

Chapter 11

The Fortunate Life of Ninian Stephen*

Philip Ayres is one of the best biographers this country has ever produced. He is also one of the ablest contemporary Australian non-fiction writers. His latest subject is one he knows very well—Sir Ninian Stephen. (Hereafter that subject will be called, for short and with respect, “Stephen”.) Ayres’s title is *Fortunate Voyager: The Worlds of Ninian Stephen*. The allusion is to Robert Louis Stevenson’s contention that a traveller in the wilderness of this world who finds many honest friends is a fortunate voyager. But Ayres demonstrates that Stephen was fortunate in numerous other ways.

Stephen must be the most decorated of Australians. He possesses four awards for more than four years’ service in the Second World War, including the New Guinea campaigns at the end of it. He possesses five knighthoods (two in the personal gift of the Queen). The first knighthood, conferred shortly after his appointment to the High Court, was largely in consideration of services to be rendered, not those already rendered as barrister and judge of the Supreme Court of Victoria. The rest recognise the labour and self-sacrifice involved in a remarkable career after he left the High Court—as Governor-General from 1982 to 1989, as Australian Ambassador for the Environment, as chairman of Northern Ireland peace talks, as an ad hoc judge of the International Court of Justice, as a founding member of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (the first war crimes tribunal since those which sat at Nuremberg and Tokyo), as mediator between government and opposition in Bangladesh, as leader of the United Nations delegation to Cambodia to work out how former Khmer Rouge leaders should be tried, and as leader of two United Nations missions to Burma to investigate the extent of forced labour in that country. Other activities involving extensive overseas travel included work for the Melbourne Olympic Bid Committee, other work related to the International Olympic Committee, and numerous legal addresses. Then there were many domestic tasks. Examples include reviewing the future of the Institute of Advanced Studies at the Australian National University, chairing the Constitutional Centenary Foundation, and chairing an inquiry into the safety of Australian blood banks. Those activities were carried out by Stephen at various stages between his sixty-fifth and eighty-second years. And there are many other activities he has maintained until very recently.

Not all these enterprises were enjoyable. Stephen generally enjoyed excellent health, but he was far from young during this late blooming career. Some of his activities involved working in conditions of real hardship in places which had been and continued to be ill-governed, like Cambodia, Burma and Bangladesh. Some involved handling people whose murderous pasts did not enhance their attractiveness (in Ireland, the Hague and Cambodia). Some involved dealing with people, such as academics or

* Previously published in (2014) 58 *Quadrant* 26.

This is a preview. Not all pages are shown.