

## BOOK REVIEW:

# *The Hero Maker – A Biography of Paul Brickhill*

by Stephen Dando-Collins

Vintage Books/ Penguin-Random House; 2016; 416 pp.; ISBN 9780857988126 (paperback);  
RRP \$34.99



*This is a biography of Australian author Paul Brickhill best known for his World War II dramas, The Great Escape, The Dam Busters or Reach for the Sky.*

There would be few among us who have not read at least one of the following best-selling war dramas *The Great Escape*, *The Dam Busters* or *Reach for the Sky*. Australian Paul Brickhill authored all three of these and did so in a four-year window. For a period, he was one of the most financially successful and well-known authors on the planet. But Brickhill's fame was fleeting and afterwards he was beset by a range of issues that saw him descend into virtual obscurity.

Stephen Dando-Collins' biography not only reveals the complexities of Brickhill's character, but also some lesser-known facts regarding the stories behind these three titles. It is the interplay between these well-known stories and their author that make this biography interesting. It's a portrait of a life that could apply to a number of post-war Australian writers: large, expatriated, successful, troubled and, in the end, sad.

Brickhill, a journalist before the World War II and a Spitfire pilot during the war, was shot down and spent part the war in Stalag Luft 3 where he was involved first hand in the events now called 'The Great Escape'. His personal experiences and ability to relate a story saw him well placed to subsequently write *The Great Escape* and then follow on with two other books on related themes. He was adept at deep research and writing in an authentic and exciting manner – but also guilty of 'hero making' by omitting certain details.

Success brought sizeable advances and royalties,

media attention, parties and film deals, films and lunches. Dando-Collins's research identifies how those books were produced and the factors that shaped their final form. But behind the success Dando-Collins reveals a man who struggled to deal with success, alcohol, tobacco, drugs and a failing marriage that ended with bitter divorce proceedings. As an author Brickhill was not able to maintain his success and suffered from mood-swings, depression and writer's block. The experience of being shot down in the war prevented Brickhill from being comfortable in an aircraft for the remainder of his life. In retrospect the experience of the war and the enormous stresses of writing three books in four-year window probably indicate that he suffered from some form of stress disorder.

Stephen Dando-Collins is an award-winning biographer and author of a range of books. It is clear that the author has researched deeply to compile this 'warts and all' biography. The author's final chapter is a tremendously insightful analysis of his subject.

*The Hero Maker* includes a number of black and white images, notes, bibliography and an index. Given the mythology that his three most well-known books generated this is a revealing expose on the man who literally made his characters heroes and will be of interest to those who are familiar with those works in book or film versions.

**Marcus Fielding**