seemed to have very strong views at that time about precisely what a cultural magazine funded by the party should and should not publish. Individual articles were seized upon as evidence

not only of the editors' views but as party policy. One such article by Noel Hutton, the first wife of the highly respected *Age* journalist, Geoffrey Hutton, entitled 'Art and the Working Class' aroused sharp criticism not only from John Reed and his cohorts but also from Noel Counihan and Judah Waten. Counihan gave warm yet guarded approval to the magazine but he and Waten were highly critical of Hume Dow, who had been responsible for obtaining the article from Hutton. It was not in my opinion a good article, but a rather doctrinaire attack upon avant-garde art. It accorded more with Farwell's populist views than with mine. But it did advance a valid personal view that expressed the concerns of many and we published it. In such cases there was a tendency to invoke the authority of the party to pronounce on cultural issues. During the war years it wisely refrained from doing so except along the most general lines. Despite these problems *Australian New Writing* was highly successful both among the armed services and the community at large, far outstripping in sales comparable publications such as *Angry Penguins*, *Meanjin Papers*, or *Southerly*. Nevertheless I soon became disenchanted with the petty controversies it was engendering both within the party and beyond, and began to leave most of the editorial responsibility to Farwell, who came to identify himself with the magazine far more than I did. My own interests were then turning more to the visual arts.

Although I was pleased to gain Counihan's support for *Australian New Writing*, I was disconcerted by the ferocity with which he criticised *Angry Penguins* and *Comment*, and artists with whom he disagreed, in his letters to me. It developed a curious ambivalence about him that persisted.

It was his paintings exhibited in Sydney the following year in the annual CAS show, such as *At the Corner of Nightingale Street* and *At the Start of the March 1932* that stimulated my lasting interest in his work. By that time I was in regular, at times daily, contact with Sydney Ure Smith as a result of my work with the War Art Council and the Country Art Exhibition Scheme of the Art Gallery of New South Wales, of which I was then in charge. I had no hesitation in recommending to him that the gallery should acquire *At the Start of the March*. This they did—many years before any public gallery in Australia could bring itself to acquire another Counihan painting. After that, as is well known, I vigorously championed the 'new realism in Australian art', particularly the work of Counihan, Bergner and O'Connor, in the last chapters of my book *Place, Taste and Tradition* (1945). Those last two chapters were written first as a lecture given late in 1943 and published in *Meanjin* in 1944, well before the rest of the book was

written and at a time when victory over the Axis powers was far from certain. They were part of a programme for the promotion of a strenuously anti-fascist culture at a time when aestheticism seemed to me to be a cultural form of defeatism not only before the fascist onslaught abroad but also before the sinister presence of the anti-Semitism and latent pro-fascism then widely current in official Australian art circles. I see no reason now to qualify anything I wrote at that time or the tone in which I wrote it. A few months after the appearance of *Place, Taste and Tradition*, Ure Smith's influential anthology *Present Day Art in Australia* (1945) appeared. It included four paintings by Noel Counihan (he was the only Victorian painter included) together with a brief article I wrote on his work. What I had to say in these two books gave Counihan's art a significant place in the war-time art of Australia that has rarely been questioned by fair-minded critics. But it also had the effect, not anticipated at the time, of locking his work firmly into the rubric of 'realism'. That would not have mattered had not 'realism' become a fall guy for the cold war type of art criticism that began to develop after 1947 both here and abroad.

One of my reasons for writing this book is to redress a situation for which I was in part responsible. Neither history nor criticism can be conducted without categories. The rubric 'impressionist' has not hindered the appreciation of Monet, indeed initially it probably helped to promote it. The rubric 'realism' has not in the long run hindered the appreciation of Courbet; but because of the special circumstances obtaining during the cold war it has not served Counihan well. Fortunately in Melbourne, Adelaide and Perth, wherever practising critics seriously confronted Counihan's work in person they tended to admire and praise it in terms of its aesthetic value. Sydney is a special case. Here praise was rare, though Paul Haefliger, the most influential critic practising in Sydney during the 1940s and 1950s certainly had a high regard for his work. But for the most part cold war criticism was practised more assiduously by the Sydney press than that elsewhere.

The overall effect of this categorisation upon the reception of Counihan's art has been paradoxical. Newspaper critics responding to his work over the years reacted positively but curators and art historians tended to lock his reputation into his war-time work, the 'realism' rubric blinding them to his formal achievements. The result has been that his work is inadequately represented in our art museums, and the highly influential role he played on the Australian art scene, particularly in Melbourne, during his life has been passed over for more fashionable and less controversial artists.

It has not been my intention to present Counihan as a hero,

though I should have to admit that if courage is the prime virtue of heroism, then Counihan, in my experience, possessed more than most Australian artists. But that said, it must also be said that courage does not necessarily lead to good art; intellectual courage may privilege talk when a capacity to listen would be more appropriate to the occasion. The philosopher Cameron Jackson once said to me that Counihan talked well but did not listen well. He was, of course, speaking about the young Counihan. For Counihan did change; his was a reflexive personality, and in the end he did listen, but it took some time.

I cannot recall when I first met Counihan. It may have been when I visited Melbourne in August 1945, shortly after the publication of *Place, Taste and Tradition*, and in connection with the development of the Encouragement of Art Movement in Victoria. I do recall meeting at that time many of his friends and associates, such as Victor O'Connor, Rem McClintock, Ambrose Dyson, Vane Lindesay and others. Years later I met him a few days after he arrived in London for the first time, and took him on his first visit to the National Gallery. I shall never forget the profound effect that Goya's portrait of *Dona Isabel de Porcel* had upon him. It would have been the first original painting by Goya that he had seen. He stood before it rapt, and then began to tell me, excitedly, how Goya must have felt as he painted the lady. Later, in 1950, I saw more of him and his family when our residence at the Abbey Art Centre, New Barnet, overlapped somewhat, though I did not see as much of him as one might expect because we were both deeply involved with our own careers and concerns. After that our relationship continued to be friendly but discontinuous. I distrusted what I regarded as the enthusiastic naiveté of his politics but realised that it gave his life a sense of purpose, probity and cohesion.

My involvement with the CPA was never as committed as Counihan's. He was a Depression communist; I was a war-time communist. There is a difference. Those who experienced the Depression as active party members saw a much uglier side of the Janus face of capitalism than I did and became more committed. In consequence their break with the Australian party's petty intolerances was that much harder to make and their belief in Soviet 'democracy' that much harder to shake off.

I joined the party early in 1939 and was an active and committed member until the end of the war. It was J. B. Miles announcing the Zhdanov line on culture to a meeting of 'cultural cadres' in 1946 that shook me. It was not the Miles I knew and had respected. He was speaking for others, not from his heart. After that I was a very passive party member indeed. In any case I was so involved in

completing an arts course at the University of Sydney as an evening student, while rushing back and forth organising and speaking at art exhibitions throughout New South Wales, that I had little spare time for day-to-day party activities. But I retained a great respect for the unselfish work of party members who were working in education, the theatre, writing, dance, indeed in the arts generally, in order to create an informed mass audience for the arts, one far greater than had existed during the mean-spirited pre-war years. So I did not leave the party immediately.

I happened to visit Czechoslovakia shortly after Counihan did in the summer of 1949 on my way to Italy and stayed there for a fortnight. My reactions were the exact reverse of his. In Prague I was allocated Ms Mrstikova, the same interpreter allocated to Counihan a few weeks before. He must have been in Poland by then. She realised that I was genuinely curious about the state of things in Czechoslovakia and began to tell me what she was not prepared to tell Counihan when faced with his heightened enthusiasm for everything he saw. How, for example, middle-class students had, following upon the coup of February 1948, been removed while mid-way through their university courses and given manual work on the roads or elsewhere as part of the 're-education' process of the new workers' state, their place being taken by students of pure proletarian origin. Visiting the studio of the sculptor Karel Pokorny, who once produced interesting work in a Rodinesque manner, I found him preoccupied with the production of innumerable busts of Klement Gottwald. An art historian whose interest lay in Italian art told me how he could no longer travel there to pursue his research. I quickly realised I was in a police state. I 'officially' left the CPA when I returned to Australia in 1951.

None of this weakened my admiration for the way in which Counihan was seeking in his own art to develop a sensitive and telling critique of his own society. I admired the art, not the politics. This is the reason why I did not want him with the Antipodean group. I wanted that group to announce a plague on both their houses; upon both the superpowers using art as an instrument of power in their struggle for world supremacy—the American State Department's use of abstract art, and the Soviet Union's use of socialist realism. The Antipodean affair was not a nationalistic project at all, though attempts are still made to view it thus. The Antipodean Manifesto was addressed to an international issue and an international audience. But there are none so deaf as those who will not hear. Counihan, in 1959, could never have agreed to an explicitly public criticism of Soviet-inspired socialist realism. Yet I personally admired his work (and his probity) far

more than I admired the work of, say, Clifton Pugh.

Why does anyone write biography? One interesting theory is that biographers write lives that might have been theirs. That is not at all to say that biographers write out of envy of the life of their subject. It might rather be that they retain an interest in a kind of life that they themselves, at a crucial moment in their own lives, chose not to live. That is curiosity, not envy. I admired Counihan but he is not my hero. I have never regretted that I stopped painting at the end of 1940 and turned instead to history. Those who are incapable of understanding that decision will not comprehend why some write history.

Had I lived out my life as an artist I would have had to make decisions that were imperative to my generation; the decisions taken, each in their own way, for example, by Bergner, Boyd, Counihan, Nolan, Perceval, and Tucker, to name a few of the most prominent. It is perhaps for this reason that the lives of such artists have continued to interest me profoundly. Somewhere in all that work of my generation lies the kind of work I did not myself produce.

I could have continued to write my autobiography. But having already pursued that indulgence to age twenty-four I decided that enough is enough. Because I have come to the conclusion that autobiography, however skilfully it may be distanced from the self of the author, inevitably delivers him or her up as a hostage to conceit. Unlike autobiography, biography can become an exercise in empathy, an endeavour to understand another or point promising paths towards such an understanding. Not that I would recommend the writing of biography to anyone. It is, in my experience, the hardest of all the literary genres; and its ambition is an impossible one, for we cannot hope to understand others fully any more than we can understand ourselves. And it cannot possibly hope to meet with the approval of family, friends and acquaintances, all of whom will have their own cherished perceptions of the subject.

I have attempted to disclose some paths towards a better understanding of Counihan as man and artist. It is a life and art filled with paradox. There is the continuing paradox of his sexuality: his youthful desire to treat women as sexual objects but increasingly as social victims in his adult life. There is the paradox of his respect for the artist as skilled craftsperson and his anti-elitist desire that the amateur as well as the professional artist should be encouraged and supported. He did not grasp sufficiently that the deskilling processes implicit in modernism made the practise of the arts in

twentieth-century society far more popular and widespread than the retention of those academic skills he demanded of himself. There is the paradox of the categories that dogged him all his life. On the one hand was his felt need to champion a 'realist' art, and on the other his desire that his (and all) art should be assessed, irrespective of category, by its capacity to shape and form content in a satisfactory aesthetic manner. At bottom that was a desire for his art to be judged as 'significant form', though he would never have admitted to it in such terms. There was above all the familiar paradox between his political loyalties and his artistic aspirations. He was not prepared to take the easy path and erase all trace of political content from his art; he chose rather the paths taken by Goya, Daumier, Courbet, Barlach, Kollwitz and many others—but not by many others in Australia. There is the paradox between his modernism and his sense of tradition. His art reveals traits of modernism for the good reason that no creative artist of the twentieth century was able to ignore entirely the formal imperatives of modernism, since it was the hegemonic style for most of the century. But for him modernism meant the use of those imperatives for the creation of a popular art, one that could be readily appreciated and enjoyed by ordinary people, and not confined to those who treasured art as an elitist gift from a few practitioners whose art spoke only to a chosen audience. Closely related to that paradox was yet another. His respect for his art as a skilled handicraft—whether in drawing, painting, linocut or lithography—in which the artist craftsman retained full possession of the creative processes by means of the skilled use of tools, and those popular arts of mechanical reproduction that the century brought forth so abundantly. He did not experiment with photo-montage, film, photography as an art in its own right, or with television and video. Just as he recorded the dignity of manual labour in his representations to an extent that no other Australian artist did, so he confined himself to those arts that were an expression of his own manual labour. In that respect, as noted earlier, his art is elegiac.

In all these paradoxical situations Counihan occupies an ambivalent position *vis-à-vis* modernism. To the extent that the modernism of the first two-thirds of the twentieth century is best described as formalism, that is to say, that it contained within itself an inner dynamic towards a wholly abstract, 'non-representational' art, Counihan may be viewed either as premodern or as a precursor of the postmodern. As premodern if his art is seen as a negative and reactionary resistance to an inevitable triumphant abstraction, or as a precursor of the postmodern if his art is seen as a creative

critique of the constraints latent within formalism and abstraction.

That said, it must also be said—if Counihan is to be read as a precursor of the postmodern—that he was not the only one. All the truly creative artists of his generation in Australia reacted in one way or another to the dominance of formalist modernism as the hegemonic style of their time. They could not possibly avoid its dominance entirely, any more than they could avoid any of the other dominant concepts that helped to fashion the culture of their generation, but they did, as creative artists, learn how to shape formalism to their own purposes. In so doing they were developing one of the main sources, though not the only one, of what is now unfortunately called postmodernism. And not only in Australia. Precursors of postmodernism are to be found in every part of the postcolonial world, wherever artists of European descent or culture found themselves sandwiched between the European art of their own ethnicity and the indigenous art of the peoples whose lands their colonial ancestors had appropriated and whose art they had sought to destroy. This at the very time that their cousins, the European modernists, were seeking to exalt and transform indigenous tribal art into the spurious concept now known as 'primitivism'—a pure, timeless, international (but essentially Europeanist) model for art to which all other arts should aspire.

Now that the cold war is over and the hegemony of modernism is waning we are at last in a position to revalue not only the art of Counihan but also the art of his generation, both in Australia and elsewhere.